

*Australian Stories of Coffee in Melbourne and Environs: A
Selective Cultural History*



Submitted by

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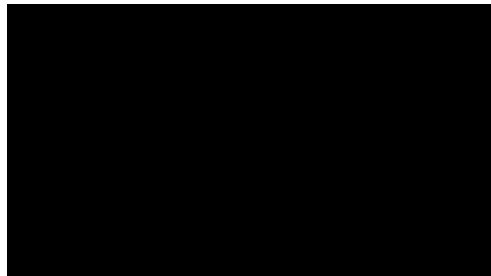
Cook, Marie

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in Melbourne and environs :
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Student declaration

“I, Marie Cook, declare that the Master of Arts by Research thesis entitled *Australian Stories of Coffee in Melbourne and Environs: A Selective Cultural History*, a combined creative and critical thesis comprising the history of a local coffee culture, is no more than 60,000 words in length, exclusive of appendices and references. This thesis contains no material that has been submitted previously, in whole or in part, for the award of any academic degree or diploma. Except where otherwise indicated, this thesis is my own work.”

Signed:



Date:

31 / 3 / 2005

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Introduction

Your father laughs. ‘This coffee is no good,’ he says. ‘It makes my heart race. It tastes bitter. Why do I drink it? Habit and superstition. I believe it sobers me when I have been drinking. I believe it sharpens me up when I am tired. I believe that an offer of coffee to friends equals the hospitality of a thousand welcomes. You and science would tell me that coffee doesn’t sober, doesn’t relax, doesn’t revive, doesn’t welcome, that it shortens my life, costs a fortune, disrupts the economy of Brazil, and if left too long in the coffee pot will corrode the silver. But try to stop me drinking it!’

Crace (1986: 24-25)

It is difficult to locate the genesis of any subject of creative and critical inquiry. However, I consider I embarked on this MA research project because having a decent coffee was important to me, and I did not know why. I recall the precise moment I realised I was attaching special meaning to coffee. I was in a new café at Airey’s Inlet, a seaside town on the Great Ocean Road in Victoria, my home State, and I had ordered a café latte:

The woman serving me was in her sixties and appeared to be out of her depth; she was most likely helping her daughter set up the café and trying to be useful. I imagined she lived on one of the surrounding farms – she reminded me of my mother. Her hands had probably made a thousand morning teas for shearers,

with big pots of tea, the best china for the jug of milk and tea cups, and big baskets of scones with cream and jam. But using an espresso machine had baffled her. I, on the other hand, no longer wanted the life of tea and demanded a decent coffee (Cook, 2005: 15).

At that moment I realised there were a number of reasons for me wanting that coffee to be ‘decent’. They related to my growing up in the country and wanting to live in the city, to my experience of café life in Europe, and finally to personal rebellion – against a certain conservatism of the 1970s in Australia, and ultimately against a colonial English custom of tea.

This project is located in food and social history and focuses particularly on the introduction of espresso coffee to Melbourne in the 1950s and '60s, as in my view the Italian cafés of that period had the greatest influence upon present café culture. However, this project is not pure social or food history, as it synthesises my own personal experience, and that of my interviewees, with archival, scholarly and more journalistic/literary research, and with a particular approach to the writing of non-fiction narrative, known as ‘creative non-fiction’. The final thesis can be seen therefore as a fusion of qualitative and scholarly research, with memoir and oral history – or, in summary, as what I have termed a ‘selective cultural history’.

In this project I have been thinking through how to write about the local and the personal in relation to the ‘facts’ of history. The historian Inga Clendinnen has questioned the validity of ‘objective’ historical writing. Clendinnen considers that it is important for historians to recognise through their writing that there is an “‘I’ between the past and the reader through which everything must pass” (1996), that they need to leave the emotions in their accounts, to re-create their historical subjects, and to write

about particularities. I have been guided by Clendinnen's ideas in my approach to the historical subject matter in this project.

My initial research into coffee was depersonalised and largely 'de-localised'. I read the definitive history of coffee by Ukers (1922), which gave me insight into the myths and stories surrounding the beginnings of coffee use in Ethiopia and the Levant, and to its later and wider adoption across the globe. I read about the early coffee houses in England (Ellis, 1956; Lillywhite, 1963), about social customs in England (Wilson, 1993), about the history of bohemia in Paris cafés (Bradshaw, 1978), about the social history of coffee in America (Bar, 1995, 1999; Pendergrast, 1999), about the history of caffeine (Weinberg & Bealer, 2001), and about coffee-drinking as an addictive custom (Smith, 1995). I also located my research in food history, and read food historians from Australia (Gollan, 1978; Symons, 1982; Beckett, 1984; Walker & Roberts, 1988; O'Donnell, 2000), from England (Tannahill, 1973; Wilson, 1993) and from Canada (Visser, 1986). I researched the temperance movement of the nineteenth century in Victoria and its origins in England, and the coffee palaces of the 1880s in Melbourne (Cannon, 1976; Barrows & Room, c. 1999). I could find only one article on Italian café society in Melbourne between the two World Wars, and only one monograph dealing with more recent coffee culture in Melbourne, an MA thesis focussing on a case study of an Italian espresso bar (Sgro, 1976).

The feedback on my initial writing about the local history of coffee was that the research was interesting but it was not personalised, and there was no sense of 'myself' in the telling. At this stage of my research I encountered a work by the contemporary writer Peter Robb. Robb's *Midnight in Sicily* (1996) is a multi-layered history of Sicily and of the Mafia. History and culture are scrutinised through literature, politics, art and, especially, gastronomy. Robb locates himself within the history of which he writes,

based upon his extended periods of travel and research in Sicily from the 1970s to the 1990s, and synthesises archival and scholarly research, interviews, and personal observation to write this history.

I also became interested in the work of food historian Margaret Visser and her concern with the ‘anthropology of every day life’ (1986: cover blurb). In *Much Depends on Dinner* (1986), Visser notes that her research into onions involved traversing many disciplines, from medicine to folklore to business and anthropology (13-14). Robb’s use of his personal daily experiences to write about social history and Visser’s crossing of disciplines gave me license to explore personal connections and lateral relationships in my research and writing about coffee.

Through reading *Midnight in Sicily*, I became interested in the genre of creative non-fiction. According to the American writer and teacher of creative non-fiction, Lee Gutkind, this genre is ‘what is generically referred to as literary journalism’ (1997:8). The American journalist Tom Wolfe coined the term ‘New Journalism’ (Wolfe, 1973) to describe a more personalised and literary strand of feature journalism, evident from the mid-1960s, and from which – according to Gutkind – creative non-fiction grew (Gutkind 1997:8). Gutkind considers that creative non-fiction can include memoir, journalistic reportage, archival research, and reflection. This more personal and reflective style of journalistic writing uses fiction techniques, such as characterization, scenes and dialogue, description, and shifting point of view (Gutkind, 1998: 3), and often involves the writer’s own journey of discovery.

The works of Robb (1996) and Gutkind (1997, 1998) prompted me to read more widely in the creative non-fiction genre. I read Kim Mahood’s *Craft for a Dry Lake* (2000), in which Mahood writes about the geography of her youth while also writing about her father’s life in an Australian landscape. I then explored the work of American

New Journalists Joan Didion (*Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, 1969) and Hunter S. Thompson (*Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72*, 1973), and of the American literary non-fiction writer Annie Dillard (*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, 1975). I wanted to see if there was any comparable Australian literary non-fiction and read Charmian Clift (*Peel Me a Lotus*, 1959; *The World of Charmian Clift*, 1970) for her personal accounts of everyday experience and her sophisticated command of narrative; I read Frank Moorhouse's *Days of Wine and Rage* (1980) for its location in an urban Australian landscape, and Gillian Bouras' *Aphrodite and the Others* (1994) for its use of memoir. I read also some contemporary 'gonzo' journalism: Anthony Bourdain's *A Cook's Tour: In Search of the Perfect Meal* (2001), and Stewart Lee Allen's *the devil's cup* [sic] (2000), a journey tracing the history of coffee. Finally, I read two works of travel writing – Colm Toibin's *Homage to Barcelona* (1990), and George Orwell's *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933) – for their handling of personalised narrative. Anna Funder's *Stasiland* (2002) added another texture to my understanding of creative non-fiction, as it was constructed around oral histories documenting the activities of the Stasi secret police in the former East Germany.

One of the main parameters of creative non-fiction research is the concept of 'immersion', that is, the writers immerse themselves in the lives of the people they want to research 'for prolonged periods' (Gutkind, 1997: 99). Gutkind himself 'hung' around a hospital for three years to write about transplants. Annie Dillard walked the same route along a creek for a year to write *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1975), Peter Robb lived in Italy for ten years before writing *Midnight in Sicily* (1996), and more recently Anna Funder lived in East Berlin for years before writing *Stasiland* (2002).

After reading these works of creative non-fiction, and Gutkind's ideas about the genre, I decided to immerse myself in the local coffee culture in Melbourne and its

environs. I defined ‘coffee culture’ as ‘the nexus of perspectives and practices surrounding the making, processing, importing, purchasing and consuming of coffee and coffee related artefacts by manufacturers, producers, coffee proprietors and consumers’. For me, the process of immersion in local coffee culture involved formal interviews, archival and scholarly research, and site visits to still-existing inner city cafés from the 1950s, such as Pellegrini’s in Bourke Street, and to locations of now-defunct cafés and restaurants of the period, such as The Legend in Bourke Street and the Russell Collins at the corner of Russell and Collins Street. I also attended cultural events, and visited museum and art exhibitions, and contemporary cafés. Sometimes I would not enter a café for fear of having to observe and reflect.

At this point I should note also that this thesis is grounded in the methodological principles of qualitative research. Data gathering included participant observation, in-depth interviews, and the collection of relevant documents (Maykut et al. 1994: 46). Interviews were based on qualitative inquiry as a method that ‘captures language and behaviour’ (46). Observation and interview data was collected in the form of field notes and audiotape interviews, which were later transcribed for use in data analysis (46). All this was done in accordance with ethics approval. In this sense, I have related the qualitative notion of the ‘participant observer’ (69) to Gutkind’s concept of ‘immersion’ journalism (1997: 99-106).

My thesis is therefore a synthesis of the creative and the critical. I have adopted the methodologies of qualitative inquiry and creative non-fiction in the research and the writing of the thesis. What would be separate creative and critical components in the standard creative thesis are fused in this thesis. Qualitative research interviews are fused with immersion research techniques, with more traditional archival and scholarly

research, and with personal experience and reflection. This fusion has allowed me to write a creative/critical narrative focussed on one aspect of cultural history.

Chapter one

Billy tea in Mutawintji National Park

... one never entirely gives up looking for a good cup of coffee.

Symons (1993: 2)

In 2003 I accompany my friends Sophie and John on a brief camping trip to outback New South Wales. Sophie and John can only get a few days break from work and want to see Broken Hill, and if possible Mutawintji National Park, a five-hour trip north of Broken Hill, as they have heard they can go on walks to caves with Aboriginal paintings. Towards Broken Hill, the terrain becomes semi-desert, with an occasional sheep station dotted in the distance, or a seventy-kilometre track leading to one. This year New South Wales is gripped by a worse than usual drought. Wild emus and goats normally found further west, where they are able to survive quite easily, now roam along these road routes in search of food.

We arrive in Broken Hill just in time to have lunch at a pub and watch the AFL Grand Final being telecast to a mob of Collingwood footy fans, then spend the rest of the day sightseeing. We head further on to Mutawintji the next morning. By afternoon we have walked across dry river beds and navigated rock crevices and ridges dictated by tourist maps – a small glimpse of untravelled territory for the three of us.

On our way back from Mutawintji towards Broken Hill, we stop in what feels like the middle of nowhere. The road is mostly dirt and dust, and often there is no fence separating the road from the wilderness beyond. Wild emus graze along the roadside. Kangaroos and wild goats mingle with sheep from local stations. We stop by a dry dam along a small track leading off from the main road. There seems little for the animals to survive on. Most of the trees and shrubs have collapsed with dryness. Dry splintered branches form a cushion where a tree's main branches have fallen, creating its own mulch. A clear blue sky prevails and a mountain range in the distance displays the purple of Namatjira paintings.

We have had to take drinking water to Mutawintji, water we bought from a supermarket in Broken Hill. The morning before we leave the park we boil it on a very small collapsible gas stove and pour it into a thermos. We are heading back to Melbourne. Sophie, John and I all live in inner city suburbs and our lifestyle reflects this – going to cinemas and seminars at local bookshops and, of course, spending time in coffee shops and being selective about how we drink our coffee. We have been on a whirlwind five-day round trip in a small inner city car not built for these rugged outback sandy roads. I feel I must come back here to get a better understanding of the desert landscape and its history.

I walk towards the dry dam in the stillness, except for the crackle of dry branches beneath my feet. The previous night we sat around a large communal campfire at Mutawintji, once an old cattle station and now reclaimed as a national park run by Aboriginal rangers. As part of the guided tours to the secret sites and the Aboriginal cave art, the rangers had organised a billy tea and damper evening the night we stay, which gathers most of the campers around a big campfire at dusk. We are asked to bring a mug.

By the time we arrive the campfire is blazing. Grown-ups are sitting around on logs. Children are racing around and making their own damper from a thick paste of flour and water provided by the rangers. Damper is also cooked on a large grate over the fire and passed around; alongside the grate is a very large saucepan that gradually comes to boil. I assume it is tea, but it's just water and we need to find our own tea bags.

We learn about the local Aboriginal country, about the lives of the rangers, and about the shearers' sheds they stay in when they come up here from Broken Hill. I want to talk to the Aboriginal children. Earlier in the day I heard them yelling and screaming at the tops of their voices, playing in the sandy creek bed; there was no stopping those voices of high-pitched pleasure. I ask them lots of questions. One of the little boys Anthony tells me, nudging my arm, 'Beware of the featherhead, the man in the dark who has feathers on his feet and feathers covering his head'. He adds, 'Don't look at red eyes as they will pierce your heart and you will die'. We sit in the dark around the fire and Anthony's stories become more fantastical and scary until his mother takes him away to bed. When the water finally boils people queue with their mugs, some exchange teabags. An anthropologist talks about the small marsupials in the park she has come to research, motivated by her son's interest, and explains how these creatures can be counted. A horticulturist shows his daughter how to find west by locating the planet Venus in the night sky, while the daughter tries to find the appropriate stick to toast marshmallows. The fire smoulders out, cinders begin to form, and we all slowly drift away.

*

In the car on the long journey home we play family inquisitors to ease the monotony of the drive. John's mother was an opera singer, and his parents were missionaries in India and Asia. His father and brother are doctors. Long after John's parents divorce, his mother remarries a clergyman. Sophie's parents are farmers in northern Victoria from 'way back' but have Eastern European ancestry. She explains how much she felt 'at home' on her recent travels through Eastern Europe. I have known Sophie for a very long time and yet I have been unaware of this history, and now realize there is a big gap of knowledge between us. That knowledge must be so important to her. It's my turn and I tell them about one of my great grandfathers who lived in the mountains north-east of Milano in Italy, and who would talk about Garibaldi marching into his home town when he was very young. My ancestor later escaped conscription by fleeing across the Swiss Alps and getting a boat to Australia with his two brothers. He came from a family of stonemasons, and he and his brothers ended up in Footscray working in the quarries and building roads. By chance I now live not far from where my great grandfather once lived and I often think about him when I travel over bumpy old roads near my house. I talk about the feeling of 'coming home' when I'm around Italian friends and try to explain it, but I became confused because somehow it sounds irrational and vague. Sophie talks about this feeling as 'feeding your soul' – making a connection.

To save space in the little car we have allowed ourselves only one book. John's book is about exploring spirituality in a Western context. I'm curious about his choice after learning about his parents' religious backgrounds and it makes me think about how our personal past influences us; and even though John says it's his personal journey of spirituality he's more concerned with, it made it more poignant for me to know about his past. I am embarking on a research project about coffee and especially the influence of the Italian cafés in the 1950s and '60s, and in these isolated surrounds along dusty

roads where you must carry your own water bought at a supermarket, I wonder if it's my Italian roots that makes me want to explore my interest. I know that many Italians who came from small villages after the Second World War had never tried coffee until they came to Australia, so that my interest is not necessarily inherited. Maybe it's because I'm hooked on espresso machines.

We share the water in the thermos between us. I jiggle a tea bag in the hot water in my plastic camping cup. I think of the writings about billy tea of the white settlers in the early 1800s. More recently, the Australian food historian Anne Gollan writes of tea being boiled in a billy made from a quart-pot, of how the billy would be swung in a circle, or just tapped on its side, to make the tea leaves sink (1978: 25). Based on these early experiences, the making and drinking of billy tea became part of the Australian identity. It is only in the past fifty years that this identity has been reinvented through coffee and cafés. For the early white travellers water was also scarce, and Gollan mentions stories of water having to be strained through an old piece of shirt to clear the leeches and other debris, and the Aboriginal practice of throwing ashes into the hot water to carry the sediment to the bottom (1978: 25). Tea too was often scarce and expensive, so in isolated places various native plants were used instead of tea, including sassafras bark and the leaves of the tea-tree, the leptospermum and the melaleuca, and of the *Correa alba* to make Cape Barren tea (26).

Tea was thought to have taken off in Australia because it was so light to carry in a knapsack and easy to make, instead of the more complex process needed for coffee. But there are other reasons for the continuation of tea-drinking in Australia. America discarded tea in 1773 as a response to the high tariffs set by England: in the protest known as the Boston Tea Party, a group of demonstrators tossed tea chests into the sea, a gesture considered to have initiated the American War of Independence. Mark

Prendergast (1999) writes about the American social history of coffee, about how it was carefully divvied out to soldiers during the Civil War (1861-1865), and how each soldier had a small coffee mill connected to the buttstock of his gun (49) so he could individually grind the newly roasted beans.

We sit for a while on a dead log under a tree that is still alive, to protect our white faces and arms, the colour of the white sandy earth, from the harsh sun's rays. It's important I sit here for a while, because this is what I want to remember when I'm back in Melbourne.

Though there may be more than one reason to see *Down by law* (1986), the film by Jim Jarmusch, it is worth it merely for the finale. Three prisoners, who happen to be good guys, escape from a grotty Louisiana goal. They spend days wading waist-deep through the bayou, with only a wet packet of matches between them. Traipsing inland, they eventually stumble across an old wooden house beside a dirt track in the middle of nowhere. It's an old Italian restaurant, hidden among the trees. The owner is a young Italian woman, whose father has died some months before, leaving her to run the business on her own. She has not seen anyone for some time.

The café shows signs of wear. There is a feeling of frugality; the walls are bare, except for a couple of cheap prints of the blessed Virgin taped next to a Coca Cola sign by an old juke box. But there's an espresso coffee machine, and the young Italian woman makes the three escapees a coffee, and much later dinner. I cannot tell you why it is coffee that provides all things lost, as that is how I think of it ... still not understanding what I have really lost. Maybe in the past in Australia it was billy tea that

provided this feeling, or a slug of rum. Jim Jarmusch further explores the role of coffee in human relationships in his more recent *Coffee and cigarettes* (2003), a layered series of comic vignettes, in which the characters discuss things as diverse as caffeine popsicles, Paris in the twenties, and the use of nicotine as an insecticide – all the while sitting around sipping coffee and smoking cigarettes. As Jarmusch delves into the normal pace of our world from an extraordinary angle, he shows just how absorbing the obsessions, joys and addictions of life can be.

The history of coffee is about the history of how people come together. It is also about the history of extending the hours you want to be awake, awake enough to be able to talk and to think, even to work. These days these decisions are taken for granted, but drinking non-alcoholic beverages has really only occurred in the Western world in the past 350 years, since the main non-alcoholic beverages of coffee, tea and chocolate have been around. Otherwise people generally drank alcohol, like ale, for breakfast, and occasionally a herbal brew.

Parked along a track off the main road between Mutawintji and Broken Hill, John asks me why I'm interested in researching coffee.

'The café "thing" is an integral part of many Western countries,' I reply. 'But there are also local influences that have made us arrive at this lifestyle.'

'And it's certainly become that,' says John. 'But do you think it's because your background is part-Italian that you want to find out more about it?'

'I think that has something to do with it,' I say, 'but it's more than that, and I'm not sure how I can explain it yet.'

I walk in the white sandy soil and acquaint myself with the sense of open space I have not experienced on this scale before. I toss the dregs of my mug onto the dry soil and watch the soil absorb the tiny moist spots.

‘I think I give meaning to drinking coffee and going to cafés because of many different personal experiences,’ I finally say, ‘but I don’t really know why.’

We climb back in the small car not made for these outback tracks. It is actually a defining moment that drives my interest in coffee, and there wasn’t the time on this short-lived trip to sit in the desert plain and discuss it. It was the end of one summer holiday. After spending most of my time at home entertaining friends and finding the occasional beer stubby upside-down among the lavender bushes, I decided to leave it all for a while and head down along the Great Ocean Road to Lorne. In Anglesea we stopped to see a Spanish horse circus, something I hadn’t done before, and afterwards decided to get a coffee. This was problematic because there was nowhere to get the kind of coffee I was used to back in inner city Melbourne. I could have a large mug of instant coffee, but there was no place with an espresso machine.

After wandering through the lower part of Anglesea and heading up the hill towards Airey’s Inlet there was still no sign of a place with an espresso machine, until we reached the turn-off near the wondrous Airey’s Inlet lighthouse. On the right was a group of new shops, one with a big bright sign proclaiming *New Deli*.

It looked promising. There was a large refrigerated display of Tasmanian brie, smoked terrines and pâtés served with home-made bread, and large bowls of kalamata olives and fetta cheeses. But I only wanted a coffee. The brand new espresso machine was very shiny and looked very stylish, which raised my hopes to expect the kind of coffee I was used to in Carlton. When the café latte was placed in front of me, my heart sank. It was pale and watery; it was cold, and there was no froth. The flavour did not

complement the expensive makes of brie and pickled artichokes. I asked if it could be made stronger, but there was no difference. I asked for another, adding a few instructions. The woman serving me was in her sixties and appeared to be out of her depth; she was most likely helping her daughter set up the café and trying to be useful. I imagined she lived on one of the surrounding farms – she reminded me of my mother. Her hands had probably made a thousand morning teas for shearers, with big pots of tea, the best china for the jug of milk and tea cups, and big baskets of scones with cream and jam. But using an espresso machine had baffled her. I, on the other hand, no longer wanted the life of tea and demanded a decent coffee. I think also I was annoyed that anyone who could afford to buy an espresso machine should not know how to make a decent coffee. Most of all, for me making a coffee was about something else more important. There was no love in that coffee, and who was I to tell her that?

When I look back at my demands that day I cringe at my middle-class expectations, but it was as though I was being driven beyond my control. I think it's important to complain about finding a fly in one's soup or being served mouldy bread – but not to send back a cup of coffee three times because it's not strong enough, and then to stew over it for the next three hours. It seems to me that in every cup of tea, hot chocolate or coffee we are looking for some kind of arcane connection. For coffee, for me, that takes skill. Skills that involve knowing the correct temperature and humidity of the water to pass through the coffee grains and how to heat the milk, even before the individual demands of the customer for a latte with three-quarters milk, or a macchiato with half decaf, are taken into account.

Surely waitresses and the rest of the service industry should not be in the business of dispensing love? No contract would dare contain such a demand. But truly, that is what I was expecting. The coffee was to be made with love. Love of smell, of

taste, of knowing the person who drinks it will feel love. I wondered where or when this notion became important to me. The friend who accompanied me along the Great Ocean Road, who was more used to drinking coffee than I, wasn't worried about hers at all, and had long finished it and was now reading the paper. I, on the other hand, stared out over the wind-blown umbrellas towards the lighthouse and thought about the notion of questioning something only when you know it is missing. I thought about the possible reasons why I was feeling like this, and I saw that the experience was not merely trite. All at once a myriad of ideas came to me. It was like a mandala; of the rural versus the urban, suburban versus the urban, the English Empire versus the multi-cultural, tea versus coffee, my experiences in Europe versus the Victorian coast, isolation versus community. I looked around at this most beautiful vista of countryside and sea, and knew I felt a part of this landscape, yet there was something missing that I pined for and it made me recall my experiences in Europe, where I could have the country and the sea, but also the life of cafés and people, and this made me sad.

I stare out the dusty window at a kangaroo that stands alone on a small hill – the presence of just one magnifies its importance. The first time I remember drinking coffee is when I am about eleven and I am at a family gathering of my parents' friends in the 1960s. I have been brought up on tea, which I like. My parents have befriended a family who would have been called at this time 'new Australians'. The father is from Slovenia. They are slightly different to other friends of my parents, who are mostly connected to the local parish. In some ways though, my parents seem to have a much more jolly time with their new friends, and I have never heard them laugh so much.

I cannot remember what we have for dinner or what other interaction we have with the grown-ups, except for when we congregate around the stove to watch the coffee percolating and then make cappuccinos with whisked Carnation evaporated milk. Ursula, the mother, yells out to all the children and the adults that 'It's time to make the coffee and you all better get ready for it!' She makes it a big thing for the children who have been playing separately from the adults. I think this is where the significance of the experience lies, for it's the time when children play with children, while the adults spend time together. Ursula brings us together over the making of coffee. I know she percolates the coffee using ground beans. Even at my young age the aroma of the coffee is energising. Ursula whips tinned evaporated milk till it is stiff and frothy. I stand very close to the coffee pot waiting for it to percolate, and help with the evaporated milk. When I see the coffee percolate through the glass top to the lid of the pot, it's time for Ursula to pour the coffee into the cups.

I can have as much froth as I want and top up my cup till it nearly overflows. The more froth, the happier Ursula is. I carefully spoon in the sugar making sure I don't reduce the froth, then finally Ursula shakes a tin with holes in it over the coffee and little brown flecks of cinnamon fall on to the froth. The cinnamon is deliciously fragrant. I carry my cup to the table. Life is good. I drink from the cup. I smell the cinnamon as I get a mouthful of coffee. The froth catches my top lip and almost goes up my nose. All my senses work at once to balance the aromas and flavours while I sit at the big table with all the adults, listening to their chatter. I am a grown-up for this short time. I juggle the cold froth with the hot coffee, the sweet bitter aroma of cinnamon with the bitter sweetened coffee. Ursula yells out for the next person to take their coffee. Maybe this is why my other Catholic girlfriends aren't so happy. They have never tried coffee. Whenever we have dinner at our new friends' house, and Ursula calls us for

coffee, the excitement in her voice carries through the whole making of the coffee. I participate in a ritual that has already been prescribed meaning before I have even placed my lips to the cup.

‘Going to cafés and drinking coffee is a preoccupation with most inner city dwellers these days,’ I say to John out of the blue, from the back seat, as we continue our drive south. He’s too busy negotiating thick sand to respond. Sophie has heard too much about it from me. She was around when I first wanted to go to the State Library to research coffee. After she helped me access hundreds of references with the word ‘coffee’, she became lost in coffee recipes.

In the early 1970s, just after I’d left my home in Geelong, I went to work in Melbourne. I was living in the inner city suburbs of Fitzroy and Carlton, where I discovered cafés like Tamani’s and the University. This part of the city was buzzing with students and people my age in a state of inquiry about culture and the arts.

Going to cafés was exciting for me, especially after growing up in the country, which meant isolation from people and ideas; even living in the suburbs did not satisfy my curiosity. Living near the centre of Melbourne meant a lot to me. I recall an image of a woman walking across the top of Bourke Street, near Spring Street, just past Pellegrini’s. I saw mostly the back of her. She signified the height of urban sophistication, of worldly leisure, of the cultural and intellectual life. She had shoulder-length auburn hair, and was wearing sunglasses and a long black coat down to her black heels. She was jaywalking across the road, in long strides, with purpose, as if she owned the city and knew how it worked, and it served her. I thought she may have been an

actress, or had something to do with the arts. I think she became the epitome of urban sophistication for me. I, on the other hand, lacked that confidence in a city.

In the suburbs in the early 1970s there weren't many places to go out, except to pubs. Pubs were rowdy and smelly, and at that time going to a pub was about drinking to get drunk, not much talking, but listening to the occasional good band. Other than pubs, one would meet at someone's house, sitting in the kitchen, the 'oldies' next door watching TV, you either chatting with your girlfriends about marriage, or trying to impress boyfriends when you would be interrupted by younger bored siblings. I wore white fishnet stockings, white gloves and pale-coloured dresses and hats as Sunday best. It was the early 1970s and the musical *Hair* was creating a furore with its nude scenes – although my good Catholic mother sent me tickets for my eighteenth birthday. When I went overseas in the mid-seventies I became more interested in the lifestyle of going to cafés, especially on my travels to Italy, and when I finally returned to Australia I wanted to sustain my European café experience, based on the cafés I used to frequent in Melbourne before I left.

John doesn't get all the details. I just told him going to cafés in the early 1970s was important to me after growing up in the country and later the suburbs, and that it was that time of transition to a very urban lifestyle that was really important to me – a time of experiencing my own freedom. I also felt coffee and cafés represented a lot for many of my generation. John makes the connection to pubs as the only meeting places before the rise of cafés, and the significance of cafés as an alternative to the pub scene – especially when the licensing laws meant pubs closed at 6 o'clock and this caused the

ensuing fracas of downing as much alcohol as possible before leaving. Even when pubs closed later at ten, there was still that sense of urgency to drink as much as possible when ‘Last drinks!’ was yelled out.

The previous night John, Sophie and I had been sitting around the large campfire at Mutawintji drinking billy tea made from a very large saucepan of hot water, and sharing tea bags with strangers, and learning about the country from Aboriginal rangers – still not enough, but for now I am returning to Melbourne and my urban pursuits.

Sophie says the first thing she will do when she hits home is do her laundry, John will get on his bike and ride into Lygon Street in Carlton for a coffee and to read the paper. I also know I will not feel I have arrived home till I go to my local café.

A few days later on a frosty Sunday mid-winter’s morning I head to Sydney Road in Brunswick to meet someone for breakfast. I don’t usually come to this part of town and I arrive before the café opens, so I go for a stroll. It feels good to stroll so early on a Sunday morning without the busy traffic and the rush of shoppers. The atmosphere of Sydney Road is different from other inner city enclaves, mainly because of its particular mix of ethnic groups. Specialised food shops from the Mediterranean to the Middle East are mixed in with alternative clothes shops, large Italian homeware shops, and shop factories used as cheap clothes outlets. I wander past a shop selling polyfleece coats for dogs alongside post-modern black tea-cosies with gold patterns in the shape of space ships, then an interesting shop selling Turkish wares of tiles, plates and gifts. What catches my eye first is the array of white tiles with blue and green patterns, and ornate taps and heavy basins, and intricately designed purses based on patterns I’ve only seen

in hand-woven rugs. Everything has been imported from Turkey and not having travelled there I feel immediately transported, both physically and mythologically.

What I become most interested in is a flier taped to the door, announcing a performance of whirling dervishes. The photo on the flier shows the dervishes with the edges of their long garments describing large perfect circles as they whirl. The photo reminds me of *Teacup ballet* (1935), the photograph by the Australian photographer Olive Cotton: a set of teacups is lit quite low, making long shadows of their shape. The shadows of the cups look like dancers and have similar symmetrical splayed shapes, and the movement of the outfits of the dervishes are similar to the teacups and the shadows of the saucers, with similar spacing between the dancers. I am determined to see what is called the *Ceremony of Sema*, and note the mobile number.

This small advertisement transports me to the Levant in the 1400s. I forget why I have come to Sydney Road so early on Sunday morning to meet someone I haven't seen before, which has its own sense of anxiety, until my date interrupts me at the window. I cannot even properly introduce myself when he asks what so interests me. It is too long a story to explain to someone I am meeting for the first time. Here is an original custom from the 1400s, from one of the first cultures who drank coffee, that is being performed somewhere in Melbourne and has a direct relationship to early coffee drinking.

Not only do I like drinking coffee for the caffeine, I know I am attached to its history, to what is thought of as exoticism, ritual, and mythology. It is these historical links which makes coffee drinking more meaningful to me. I have come across other local practices related to coffee: Italian women working in the clothing factories in the 1970s would chew coffee beans to stay awake in order to work the long laborious hours; Turkish hospital orderlies ritually brewed their powdered coffee in the early hours of the morning in little copper pots above a naked flame with heaps of sugar in Fitzroy; the

still existing Greek men's club-like cafés of Yarraville; the temperance societies that were the instigators of the coffee palaces of the 1880s (of which there are still architectural remains); the influence of the Americans during the Second World War on coffee drinking; the jazz cafés of St Kilda in the 1950s, and the 1950s Jewish cafés; the folk music scene in coffee houses; and, finally, the Italian espresso bars of Carlton, where coffee can be drunk standing by the counter.

Every time I go to the State Library I order the same book – Ukers' *All About Coffee* (1922). It is a big thick leather-bound text, and each time I go I photocopy another section. I hope one day someone will republish this book. Many contemporary texts on food history (Allen, 2000; Weinberg & Bealer, 2001; Tannahill, 2002) refer to this history. Ukers has recorded the stories of western travellers and merchants to the Levant, and of Levantine poets and muftis from the early ninth century onwards. His work explores the history of coffee from its early mythology, to its journey to Europe and then America, to its cultivation elsewhere, to the relationship between coffee and the arts, to its first trading on the stock exchange.

One of the early legends about the initial discovery of coffee in the Levant told by Ukers is apocryphal:

[An] Arabian herdsman in upper Egypt, or Abyssinia ... complained to the abbot of a neighbouring monastery that the goats confided to his care became unusually frolicsome after eating the berries of certain shrubs found near their feeding grounds. The abbot, having observed the fact, determined to try the virtues of the berries on himself. He too, responded with a new exhilaration. Accordingly, he directed that some be boiled, and the decoction drunk by his monks, who thereafter found

no difficulty in keeping awake during the religious services of the night. ... According to the legend, the news of the “wakeful monastery” spread rapidly, and the magical berry soon “came to be in request throughout the whole kingdom; and in progress of time, other nations and provinces of the East fell into the use of it” (Ukers, 1922:14).

Ukers also cites an alternative story recorded by an unknown Frenchman about a goatherd called Kaldi, who had a ‘heavy heart’ and after noticing his goats ‘abandoning themselves to the most extravagant prancings [after eating] certain fruits [with delight, Kaldi] in the hope of cheering himself up a little ... thought he would pick and eat of the fruit... He forgot his troubles and became the happiest herder in ... Arabia’ (14).

This second story has become the popular originary legend today. A shortened version can be found on wholesaler coffee fliers, or on coffee bean packets. In the mid-1990s I phoned a local Melbourne coffee wholesaler to find out about their history in the coffee trade, and the office worker gave me a potted version of the story of the goatherd from the back of their flier.

There are other legends too. Ukers tells of a famous mufti of Aden, Sheik Gemaleddin Abou Muhammad Bensaid, who during an illness recalled his introduction to coffee on his journey into Abyssinia around 1454. The mufti sent for some coffee and after his recovery he suggested that his dervishes use it in their night religious ceremonies (16). Most of the myths about the early use of coffee revolve around its use by religious groups. Ukers states that Muslim worshippers used coffee in their ceremonies as a means of maintaining their trance-like state for longer periods; coffee then began to be used by Muslims outside of religious ceremonies as a way of

informally meeting between friends and family (Ukers, 1922: 17). It appears that the people themselves were looking for a social beverage to replace alcohol, which was banned by the Koran. However, in England it was the legend about Christian monks using coffee to keep them awake during prayer that became the accepted myth of origin, and I wonder if this story made coffee easier to identify with than a Muslim ceremony of whirling dervishes using trance.

I look at the advertisement for the ceremony of whirling dervishes on the door of the Turkish hardware store in Sydney Road, and wonder if the ceremony still has a connection with coffee. Over breakfast with someone I have not met before I have a discussion about whether intense prayer or certain forms of meditation are similar to trance-like states. My breakfast companion would even include focused concentration on a computer screen in the list.

The following week I negotiate my way through very stormy weather and a maze of highways to Templestowe in the outer north-east of Melbourne, where only in the recent past narrow roads led towards orchards set between undulating hills and overgrown native gums, and to the mud-brick houses of those seeking an alternative lifestyle. Now Templestowe is an outer suburb of brick veneers, mostly two-storey, and the little local meeting hall sits alongside a large supermarket complex, a large RSL Club with Pokies, a very large Chinese Restaurant, and a block of large licensed pizza restaurants fraternized by extended families and large groups of young people. When I first phone Gill to make arrangements, she tells me this evening's ceremony isn't for an audience – but still I am allowed to come. I bring along a friend also interested in different cultural

experiences. We accidentally walk across the main hall area in our boots, and only notice the line of shoes at the entrance when waiting in the alcove across the other side of the hall. A very welcoming musician apologises for two of the performers who are away sick, which he says will make the music less exciting, and he then keeps apologising for the long delay in starting. We don't mind, as it gives us time to orientate ourselves in the quiet space. We sit and whisper.

Eventually we are taken into the hall and seated in a corner. I am pleased I have asked a friend, otherwise I would have been the only person present not involved in the ceremony. The old hall is very clean and has high ceilings similar to a church. The dervishes use the body of the hall space and not the stage. A Persian-looking rug is placed in front of the stage. A rustic-red dyed sheepskin is placed on the floor at the opposite end of the room. A long length of narrow rug has been placed to one side. Framed pictures of flowing Arabic writing, most likely scriptures, are strategically placed on the walls around the room, one directly behind the dyed sheepskin mat. The light is subdued and gentle.

The performers, for want of a better word, as the Sema is a religious ceremony, enter in single file. I am struck by their costume of long black cloaks with large sleeves, worn over long white undergarments. The men wear brown felt hats shaped like cones but flat at the top, the women have white, slightly flatter hats with a white scarf wrapped over the top and around their shoulders. There are adults and children. The musicians take their seats beside their instruments on the Persian-looking rug, in front of the stage. The person I later discover is the sheik, and the master of the ceremony, stands on the rustic-red sheepskin at the other end of the room, and the dervishes who will dance are ranged along the narrow carpet at the side. I am not used to this ceremony so I cannot describe the events with precision, but I do recall that initially there is a prayer in

English about God's goodness and a response by the sheik, there are repetitive chants that last for five to ten minutes, and all are involved. The dervishes, who have been kneeling on the carpet, stand and form a circle in the centre of the room. They chant as they walk in a circle, then bow when they reach either side of the sheik and, when crossing in front of him, bow again. They then return to their assigned places on the mats, and kneel again. We sit quietly and watch, careful to not make any noise.

After further prayer, the dervishes remove their black cloaks and are now all dressed in white. They make a circle, around one person in the centre, and the whirling begins. They first turn with their arms crossed in front, their hands resting on their shoulders, and as they gain momentum they stretch their arms out above their heads, and then out horizontally at shoulder height, one palm raised and the other facing downwards, as they whirl around the circle. There are about seven whirlers. They all wear – men, women and children – an almost floor-length white skirt, which seems thicker at the base, a white shirt, and a white cross-over jacket, with a red cloth rose attached to the waist, at one side. When they whirl, the skirts billow out to large circles, like upside-down teacups. I think about how old this ceremony is, about how the dancers feel as they whirl – something we did when we were children; often we would fall and hurt ourselves because of the incessant turning and not knowing how to do it properly. The dancers' eyes are open, but looking downwards. I have to place my jacket over my legs and feet as the whirlers create a cold breeze as they pass. The dancers look so uniform, I think of Olive Cotton's *Teacup ballet* (1935) coming to life, with the cups twirling around the room.

The whirling and the music are mesmerising. Just watching makes me want to whirl with the dancers. They seem to whirl in rhythm, there is no other superfluous movement. There are no sounds from outside.

After ten minutes the music stops. Immediately all the dervishes face the sheik and bow, then stand in small group, and then the whirling begins with a different person in the centre, always a male. By and by the small children are asked to leave the circle, by a nod from the sheik, or they simply choose to leave and stand by their mats. Finally the sheik moves to the centre and gently whirls. When the Sema has finished all the dancers don their black coats and walk out in single file. My friend and I sit quietly, and then begin to whisper, as if afraid to break the spell of the ceremony. It has lasted about an hour. Fifteen centuries ago, the ceremony lasted all night, the whirling induced a trance-like state, and drinking coffee helped the whirlers stay awake.

I have enjoyed the ceremony but perhaps my response is naïve, as I haven't researched Sufism, to which the whirling dervishes belong. I recall the story my companion tells me on the way here, of his friend's sister who married a Jordanian in Thailand, the ceremony in an unknown foreign language, so too the marriage contract she signed. My companion is distressed his friend did not understand what the ceremony implied. I too sit here not understanding the cultural implications of a ceremony.

My contact Gill arrives and greets us very warmly, and invites us to stay for tea and cake. To my surprise the supper also is conducted like a ceremony. Chairs are arranged in a semi-circle, and everyone takes a seat. A small table has been set out in front of the semi-circle, and the sheik sits – or should I say presides – on a chair to one side. Gill and I talk and talk about the Sema. I ask many questions, which she answers readily, but still I am afraid to take out my notebook to write everything down. I don't even know the names of the musical instruments.

The children who had been part of the ceremony bring home-made cake and small plastic plates, then a tray of tea. Each person takes a plate and a piece of cake. The

black tea has a very delicate flavour. Gill and I are still madly chatting, even though we are really whispering, and then I notice the silence, everyone is just quietly eating their cake and drinking their tea, not talking. Even the sheik is quiet, although he does gesture to the young ones to pick up their crumbs. I do not understand the silence of the others. I wonder if the ceremony makes them quiet and meditative. Gill tells me there is no trance, as I have been told occurred with the original dervishes in the thirteenth century.

I get the impression I must acknowledge the sheik and ask him a question. I try to think of one that sounds important but I can't. The sheik tells me when a person goes into the centre of the whirling circle, he is the sun, and the dancers are planets whirling around him. He also tells me their group is the only one in Victoria. Then there is more silence.

I don't know where to look. I sip some tea and want another piece of cake. Again, it may be the intensity of the ceremony that people are not yet able to speak. There has been a lot of prayer. I don't feel it is right to ask Gill more questions as now I feel I must direct them towards the sheik. He tells me coffee is no longer part of the ceremony, and tea is the only beverage they drink after it. The dervishes seem to be from different cultures, the sheik has a very strong English accent.

The sheik then asks me about the relevance of coffee to their ceremony. I tell him of the connection between the first discoveries of coffee in the Levant and its use by the whirling dervishes as a means to keep them awake while they were whirling in a trance. I hope I am not giving any information contrary to Sufism in front of the sheik's 'disciples'. He then talks about his knowledge of their origins in the Levant, of the great Sufi poet, spiritual master and founder of the Sufi order, Mowlana Jalaluddin Rumi.

'So why else is coffee important?' he asks.

I tell him Muslims wanted to find a beverage that wasn't alcohol. The sheik wants to know more. I'm afraid to continue. I want to tell him how the Sufis and other Muslim sects first used coffee in their religious ceremonies and then began to drink coffee and to develop rituals in their homes, and to invite other people around, and the religious leaders rebelled by persecuting people, employing 'coffee police' to wander the streets sniffing out the coffee-drinkers. I sit in silence instead.

Suddenly the sheik declares 'The supper has ended' and everyone stands up and packs up to leave. I thank Gill, who has been so welcoming, and my friend and I leave.

I am surprised there has not been even light chatter between the people present at the supper, and that the sheik oversaw the proceedings. I think back to the early sixteenth century, when Muslims began to drink coffee outside religious ceremonies, and to invite people to drink it in their homes. I wonder if the ritual of drinking coffee was transferred to people's homes to simply have more informal conversation with friends, without a religious superior officiating – especially in a culture where religious belief could not be questioned. Getting together informally with friends for conversation was quite threatening to religion and to the establishment, as it implied free speech, and the questioning of official doctrine. In fact, the first ever cafés were synonymous with freedom of speech, and there have been instances of cafés being closed down by whatever government is in power, albeit temporarily (Ukers, 1922: 17-18; Lillywhite, 1963: 18).

I realise after the ceremony at Templestowe that the sheik would have known I was coming and was already curious about my research, as perhaps were the other Sufis. So perhaps my presence had determined the way the supper was 'performed'. Afterwards, my friend and I wanted a coffee, even a stiff drink, somewhere we did not

have to whisper, so we headed to a large pizza restaurant nearby. That night I dreamt I was whirling and felt the wind I was making with my long extended skirt.

There is, however, an earlier culture that drank coffee. The Oromo people from Ethiopia, more correctly from Oromiya within Ethiopia, are the first culture known to have used coffee. Stewart Lee Allen, an American journalist, writes in *the devil's cup* [sic] (2000), that the Oromo, a nomadic people who lived in the kingdom of Kefa, used to crush the beans, and make balls by mixing the crushed beans with fat to chew on long journeys. Allen states that the Oromo were using coffee three thousand years ago (12). On his travels in Ethiopia, Allen encountered the Oromo friendship ceremony, based on drinking coffee.

There is a small Oromo enclave living in exile in Melbourne, in Footscray in the western suburbs. A local sociologist Greg Gow (2002) has written about befriending the Oromo community. They began to settle in Footscray in the early 1980s, and by 2001 there were around 1,500 Oromo in the suburb (10). Greg Gow moved to Footscray with his family, to live near the Oromo. In his street many Oromo had settled in tiny flats, before moving to larger accommodation further out, or to public housing.

Greg and his family are invited to many cultural events and family parties. One New Year's Eve there is a gathering at Semira's, a young Oromo woman. As part of the ceremony Semira has collected fresh green grass from downstairs and strewn it throughout her flat as a gesture of life and fertility, a blessing to her guests on New Year's Eve (2002: 12). Gow writes:

Semira prepared *buna* – the traditional coffee ritual popular in Ethiopia. She sat on a small stool in the middle of the room, surrounded by green grass shoots, popcorn, biscuits and sweets, frying the raw coffee beans over hot coals in a portable stove. The thick smoke of fried coffee beans and *lubanota* incense filled the room.

Before drinking *buna* Ahmed led us in a simple Oromo blessing spoken in *afaan Oromoo* [the standardised Oromo language] and finished in Arabic. We sat with our palms raised. Following each request we approvingly responded in Islamic fashion with *aamiin* (amen)... Following the blessing Semira poured her thick black coffee from the clay *jabanaa* pot into small cups, passed them around and we drank together. A silence followed the drinking as Semira prepared the second cup, which, because there were so many of us, would be our last (13).

I dearly wanted to attend such a ceremony, which to my amazement was happening in a neighbouring suburb. I met Greg at a postgraduate seminar and later asked him if I could talk to the Oromo women about their coffee ritual. I want to attend an Oromo coffee ceremony because it is such an ancient ritual. I wonder about how the ceremony would change the feeling between the guests. I also want to ask many other questions, like what fertility really means for the Oromo people. I want to know why the Oromo sit around a portable stove when there is probably a stove in the kitchen.

My initial interpretation of fertility is about a woman becoming pregnant. However, it occurs to me much later that fertility has a broader meaning in relation to all facets of life. I think back to my Catholic experiences of saying grace before meals when we thanked God for the food we were about to eat, and to a time much later, at

university, when I would sit down to a meal with my non-denominational friends, and we would thank Mother Earth for providing us with the gifts of food and friends, which I always felt moved by.

I ask Greg if he would help me attend a coffee ceremony with the Oromo. Greg agrees, but suggests that I attend a coffee ritual happening for a purpose, rather than one staged for my benefit. This, he suggests, would be more informative. Greg says the Oromo carry out the coffee ritual for different social purposes; it is a cultural activity they have brought with them from home, that reminds them of home. I learn from Greg's book that people attending the ceremony bring sweet things, and I ask if I should bring something. He says the Oromo usually provide popcorn and sweet biscuits, but if I want to take something I can bring fresh unroasted coffee as a gift, as that is what the Oromo use. Greg suggests Djimma coffee, which comes from Chaffe in south-west Ethiopia, and I can get it in Footscray.

I buy some raw Ethiopian coffee beans, and wait for Greg to call. Some weeks later I hear he has moved interstate for work. The raw coffee beans rest on my library shelf as a reminder of the Oromo fertility ceremony and the stories I would like to hear, until I can find another contact.

Chapter two

Just to sit and talk

Fifty years ago to be a coffee drinker was a social marker, now social or economic judgements might be made from the kind of coffee drunk and the form of preparation, but not from coffee drinking per se.

Wilson (1993: 75)

I have a series of photos of café life in Brunswick Street, in inner city Fitzroy, from the 1990s. One stands out particularly, of a young woman, seated on a high bench at the open window of a café facing onto the street. The sun glares down upon her; there is a coffee in front of her. She rests her elbows on the bench as she gazes out into the street. She doesn't appear to be looking at anything in particular, her gaze is more inwardly focused, yet she is gazing in public. I want to know how we arrived at this image of the public gaze, especially that of women, as I think it is quite a recent development.

I go back to the 1950s and '60s, to the time when cafés were beginning to appear in Australia, when espresso machines were being imported, those devices that began to define how we would drink coffee, and how we would experience social space in a different way. I want to know more about the experience of people already living in Australia, who drank mostly tea and had not experienced such an informal meeting place as a café. I want to know what is happening, when one day you have been going

to a tea room and drinking tea, eating a pie and sauce or a club sandwich, knowing how to pour the tea and how much milk to use, how to greet the waitress in the appropriate tone of voice, and the following day you walk past a café with the smell of coffee wafting into the street, as it does, and lots of noise too, and you walk in the door and stay.

Rather than asking my friends' parents about their initial experiences of coffee and going to cafés in the 1950s, I thought I would find people I didn't know. I try to locate places I can advertise. One of the daily newspapers used to have a spot for advertising all types of reunions, and for people to contact each other, or where you could advertise for different kinds of social research, but they stopped it. I have been using historical societies and the National Trust in the course of my research, so I place an advertisement in the *National Trust News*. Again, there seems no place for social or cultural advertisements in their magazine, so mine is placed among the advertisements for restoration tradesmen, plumbers and so on, and collectors of meccano sets.

Café/coffee shops 1950s-60s, Melbourne, wanting to interview: frequenters or workers.

When I inquire about placing the advertisement, the publications officer tells me about her own experiences in the 1950s of working in the city and going out to the cafés, and starts talking about the Legend café.

'There were only Chinese food places and hamburger joints,' she says. 'There was a coffee place on Russell and Collin streets downstairs that you could get cinnamon toast and asparagus rolls. The Legend ... terribly modern ... ravioli and a long black ... about 1958.'

I'm really interested to hear the rest of her story, but she doesn't want to be interviewed, takes down my advertisement and leaves it at that. I know the ad will only reach a certain demographic, but it's a start. Weeks later I receive a call from Jan who was a waitress at the Russell Collins on the corner of Collins and Russell Streets, a restaurant well-fraternised in the 1950s. Jan didn't work there until the early 1970s, but it is a way into my research.

We arrange to meet in a suburb half-way from where we both live, in the Brighton Mc Donald's for want of a place we can easily identify. Luckily there are tables outside. We order from a nearby café and try to talk while a large noisy waste disposal truck passes by our table.

Jan worked as a waitress for pocket money while she was still at secondary school. The background noise from the street and the surrounding tables is a low-pitched constant chatter. Jan orders raisin toast and a café latte, I too order a latte. I want to gradually lead into asking about the Russell Collins – but instead I get straight to the point.

'I remember the Russell Collins as the best place I've ever worked at,' says Jan. 'There were various booths, about seven or eight, and each booth had a table attached to the wall, with two bench chairs either side. The room was fully carpeted and the booths were made out of lacquered wood, with upholstered bench seats. There were about four booths either side of the room, and at the front of the booths there was an area where the waitress had their own tea and coffee pots, cutlery, crockery, serviettes, bread rolls and little butter rolls. You had your own little sink to do your dishes, so you were totally independent. It was good.'

There's something very doll's house about it – booths, a little sink, and the main kitchen out the back, away from the patrons.

‘The tea would be made individually, always with tea leaves,’ says Jan, ‘and I seem to recall the coffee being already made in like a big urn, you always served it in a metal coffee pot - a more elongated pot than it was for tea. It was quite a ritual. A pot of coffee came with two jugs of milk. I think most people seemed to drink it after their meal.

‘I don’t think they were too worried about me wearing the traditional black and white uniform, just something clean and neat, but I think I would have worn a white shirt. At night the lady … who would be called the *maître d*, was all dressed up with pearls and everything. I remember how flash it was … showing everybody to their seats.

‘The atmosphere was “spiffy”,’ says Jan. ‘Really upmarket. It made a real impression on me. The lighting was subdued, and I think people were pretty cheerful and nobody really demanded anything. It was very well organised.

‘People didn’t come for tea and scones. They came to have a meal. The food was the food of the era,’ says Jan. ““Hearty” soups, always served in big bowls placed on big Mediterranean plates with doilies on them. I do remember things had a lot of sweet corn served with them. Very old world, very elegant, everything done very nicely.

‘The clientele at the Russell Collins would have been people coming in to the city for a particular reason,’ she says, ‘like going to the movies or something. They weren’t just walking past and just dropping in. Families came, and adults who were very dressed up.

‘I went to a Catholic convent in the secondary years and whenever we went into the city it was a really special thing you did,’ says Jan. ‘It meant putting on your gloves and hat, and getting dressed up. You didn’t just go in any old time and you’d have a big shop and do special things in there. So I do remember that people at the Russell Collins seemed to be dressed up.’

This is about all Jan can remember about the Russell Collins, but it has given me some a feeling for the restaurant. I want to know more about Jan's later experiences of going to cafés.

'In 1976 I started going to night clubs in the city and I learnt how to say "macchiato" and I went to a coffee shop in Carlton. It was open until three or four in the morning. I remember there were the nightclub people and there were also lots of men sitting around without women and having coffee. I learnt about different types of coffee – cappuccinos, lattes, short black. Before I lived in Faraday Street I never went to the coffee shops at all. It wasn't the sort of thing that you did. You would just go to people's houses. I don't remember anybody who went out and had a coffee at a café.'

'So what makes a coffee shop important to you now?' I ask.

'Compared to a restaurant ... by the time you order and get your meal, then you are mindful of eating it while it's hot, you don't really have a conversation,' says Jan, 'so I think meeting for a coffee sort of indicates you'll have a chat. It's also a way of saying "I'm not going to spend a long time with you".'

It's time to leave. I thank Jan for making me remember back to my teenage days, and for describing how we both related to the city in a similar way as 'going out'. A few people start to gather on the street around the table when they see me using a tape machine and they start to hold up the flow of traffic. Luckily the garbage truck starts up its very loud churning noise, so we – and our spectators – make a hasty departure.

I later interview Jan's mother Betty, and her mother's friends, who are all quite elderly and who attend the same Probus group. I begin the interviews with Betty's friends. They

want to be interviewed together. I know it will be more difficult to transcribe their individual conversations, but because of their age I risk it.

I drive to Canterbury on a grey winter's day, and try to imagine the four women I am about to meet – Jean, Elizabeth, Nancy and Norma. I come to interview them about their experiences of drinking coffee in the 1950s and '60s, knowing that they would have grown up drinking tea and the tradition that implies. I am heading for the eastern suburbs known as the 'dry belt', where the Australian temperance movement, some one hundred years before, prevented local councils from issuing liquor licences to local business (Room, 1988: 424). Hence, in some eastern suburbs, such as Canterbury, there are no pubs or licensed restaurants and cafés, even in 2002. Of course, alcohol is consumed here in people's homes, and is easily accessible from nearby suburbs, but still the dry belt remains.

I think of Canterbury as a suburb for more wealthy established families, whose values are very conservative middle-class. But all I really know about Betty's friends is that Canterbury is the suburb where they have chosen to live in retirement. We arrange to meet at Elizabeth's apartment in a retirement village. We initially want to meet at a café to make it an occasion, but there isn't one close by that doesn't have loud music or rowdy young children, so Elizabeth suggests we meet at her place.

I collect Jean on the way. She is waiting on the front step of her flat wearing a royal blue suit and a bag to match. She has dressed up for the interview. When I greet her she is quite worried, as she thinks she has lost the keys to her flat. I wonder if it is because she has been worrying about meeting a stranger on her front doorstep and is about to be interviewed. At 90, Jean is the eldest of the women, and I feel guilty I have made someone so elderly get so nervous, and then I worry my car is old and not properly heated, and is not comfortable enough for her. But still we manage, and I

realize on the way that actually Jean is excited that a stranger wants to interview her and take her somewhere in an old car, and that is why she forgets where her keys are.

We arrive at Elizabeth's apartment and Elizabeth greets me with a great enthusiastic handshake and we both make sure Jean is helped inside. Elizabeth has made asparagus and egg sandwiches shaped in little triangles. I bring some shortbread cakes from the Greek cake shop in Yarraville, my side of town – and I think that they may not be appropriate for elderly people because they are smothered in nuts and chocolate and the shortbread is very crumbly. But Elizabeth is very impressed. She is 88. We help Jean to the sofa and make sure she is comfortable. Elizabeth's apartment is quite small. The front door opens directly into a small kitchenette that then becomes the lounge room, the two areas separated by a small partitioned bench. The lounge ends with big windows facing onto a little balcony, where the sun glares, even though it is winter. Off the lounge is a small bedroom, which leads to a very small bathroom. Every corner of each room is used to store something from the present or the past – like glass, china, trinkets, and papers; it is a happy place.

Elizabeth places an armchair in front of the windows so I sit with my back to them. She then places another three chairs in front of me. I can't imagine the space is large enough for all of us; I sit down in my designated armchair to create more room around me. I gather my tape and question sheet while trying to keep the atmosphere relaxed, but Elizabeth is doing that for me and brings me a big mug of tea. Jean leans back into the couch and stares at the floor, and the two of them chatter about their day with the relaxed manner of knowing each other for a long time. Then two other women arrive, Nancy and Norma. Nancy has also dressed up and greets me in a very decisive, cultured accent and a strong handshake. She sits down on my left, alongside a low coffee table with photos of our host Elizabeth's grown-up family. Nancy has walked

quite a few blocks to get here, and I only later realize when I drop her off how admirably far it is. Nancy is a very sprightly and confident 89-year-old, and tells me that the following week she is going on an overseas trip on her own, preferring to travel that way so she can meet other people.

The last person I meet is Norma, who has been in the kitchen talking to Elizabeth. Norma is another exuberant woman and greets me in a deep husky voice, probably from smoking. She exudes optimism as she holds my attention with her big eyes. Norma has only had to walk a few steps as she lives in the same block of retirement flats, just down the corridor. She is the youngest at 70, and has dressed more casually in beige slacks.

The women act very warmly towards each other. They appear to be happy just to be together and the small room quickly fills with enthusiasm and laughter as they help each other to fill in forms for the interview. Norma fills in Jean's. The sun from the window behind me reaches them. I learn that Jean, who is sitting on the couch, has been a housewife most of her life and feels a bit insecure to say it, as the others tell me what they used to do. Nancy, seated by the family photos, tells me in her very cultured accent that she has lived in Adelaide, Sydney, and Melbourne, and used to work as a physiotherapist, and has been married. She now thinks of herself as a traveller. Nancy does have a very worldly air about her – although it is hard to imagine her as a younger lithe physiotherapist. Getting old is not fair. Elizabeth, our host, who is now settled in between the others in the chair directly in front of me, tells me she used to be a teacher, and also an administrative officer at the Royal Children's Hospital. She speaks very softly and has the warm personality of a host, she is most concerned everyone has their say.

I wish I had more time to ask these women about their working lives of so long ago. They are all strong characters in their own right, even Jean who was mainly a housewife. Norma, who lives a few doors away, and has been helping Jean fill in her form, now tells me she used to be a nurse in the early 1950s to '60s at the Royal Women's Hospital in Carlton. We are immediate allies because of my nursing background, and I also think Norma must have been to some of the early cafés around Carlton. She tells me she is dying to tell me about her initial times of going to cafés.

Once the forms have been filled in the women all face me in silence. Now it is my turn to explain and I am almost in shellshock. They want to know what I am looking for and feel inadequate they may not have anything to tell me. My main concern is how to keep everyone relaxed. I mention about my interest in cafés when espresso machines first appeared in Melbourne, and that they would have been going out at the time to places other than cafés, so they would have seen the transition between tea rooms, formal restaurant dining, and the more informal experience of going to cafés and drinking coffee. I also mention I want to know what it was like to first encounter coffee, assuming they would have grown up drinking tea.

'I don't think I can help you,' says Jean, from the couch, 'because I was just a housewife at that time.' Jean does not look at me but still responds to my question. 'We didn't go to cafés in those times,' she continues, 'because it was the Depression. I looked after my father at home. I was just a housewife. One day when the doctor arrived he asked if I was a nurse, and I said I was just a housewife. I was in my thirties.'

I try to digest how decades of a woman's life experience can be compressed into one or two sentences. I think of my own mum who had a small family by the end of the 1950s, and no time to even find a café to sit in.

‘You only had tea available; you didn’t have coffee, even in tea shops,’ says Norma, sitting on the edge of her chair to make sure she is heard.

‘We used to boil the water and put the ground coffee on top of the water,’ says Elizabeth, ‘and then throw in two tablespoons of cold water which would take the coffee grounds to the bottom. You then strained it with a coffee strainer.’

‘We used to just leave it there till the strength was what we required,’ says Nancy the traveller. ‘I can recall when I was quite young there was a grocer on the corner of Faraday Street and Lygon Street called King and Godfrey’s. I don’t know why my parents or my mother ordered coffee. When the coffee came home it had already been ground in the store and I, being the nice little daughter, poured the coffee grounds into the tea-pot.’ The women all laugh. ‘I do not remember getting into hot water about it. I have no idea how we drank it, whether it was sifted through a strainer or something. I married an Englishman in 1940 and he liked coffee but he drank it as “black as night, as hot as hell and as sweet as love”.’ Nancy makes grand hand gestures for emphasis. ‘Continental coffee. He drank it at home; and his parents drank it at home. He went to school in London and his parents at that time lived in Buenos Aires when he boarded in England. When his parents came back to England, they brought back the South American way of making coffee.’ Nancy sits back in her chair confidently, revelling in her memories.

‘In the late forties, early fifties, when we moved into a house down in Balwyn, a neighbour had a very, very tall open jug. It was so high,’ she gestures with her hand, ‘with a very thick base to it. I don’t know where she got it from but she used to grind the coffee in something like a mincing machine, and then she would put the grounds in to the coffee jug and stand it over a very low gas heat for about ten minutes before she’d

pour boiling water into it. It certainly was beautiful. We'd always take a cup. It was a beautiful flavour of coffee.'

'I wonder if that was a roasting process and she was using raw beans,' says Norma.

'She used to freshly grind it in something like a mincing machine,' says Nancy.
'It was quite a ritual when we'd go down there in the evening. I discovered recently doing some spring-cleaning I still have an electric coffee grinder. I don't drink so much coffee these days so I don't use it. But we always bought our coffee unground and ground it ourselves.'

'I was given a percolator,' says Norma eagerly, 'which was nothing unusual by the fifties, and that was the most common way of making coffee in the home – the bubble one where the water bubbled through the coffee. You had to make sure you didn't do it too long. We had a copper coffee grinder. I have no idea why we had one – no-one drank coffee. It was made of copper, with a little box and a little handle, but Quists in the city was the place to go to and they ground it for you, and that was one of the main places I know of, in Little Collins at the back of George's.'

'There were copper grinders in different sizes hanging up at Quists,' recalls Nancy.

'A Turkish coffee at Quists,' says Norma, putting her thumb and index finger two centimetres apart. 'That much coffee and all of it beautiful.'

The rest of the women laugh and start talking quite fast and all at once so I can't pick up what they are saying, but Norma's recollection of Quists and Turkish coffee has got them remembering some kind of ecstatic coffee experience. They move to how coffee was made.

‘Our coffee was always made with milk, no water,’ says Nancy. ‘When it was in the cup we’d put in just a pinch of mustard.’

‘When you did it in a percolator,’ says Norma, ‘you always put a pinch of salt in with the beans. It never tasted salty, but it did take any bitterness out of the beans. Oddly enough recently when I was out to lunch with a large group of people having a coffee, one of the men passed me the salt when my coffee arrived, and he said, “Oh you always have just a bit of salt in it to suck the bitterness out”. That’s the first time I heard it mentioned since then.’

I have read about additives being used in the seventeenth century in England in the coffee houses – mustard and chilli were popular – but not as recently as these women remembered. They all knew about adding salt. I have never heard about it.

‘You only had tea available,’ continues Norma, ‘you didn’t have coffee, even in tea shops. I grew up in Glen Iris and we were a tea-drinking family and I didn’t like tea. I have never liked tea. I was always a coffee drinker and then I was told I had an allergy to tea and I realised why I didn’t like it. When we were children, we had Bushell’s coffee and chicory essence and you made that with milk. I remember when instant coffee came in, which was Nescafé, and it came in a little two-ounce tin, and it would last forever.’

Again the women speak over each other, this time about Nescafé. Although they are from tea-drinking families, there was always a coffee pot not too far away. All the women had had Bushells Essence, a mixture of coffee and chicory, with the man wearing the turban on the bottle, and loved it, and they knew about the chicory farms down at Phillip Island. I try to ask other questions, but they are all talking about how they drank coffee and I don’t know where to focus. No-one cares that I want to know. These are recollections of rituals at home. Their coffee stories are about experiences of

something out of the ordinary, or of special occasions, something ‘other’ than the normal daily routine of tea.

‘Where did you go out?’ I ask.

They talk a lot about Gibby’s where you’d get a refill of your coffee, ‘like in America’, says someone.

‘It must have been black coffee made from a dripolator, like Kona coffee, and cold milk or cream must have been served.’

Nancy tells us about what was happening right after the war.

‘There were a whole lot of coffee shops, almost clubs, and coffee cafés after World War Two,’ says Nancy. ‘There was one down the corner of Riversdale Road and Glenferrie Road, and they were evening places where they’d have someone sing. There was a coffee restaurant called the Galleon where my husband sang for a while, down at the hub of St Kilda, opposite Luna Park. Then my youngest son sang at this coffee shop in Glenferrie Road. They sang whatever happened to be in the Top 10. Those coffee shops I’m talking about were before the days of cappuccinos, and we drank black coffee.’

‘I had a boyfriend who played the piano and we used to go down there to the Galleon quite a bit,’ says Norma, ‘I’d forgotten all about it.’

The Windsor Hotel is mentioned as an expensive place to go. Elizabeth’s husband used to manage concerts at the Melbourne Town Hall. ‘Then you’d go after the celebrity concerts and have coffee,’ she says.

‘I remember in the ’50s and ’60s going down to the Russell Collins and the Elizabeth Collins,’ says Jean from the couch. We hadn’t heard her voice for a while. The rest of the women all recall going there. ‘They were both down in the basements,’ says Jean.

‘There’d be a queue right up Collins Street,’ cries Elizabeth, ‘waiting for a table at the Russell Collins.’ As I know already, it was a restaurant frequented by many a middle-class person going out in the city, especially after seeing a concert just down the road at the Town Hall.

‘I can remember going to the Russell Collins for coffee,’ says Nancy. ‘I went to a lot of tea rooms, like the Hopetoun Tea Rooms in the Block, but they definitely only had tea, which came in a teapot.’

I want to know more about what the women felt about the ambience of a tea room, how they related to other people there – considering their experience now of going to cafés. I’m told that more ladies than men frequented tea rooms, and that the clientele was usually from Toorak or South Yarra.

‘Upper-crust tea rooms,’ Nancy the traveller calls them. Jean mentions going to afternoon tea at the Australia Hotel.

‘Till the fifties you didn’t have a choice of how you would like to drink coffee,’ says Norma, moving forward on her chair. ‘At most places coffee just wasn’t available. It was always tea. And if you ever had a coffee it was a black coffee, you never had white coffee.’ I wonder if this is because of the influence of the American servicemen stationed here during the Second World War, introducing coffee-drinking as large mugs of black coffee.

‘You had it after a meal,’ continues Norma, ‘when you’d have a small black coffee. And that was really the only time you’d ever get coffee.’

‘I think we used to think that we were very socially successful if we had coffee,’ responds Elizabeth, who has been sitting between Nancy and Norma and listening to their exchange. Serving coffee at the end of a meal was an upper-class English custom,

which showed a worldliness and connection to European food habits, and especially to French cuisine.

‘Was there a difference in atmosphere between tea rooms and coffee shops, or cafés, in the 1950s?’ I ask.

‘In a café the atmosphere was more relaxed and more cosmopolitan obviously,’ says Nancy straight away, who would have known the class and cultural cues, and how to enjoy going to a café. So what was not relaxing in a tea room?

‘But coffee gave you a totally different environment,’ shouts Norma over the ensuing hubbub, ‘a totally different ambience to a tea shop. Living in the nurse’s home in the 1950s, you had no choice; there was only tea, no coffee. You’d walk into town just to have a cappuccino. There was a lovely little place in Exhibition Street, called the Danish Delight, just near Her Majesty’s and that was a coffee place, where you went before you went to the theatre. It had a continental style to it. In Carlton, not in the Collins Street coffee shops, there were a lot more people from other cultures there who you could talk to. In the 1950s and ’60s there were not a lot of places around then, a few in Lygon Street in Carlton, and Pellegrini’s in Bourke Street. The espressos and the cappuccinos were just happening, it was very avant-garde.

‘It was different,’ says Norma, ‘and that’s how it felt to me. There were different people you were meeting and talking to … people who were different, different cultures, different ideas, different backgrounds, and that’s why it appealed to me as much as the actual coffee.’ Nancy, Elizabeth and Jean are quiet.

‘The majority of the people we were in contact with at the hospital were Greek and Italian,’ says Norma. ‘Not that you got to know them personally, but you sort of got the feel of a culture without being a friend of the person, and also it was a professional relationship. I’m talking about in that inner city area, it was where these people came,

and there was a baby boom. The cafés were just around the corner, and we were all as poor as church mice, you couldn't afford anything. Lygon Street was around the corner and it was more the whole ambience.' There is urgency in Norma's voice as she throws her hands around, trying to recapture this period of her life. I don't think these women have heard her talk about these times.

Norma went to cafés because 'she wanted to be a part of it'.

'Yet you weren't really a part of it,' she says, 'because there was this cultural difference. I had a great affinity towards the Italians but I don't know where that came from.'

'Was it also to do with the fact that they were Greek, Italian, and Turkish, was it about being among other kinds of people?' asks Nancy, who has been looking introspective.

'My background is Anglo-Saxon,' responds Norma, 'hospitals are a melting pot. You get people coming from everywhere, with every condition. It's the one place where people's defences are down and you can get to know them. No one puts on a façade.'

The atmosphere in the little room has become quite electric, as Norma has opened up a topic of conversation that the others don't know about her. I encounter a conversation not just about recollection, but about the women's interest in each other, and about reviewing the past by learning more about each other. Elizabeth's lounge room has become an informal space for just sitting and talking, the present inquiry making each of us on an equal footing. Some would call the conversation gossip.

Elizabeth asks us if we want a tea break, or 'coffee break', and takes our orders. I know I am a snob when it comes to coffee and usually do not drink milk, so I feel safe with a weak black tea. Jean, Nancy and Elizabeth herself have tea, and Norma, who has always hated tea, has an instant coffee.

I should have told Norma that I had similar experiences when I was nursing, and that I also loved the vibrancy of working with other cultures – although for me it was in the early 1970s, twenty years after Norma's experience. I also had her curiosity. I remember about seventy per cent of patients were European and could not speak English, and I remember times when we would not understand why someone was so distressed. At eleven at night at the end of our shift we would head down to the top of Bourke Street, to a café called the Hole in the Wall, which had great pizzas and coffee, and talk about these things while trying to make sense of them. Then we would wolf down pizza and I would think of what it would be like to face the fear of the unknown, of another language, another custom, an unknown gesture, or medical procedure.

'But there was also a bit of an attitude of "he's a wog",' says Nancy in her cultured accent.

'Some people who didn't live in the area would go there as a novelty,' replies Norma.

What Nancy and Norma say about the racist attitudes of that time reminds me of what the philosopher Raimond Gaita once explained in a speech to secondary teachers in 2001, that if you consider those who are different as the 'other' then it stops you feeling compassion for them, that 'you are not seeing an inner life in another, of the other' (2001).

'With all their other differences and cultural backgrounds,' says Norma, 'coffee was the common denominator.'

In the 1950s there appeared to be two main attitudes to drinking coffee: one, that drinking coffee at the end of meals signified social prestige, and the other that going to a café to drink cappuccinos and mix with European migrants signified a lack of social prestige.

‘They were all drinking coffee in the streets,’ says Jean, who has been lazing on the couch with the sun shining onto her face. ‘That was the common denominator. I bet there was no tea-drinking in the streets of London though; they always went into the shops.’ I am about to respond when Elizabeth arrives with our tea and Norma’s coffee.

We are served in fine china teacups and saucers, with a small plate each for the sandwiches. We sit in silence as we juggle our teacups and saucers and negotiate the asparagus and egg sandwiches on our plates. We have all learnt this skill a long time ago. The tea is the right temperature, cup filled to the right level, and sandwich cut to the right size. We all catch the crumbs of the shortbread over the little plate, and wipe our hands on triangular serviettes. The sandwiches and shortbread slow my thoughts; my concentration on the 1950s is momentarily suspended.

Jean has raised the idea of tea-drinking happening indoors, off the street, and coffee-drinking happening outdoors, the pastime of undesirable loiterers in the streets. So why such a conflict in an urban environment? Being out on the street, loitering, which to me is about living an urban lifestyle, has in fact been bred out of the people of Melbourne – call it a desire to alleviate the city of hooligans and ruffians, and unruly behaviour, in order to have a more controllable, gentrified city. Andrew Brown-May has explored the rise of the ‘respectable public space’, from the 1850s through to the 1920s, when a determined rising middle class forged their own version of urbanity. ‘To understand cities is to understand ourselves’ (1998: xii), states Brown-May.

In the 1850s vendors and street sellers of all kinds, from bootblacks, to fruit, flower and newspapers stalls, all plied their trade on the streets of Melbourne. There were also coffee barrows.

The street coffee stall that took up its pitch after dark at a market entrance or on a street corner in Bourke Street's busiest precinct was a boon for the night-going public, a flickering island of resort and convenience, in a dim sea of danger and fatigue. It operated as a staging post and place of repose for the straggler or the late-goer on the tired way home, and as a tonic at the start of a night's shift (Brown-May, 1998: 135).

When other places of food and beverage were closing, the coffee barrow was arriving, and, because it was open during the night, it was thought to foster the seedy street nightlife of prostitutes, petty thieves and sundry undesirables – ‘the shadows thrown from its dim lamp irrevocable and by its association harbouring the actual and imagined misdeeds ... and [arousing] an age-old suspicion of the unknown and dangerous qualities of the nocturnal’ (135). In fact, the coffee barrows were a blessing to shopkeepers, as the barrow operators kept an eye out after dark, and some even helped the police, who also used their services for sustenance.

The barrows themselves had a very colourful atmosphere. Brown-May includes a description from the 1860s, by Marcus Clarke, of the “marvellous steam engine, with lacquered boiler and funnels of brass” (135). One barrow is covered with a large board, which is sometimes covered with an oil cloth:

On this board are set ... a huge can of polished tin, with brass nozzle and spout. This tin holds about four or five gallons of coffee, which is kept hot by means of a pan of charcoal placed underneath it. By the side of the tin are arranged cups – very thick and heavy, sandwiches, greasy cakes, and a sort of plumduff of very satisfying character (Clark in Brown-May, 1998: 135).

As Brown-May notes, the coffee stalls arrived in Melbourne around the early 1850s, and twenty years later there were about eight on the street at once. But by 1874 there were restrictions on the sale of coffee in the streets at night, and by the 1900s there were only a couple still operating. There was a sense that they were a ‘general street obstruction [and] a pathology of idleness and crime’ (136).

By the First World War there was very little Melbourne night life. Many shops were closing earlier, and people who formerly lived in the city itself had begun moving out into the suburbs. The social space of the footpath was about the absence of any obstruction to the shopkeeper, the footpath had become ‘mercantile territory’ (139) – a social space for shopping for the middle class without the obstruction of the street stalls, and their owners and lingerers. Both day and night had to be ‘unequivocally respectable’ (139).

According to Brown-May, this ‘transformation of spatial ideology [relegated] social functions into more and more discrete settings, leaving the public space of the street as an evacuated and homogenised zone’ (140). Even spikes were placed on window ledges so that people would not use them as benches. The eradication of the coffee barrows, and other street vendors, meant there was ‘unhindered circulation’ (140) in the city streets. But this also meant that those who were considered ‘visually and socially incompatible with a definition of respectable public space [or] a visual affront

to urbane respectability' (140), like the coffee barrow keeper, 'the cripple or the blind man, the war veteran or the immigrant' (140) were also removed from the streets. By the 1920s, middle-class values meant the eradication of social diversity. According to Brown-May:

The spatial reorganisation of city streets ... have their roots in a period when the city underwent a fundamental and social transformation, when a middle-class demand for privacy, separation and specialisation of function deliberately neutralised the street as the fundamental democratic forum (207).

Into this bastion of middle-class social space came the post-Second World War European migrants of the 1950s. Their more urbane customs of lingering on the footpath and meeting in cafés not only defied middle-class sensibility, but also initiated a re-emergence of street life. It must have been confronting to middle-class Melburnians to see migrants loitering in the streets and making the streets theirs, when middle-class Melbourne was aspiring to leafy green suburbs, and quiet, peaceful times. In the streets and cafés the migrants of the 1950s and '60s met people from their own land and town, looked for work and housing, made contacts to help build the house, and generally used the urban space as they had 'at home', to be seen, to survive, and to alleviate the isolation.

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‘I wonder if there were people who wouldn’t go into cafés like Pellegrini’s?’ I ask the four women while brushing the crumbs of the Greek cake onto my plate, not wanting them to fall onto Elizabeth’s carpet.

‘I knew people who would make excuses, “No thank you”,’ says Norma, mimicking primness. ‘They wouldn’t say it outright but they would just make excuses. They were uncomfortable about not knowing how to drink coffee, but mainly about the clientele, being Southern Europeans.

‘It was a great time after the Second World War,’ she says. ‘It was the beginning of something new, something different, and something less conservative. At that time I wouldn’t have used the word “conservative”. That was the norm, and coffee was very much a part of the new.

‘Pellegrini’s in Bourke Street was the place to go.’ Norma is sitting on the edge of her chair again, her face is animated. ‘They served proper Italian coffee, and anyone who loved coffee would go to Pellegrini’s. There was nowhere else. Again it’s that ambience that...’ Norma takes a long pause. ‘You could sit, you could talk,’ she says finally.

Nancy, Elizabeth and Jean have retired from the conversation and sit listening.

I think about Norma’s response of ‘You could sit, you could talk’. This statement is such a simple thing to say, but somehow it is a concept that the other women do not recognise. When Norma articulates the idea of just sitting in public and talking, it gives me the impression that she was not used to it, to something assumed as normal these days. In the late 1970s in England when I was studying theatre, I remember a voice

teacher raving about the importance of a sigh. We had to say ‘Ahhhhh’ for as long as we could, and he told us that it was possible to write a doctorate about just that one sound. The feeling behind the sound resonated so much for him and he was trying to instil its importance in us. The voice teacher also spoke about its hidden meaning, and now when I hear Norma make the simple statement, ‘You could just sit, you could talk’, I feel this common pastime has the profound resonance of a sigh.

The experience of just ‘sitting and talking’ has long been related to coffee. In the Levant, around the 1500s, when coffee was separated from religious ceremonies, coffee houses began to be set up. According the coffee historian Ukers, the coffee houses were quite similar in their furnishings and their comforts, and all afforded ‘the opportunity ... for social intercourse and free discussion’ (1922: 19). The coffee houses in England in the 1650s, and later throughout Europe, afforded the same opportunity (Bramagh, 1972:47-48; Ellis, 1956; Lillywhite, 1963). And now Norma speaks of a similar experience in cafes in Melbourne in the 1950s. It seems to me that Norma is talking about the quality of a special space, a space that is both physical and psychological, a space I am yet to define – yet I am aware of its importance.

An American social scientist, Ray Oldenburg, writes in *The great good place* [sic] (1989) that:

[When] the good citizens of a community find places to spend pleasurable hours with one another for no specific or obvious purpose, there “is” purpose to such association [and] the most important of the purposes or functions served by informal public gathering places cannot be supplied by any other agencies in society (1989: xi).

Besides cafés and coffee shops, Oldenburg includes community centres, beauty parlours, general stores, bars and hangouts as ‘settings of informal public life’ (16). Oldenburg calls these ‘the third place’ (16) the ‘core settings for informal public life’ (16). The first place is the home, the second, the workplace.

Oldenburg interests me because I see Melbourne’s cafés of the 1950s as providing informal meeting places otherwise lacking in the urban landscape. Of course pubs and hotels were also such places, but research on drinking habits shows the prevalence of alcoholism, and tells of the unsocial closing time – until 1967 – of 6 o’clock, the consequent ‘six o’clock swill’, and the exclusion of women from the public bar (Room, 1988: 413-437).

Oldenburg explains the ‘third place’, or informal meeting places, in this way:

[They] exist on neutral ground and serve to level their guests to a condition of social equality. Within these places, conversation is the primary activity and the major vehicle for the display and appreciation of human personality and individuality. Third places are taken for granted and most have a low profile. Since the formal institutions of society make stronger claims on the individual, third places are normally open in the off-hours, as well as at other times. The character of a third place is determined most of all by its regular clientele and is marked by a playful mood, which contrasts with people’s more serious involvement in other spheres (1989: 42).

Oldenburg also sees the third place as similar to the home space in its ‘psychological comfort and support that it extends’ (42), even though it is ‘a radically different kind of

setting from the home' (42). These qualities I begin to hear in Norma's statement of 'You could sit and you could talk'.

'Cafés were very much connected with that new excitement,' says Norma. 'New people, new ideas, and it was all bound up in cafés in a way. If you were interested in other people Pellegrini's was a great place to go. I've got a very conservative background, and it was the leaving home and living away from home when I was seventeen, it all revolved around going to cafés.'

I can think of no more questions to ask. It's time for me to leave. The afternoon tea and the afternoon sun, now shining strongly through the large window, has made the women drowsy. I say I have had some very interesting conversations and will take Jean and Nancy home. I thank all the women. I have really enjoyed their company, especially the intimacy between them. Elizabeth hands me the remaining Greek shortbreads, even though I desist. I make sure Jean is back inside her flat before I drive off and I realise how far Nancy walked to our meeting when I drop her off. I wish her well on her voyage the following week and set off home before peak hour.

I wonder about my unasked questions. I now want to know what important things were happening in the women's lives in the 1950s and '60s, what their working lives were like, their family lives, what they argued about, what they wore to the city, what they liked to eat – because having a coffee would have meant talking about all this.

On my way home I stop off in the city, to explore the places the women have spoken about. I first go to the corner of Russell and Collins Street to find the old address

of the Russell Collins in the basement, but many renovations later there is neither basement nor the original street number. I then wander down Collins Street past the Town Hall, to the Hopetoun Tea Rooms in the Block Arcade. I sit at a small table and observe the small groups around me. Everyone is speaking very quietly. The waitress wanders over and softly takes my order, silently returns to the counter and passes it on. There is no talking or shouting across the room. The atmosphere is totally subdued. No rowdiness, no loud laughter, no flamboyance or heated discussion from the people at the little tables – like quiet leafy suburbs, where the next door neighbours are seldom heard, except perhaps when someone is washing their car on the weekend.

I think of Jean who is now 90 years old, who spends a lot of her early married years at home looking after her father, who is dying when she is in her early thirties. I try to imagine Jean as she looks after her father and her house. It is raining outside; she has been up all night by her father's bed. He has had a bad night and his temperature has been too high. She knows she must do the food shop the following day, and she must go into the city to pick some packages up from the department store. They are nighties for her daughter and pyjamas for her father. She also must pick up a package of paint brushes for her husband at the hardware store. She would like to go to the Hopetoun Tea Rooms in the Block Arcade.

All the parcels must be carried home on the tram. She has a tea in the Myer cafeteria. Someone sits next to her, and after asking her to pass the sugar, wants to talk about her daughter's wedding. Jean has to rush, she cannot loiter. Instead she thinks about her father's nightmares and wants to tell someone about them. The tea burns her mouth. Some years later she passes Carlton in the car and sees groups of people obviously from other cultures she has not seen before, loitering in the streets. They have dark skin and the men embrace each other. They wander across the road, yelling out to

each other as they do. They are drinking coffee. It is the middle of the day, in the middle of the week, when most people are working.

When Jean does stop for a coffee, maybe fifteen years after she is married, after her father has died and after her children have grown up, she goes to the Hopetoun Tea Rooms. It is off the street, tucked away in an arcade, where people talk quietly to each other. She even goes to the Russell Collins where you are waited on at tables, not moving until you have been served and your meal has been eaten.

I imagine Jean as an exile in a little village in the south of Italy, walking down a narrow street to find a place off the main piazza, a quiet ‘off-the-road’ café, out of sight, a quiet café-tearoom where she cannot see the road. She walks past open cafés, tables on the streets, lots of chatter, but it is mostly men who sit there, no women to be found, so she keeps looking for that unseen place away from the street. As an ethnic person in exile, and brought up to be demure and well-mannered, not to be rowdy or raucous, or call out across the street, not to be brazen enough to loiter, she would probably try to conduct all her tasks in a quiet pensione – looking for work, finding a house, finding friends – not in the rowdy piazza.

Chapter three

Coffee and something toasty

One of the most interesting facts in the history of the coffee drink is that wherever it has been introduced it has spelled revolution. It has been the world's most radical drink in that its function has always been to make people think. And when the people began to think they became dangerous to tyrants and to foes of liberty of thought and action.

Ukers (1922: 18-19)

Betty's daughter Jan answers an advertisement I place in the *National Trust News* about people who went to cafés in the 1950s and '60s, and suggests I also interview her mother. If Betty wasn't elderly I would ask her to meet me in a posh inner city café, somewhere in Brunswick Street perhaps, with a hissing espresso machine in the background, and there we'd discuss 1950s cafés. But instead because of Betty's age I meet her at her home in Surrey Hills, a large unit where she lives with her husband. I should not have assumed so much. Even though Betty is 76 I do not expect to meet such a lively person who would have appreciated a groovy Brunswick caf. When I arrive at her home, Betty is in the middle of preparing to be a National Gallery of Victoria guide for 'The Italian Renaissance' exhibition at the Melbourne Museum, and she has to steer me back to my interest in coffee, as I am too interested in looking through the Italian painters' catalogue.

It is mid-winter. Betty's unit is very 1970s in style, furniture in beiges and browns. It feels warm in spirit, with a good library. Betty has sat up till late the night before writing down all the restaurants and cafés she frequented in the 1950s and '60s. Her list is quite extensive. She patiently rests it on her lap while I ask about what life was like in the 1950s. Betty was raised on a farm and when she was ten moved to the inner city suburb of South Yarra, and later to Caulfield. When she left school she worked as a typist. Her teachers suggested she go to university but her dad told her if she was a boy he'd understand, and would not let her go.

In 1950 Betty marries. After bringing up her children, when she turns forty, she goes to university. She then teaches English in a secondary school until she retires. 'I was very concerned my family wouldn't suffer,' says Betty. 'When the kids went off to school, I buzzed around the house and then did the reading I had to do. And I could be home by the time the kids got back from school. I loved study. It changed my life.' No mean feat in 1966.

We sit in the 1970s lounge chairs and I rest the tape machine on one of the arms of the chairs, facing the microphone towards Betty. I don't see the tape intermittently turn off and I discover I lose most of the interview. Later I try to gather the pieces of our conversation. After talking to the other women in Canterbury I feel I may have covered enough experiences of how middle-class women felt about coffee in the 1950s, where they went in the city, and what they felt about going to cafés. I thought the women had enough contrasting experiences that I maybe didn't need to interview Betty. Within five minutes of meeting her I realised I was in for another journey.

'It is rather hard to explain to people,' says Betty. 'The big changes that occurred once the new Australians came. People in Australia had seen few Asians, or a black person. You hardly ever saw Aboriginals in the city. Then the influx of what we

call new Australians came. I don't know that they were treated terribly well, but they were different and it was very difficult for us who had lived here all along, to become accustomed to so much change.' Betty is very open about what she thinks of that time even though I have only just met her. I realize I could learn a lot about the period through allowing Betty to talk about what she thought as an Anglo-Saxon Australian growing up then. Betty speaks as both a participant and an observer of this period.

'As for coffee,' recalls Betty, 'I can remember my mother's great treat was to buy *café au lait* in a tin. It was something like condensed milk with a coffee flavour. There were four children, I was the eldest, and if you were very good you were allowed to share the coffee. The other thing was coffee essence, at which now most people would turn up their nose. I remember having a girlfriend who always went to Quists to buy ground coffee for her older aunt who had been to Europe and was slightly bohemian.'

'Few people knew how to make decent coffee,' says Betty. 'When the new Australians came, of course, the aroma of coffee was very heavy. But no-one knew how to make it. I remember buying some, and they said, "Oh you just boil it". No-one said you had to strain it.' Betty laughs at her attempts.

'I was given a coffee pot for a wedding present in 1950,' says Betty. 'There was an element of mystery about coffee. If you were making it from the beans you didn't know how fine they had to be. There really wasn't anyone you could ask. If you wanted information in those days you rang the Gas Company kitchen. They'd give you some answer but it wouldn't be very helpful, because I don't think they knew either. "How finely do you grind the beans?" "How do you go about doing that?" "Do you leave the beans in the liquid or just throw them out?" A lot of my friends made coffee with milk. It was OK but only just.' We are both laughing now. I myself bought an Italian stove-

top pot about six months ago, and half the time I have been unable to use it properly. I think it is to do with how fine the coffee is ground – but I assumed I would have no problems at all.

‘It was quite a strange situation,’ says Betty. ‘Coffee was a little bit feared too as being somewhat overly sophisticated, an area of danger. Hard for us to believe now, but that’s what it was like.’ I can understand how making coffee could feel overly sophisticated compared to making tea – most people were used to the process of making tea, and ‘overly sophisticated’ may have meant you were moving out of your class. I would really like to know what an ‘area of danger’ could mean. That is something different altogether.

‘I suppose it was an area where,’ says Betty – and the tape cuts out. I am so annoyed as I know I will never be able to follow this idea through. I always manage to miss the meaning of life, whether it is a line of dialogue in a movie, or a crucial word in a conversation. I think what Betty tries to tell me is that people felt out of their comfort zone, and maybe the phrase area of danger has a similar meaning, yet it sounds more foreboding, as if there are dire social consequences, like loss of face, or loss of confidence. Maybe I am being too sensitive, and an area of danger just means getting burnt by the steam from the coffee pot.

‘They were comfortable in their own situation,’ says Betty, ‘and they were afraid of the dangers that might be outside that situation.’ Betty is not just talking about coffee pots, but about how a lot of people felt at that time.

‘So this isn’t just about coffee beans?’ I cannot believe I ask this question but I know why.

The 1950s was a time of fear. In Australia there was the fear of the communist threat, dubbed the Red Peril by the Menzies Government. There was an element of

blacklisting of Communists and fellow travellers as supposed enemies of the State. Bernice Morris (1988) documents one such case in her autobiography *Between the lines*, and Fiona Capp has written about the security surveillance of Australian authors and intellectuals from the 1920s to the 1960s in *Writers Defiled* (1993). Then the mass arrival of post-Second World War immigrants occurred, which created another kind of fear. All these perceived threats displace the ordinary person and the stability of their dreams. It seems to me that this is what Betty and I are talking about, that this is what having a coffee is all about. The tape cuts out again and I have lost Betty's explanation of the 1950s. When I return to interview her again, she will not discuss the idea of fear any further.

I return knowing more about how to use the tape machine after feeling very silly about my last attempt. I am glad I do not suffer from the 1950s' loss of face. Not entirely, anyway. Betty has fitted me in between her schedules as a tour guide at the Italian Renaissance exhibition.

'It was also a case of spending money,' says Betty. She uses the term *frippery* to describe spending money on unimportant things, 'rather than saving it for something that was important'.

'That's all gone now,' says Betty. '[Saving] was important [then]. After the war things changed a bit but then there was an austerity, people were building their homes and starting a family, and there wasn't a lot of money to spend.' Betty says it was important for girls to save 'and there wasn't much money for spending as disposable income'.

'I mean,' says Betty, 'if you went to town you might have a cup of coffee or tea at Myer – and Myer was packed because there were lots of other people in that situation. Another place that always had coffee was Coles. You went down to what was known as the mezzanine and you could get a waffle and a pot of coffee. That was considered to be a treat. You could have a pot of tea or a pot of coffee. I don't know how they made it. You'd go into the city, even with young children, and have lunch or even take your lunch in sometimes. And if you had lunch you certainly didn't have afternoon tea. You'd window-shop and perhaps buy something you needed for sewing. There were so many big stores, Buckley and Nunns, Mantons, Foys, Treadways. They were more to do with clothing, rather than meals. You could get something to eat at Mantons. Sometimes the cafeterias were very small. It was before we had shopping centres. The shopping centres didn't come till the 1960s. But Quists in Little Collins Street was always a place to go if you wanted to have a cup of coffee.'

The era of saving to buy a house post-Second World War, of wanting to move to the suburbs, meant that people in the 1950s didn't go out as much as today. But part of that was the concept Betty mentions of being comfortable in their own situation, focusing on family and home – cooking at home, barbecues on the patio, not going out, and saving.

I recall the Australian historian John Murphy writing about the 1950s. He states:

The social experience and the political culture of the period were shaped by private investments in marriage, in children and in ideas of the home, and these

commitments involved a contraction of the public realm. ... [Domesticity] shaped ideas about what it was to be a citizen, and what it was to be a member of the national community. Happiness and identity would be increasingly sought through private commitments, and citizenship would increasingly consist of the responsible shouldering of these commitments (2000: 1).

Murphy considers that this ‘relationship between public and private domains, between outside and inside’ (2) had strong roots in the conservatism of the Liberal-Country Party coalition leader and Prime Minister Robert Menzies, during his time of leadership throughout the 1950s and into the ’60s. Betty participated in the world of developing the domestic, and in so doing participated in the political culture. The story of coffee relates to both the personal arena in the home and Betty negotiating how to make coffee for her guests, and to the public arena and city life – to having places like cafés to go out to, and to the immigrants who had no real established privacy or private investment, and who had to live out their personal experiences in the public arena through meeting at their own cafés. Yet the importance of the public arena for both ‘residents’ and immigrants was denied through the encouragement of domesticity. Still, for the residents there were times for outings to the city, and the concept of an outing existed in contrast to saving and being based at home. One dressed up with maybe gloves, a hat and a best dress.

‘Russell Collins,’ recalls Betty, ‘huge restaurant, large restaurant. Groups of tables were separated by special flower arrangements, and you would have tea or coffee there. But I was a tea drinker. You would ask for tea before you would ask for coffee. There was Rumpel Mayers in Collins Street in the forties, fifties and right through to the sixties – you’d go there for supper after a show when Collins Street was full of cinemas.

There were four big cinemas between Swanston Street and Russell Street, and there was always something on at the Town Hall. That was where the concerts and big occasions were held, and if the Town Hall wasn't lit up it was unusual. It was the centre of the city. The place [Melbourne] was alive with people ... and walking back to the tram, because nearly everyone went by tram or train. This was in the forties, fifties and right through to the sixties, when everything began to change.'

Betty didn't like the shows much at the Tivoli and preferred the cinema and shows at Her Majesty's. 'Another restaurant was the Wild Cherry in Collins Street and that was a very pleasant place to go to. There were also two small, what are now called, boutique hotels in Collins Street, the Occidental and the Oriental. They weren't called boutique hotels then, they were called just small hotels with character, at the Paris end of Collins Street. They had a very good reputation – a place to go with different food, and coffee and things like that. By the 1960s Collins Street had quite changed. At the other end of Bourke Street was the Victoria Coffee Palace. I never went there. That was a place more known for its...' Again the tape cuts out just when I ask about what the city was like during the war. But Betty was only in her teens then and just remembers that the city was livelier.

Betty explains the rituals of dating. 'You'd perhaps have a date and they'd either come out to your house and meet you and meet your parents, or you'd agree to meet in the city. It was considered to be a mark against your date if he didn't want to meet your parents.'

I ask Betty where she would meet her friends.

'You'd meet at the cinema,' says Betty. 'Some people met at Flinders Street Station, but different sorts of people met there, and it was too crowded.'

Betty mentions other places she went to in the city, she still has the list on her lap.

'The Louise opposite the Hyatt in Collins Street, in the fifties to sixties was where coffee was served. The Wattle in Little Collins Street, north of Elizabeth Street was more expensive. It was a very elegant place. It had table service. There were very few places that had table service. The Wattle was a place where I was taken and never paid. You probably couldn't afford to go on your own. The ambience was lovely there. Palms decorated the foyer. You felt as though you were being looked after. If you were asked to go to the Wattle you knew you would have a good meal. You would be served coffee there but again it would have been served in a pot, certainly not a cappuccino. Coffee would be served black or with milk. The Wattle was open for lunch and during the war and the forties when there were still servicemen around. Once I was married in the fifties of course I didn't get out as often and we had other things to do with our money.'

'Gibby's were coffee lounges,' says Betty. 'I remember the smell of coffee as you went past the place and it drew you in. Again, it would have been ground coffee, but not cappuccino, and something toasty that went with it. Not cake. Quists was another place. I remember the sign *Coffee*. They mainly sold coffee to take home and receptacles to make it in. Of course you went to the Hopetoun Tea Rooms for coffee and cake but it would be something of a luxury, if you were furnishing a home and having children as I was. The Banff restaurant in St Kilda was one that always had a sort of a continental feel, and it's still going and that was where you had real coffee with your meal,' recalls Betty. 'But again it was always with a meal, and again in a pot. The Galleon in St Kilda was a coffee lounge. We went there during the forties and fifties. It was exciting because you got wonderful entertainment as well. It was the place where

nice people went. You didn't want to go to a situation where perhaps things might get out of hand. I only went at night. You would be served coffee or tea, and something nice to eat with it.

'The entertainment was the reason we went,' says Betty. 'It wasn't the coffee. It was small so you saw the entertainers up close. In the days before television that was quite important. If there was something on at the Town Hall people gathered in huge numbers to catch a glimpse of these visiting artists because you either saw their photograph in the paper, which was fairly grainy or you saw them in the flesh. And you'd see at a distance. You'd often find them at the Galleon as well.'

'When I go down to the Jam Factory every Tuesday for a meeting,' says Betty, 'people are already having their second coffee of the day.' She pauses. 'As a girl I lived in Tivoli Road South Yarra and I used to do messages for one of the ladies who lived in the street, so I knew Chapel Street very well. You'd hardly recognise it now, because every second shop is either a restaurant or a café, or both, whereas in those days there was one cake shop in Chapel Street between Toorak Road and Commercial Road, and that was the treat. As for having a cup of coffee I don't think it was available. They used to say if you want coffee you go to the cheap Greek [cafés]. The Greeks were the only people who seemed to have quick food where you would get a meal, not too expensive, and there was never any pretence about ambience. I think I might have been to one there once. Generally, tea is what you normally asked for and you'd have to specifically ask for coffee, and it would just simply be coffee. It was before instant coffee. It wouldn't have been as strong as Turkish style coffee. This would have been during the war.'

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The food historian Anne Gollan writes fondly about the Greek cafés in *The Tradition of Australian Cooking* (1984), and about them being around from the 1930s:

The Greek cafés – there was at least one in the main street of every town of any size and status – were selling their fish, chips, and potato scallops, or their meat pies, sausages and mash, and steaks with either eggs, tomato, chips, or ‘steak and the lot’. A little later the hamburger joined the menu. These were also places to go for a pot of tea... [Few] people were willing to brave the extraordinary liquid that went by the name of coffee in cafés before the espresso machine [to accompany their] buttered toast, raisin toast, cinnamon toast, or a plate of sandwiches or mixed cakes (165).

Gollan also states that by the late 1930s:

[A] few coffee shops, serving first quality coffee, had opened and had become the meeting places for intellectuals and other sophisticates. For the price of a cup of coffee one could spend the afternoon at one of their tables, either reading a book quietly, or noisily settling the world's problems in argument with friends. Most people, however, settled for a café, or a beer in the bar of a hotel (no women allowed except in the ladies' parlour – usually a room decorated in a style befitting second-class citizens) (167).

Gollan, however, does not mention any specific places, and at this stage I am unsure what cafés she is talking about.

Betty starts to talk more specifically about the 1950s.

'I should have mentioned Pellegrini's,' she says. 'To us again it was the essence of sophistication to go into Pellegrini's. It was fairly expensive so we didn't go too often.'

'It's all relative, a case of what you're doing with your money. If you're saving for a lounge suite or a fridge, you think should I be spending my money on fripperies. Nowadays people begin with everything. In those days after we got married we built the house, and I think we had a couple of chairs and a washing machine, the only one in the street. So that's what we did. We felt that we couldn't afford to spend our money on things like going to cafés.'

The notion of spending money on the leisure of sitting in a café itself may have felt expensive when that money could have been spent on something one was saving for. So many Australians felt that way about saving at the time. To give myself another perspective I return to the historian John Murphy (2000), and to Prime Minister Robert Menzies' view about the meaning of private happiness:

The idea of the *home* carried potent political and cultural meanings for the post-war middle class. Home was imagined as the private retreat from a hectic or threatening world, as the sphere of intimate, emotional fulfilment, for lovers and parents, and as the space for dreams of domesticity ... Menzies had [...] elaborated the ways that home, and especially home ownership, had meanings of thrift, independence and dignity (136).

Betty finds her initial experiences of the waiters' attitude at Pellegrini's off-putting. She feels there was a distance between the ordinary Australians and the Italians.

‘They weren’t communicating about what they did,’ says Betty. ‘It was a sort of a secret.’ She felt the waiters were being purposely arrogant towards her and were not interested in explaining the menu to the Aussie customers, so they did not feel comfortable going there. Was it because the Italian waiters had difficulty with the Australian language, or was it because they resented Australians giving them a hard time simply for being migrants? Was it a multitude of things?

To write a literary non-fiction thesis in the field of food history I have to think in very lateral ways. This appeals to me anyway, it was a skill I learnt when I studied contemporary theatre, making theatre pieces with a narrative based on juxtaposition, or other referential relationships, between images and bodily gestures or movements, for example. The research of food history in the twentieth century, where researching coffee would be placed, also requires constant lateral connections. The food historian Margaret Visser, writes in *Much Depends on Dinner* (1986) about her travels across many disciplines to research four basic ingredients that would make a meal, that is, corn on-the-cob with salt and butter, chicken with rice, lettuce with olive oil and lemon juice, and ice-cream. In so doing, Visser makes lateral leaps to both explore her themes and to structure her thesis.

Visser mentions earlier research on onions. She began in the science and medical library of the largest library in Canada, which has only three books on onions. There was no monograph on onions in the social science or arts collections. She eventually found three pages on history and social mythology. Visser then searched ‘in at least eleven different collections of books and read articles in scientific periodicals,

journals of anthropology, sociology, and folklore, histories of religion, culinary-historical writings in various journals, business and trade magazines, and so on' (Visser, 1986: 13-14).

Visser was researching the ordinary, since the ordinary embodies 'our mostly unspoken assumptions, and they both order our culture and determine its direction' (1986: 12). Food history in the twentieth century is a process of rummaging through many disciplines, sometimes just skimming, but connecting the dots of very diverse disciplines to understand what we think of as the ordinary. I feel in a similar situation by rummaging through different disciplines in order to understand the ordinary of having a coffee in Melbourne.

I now look at the politics and policies of the 1950s to understand their influence on the people of the time, to understand people's relationship to drinking coffee. Here I am guided by Betty's experience of antagonism from the waiters at Pellegrini's, and I think about the kind of atmosphere migrants must have had to work in during the 1950s. Were the waiters continually having to deal with customers who were apprehensive about the unusual menu and how to order, or was there a more strained relationship between some of the residents and the immigrants in this informal meeting place?

I return to the White Australia policy, initially introduced by the Labor Party in 1901 at the time of the first Federal Parliament, and enforced by unions to protect the workforce by keeping Asians out of Australia. This policy is resurrected almost fifty years later, in 1945 at the end of the Second World War, by the ALP Government's first Minister for

Immigration, Arthur Calwell. The then Prime Minister John Curtin wanted to increase population, and Calwell wanted a homogeneous society.

Jock Collins writes about the migrant experience of post-Second World War Australia in *Migrant Hands in a Distant Land* (1991). Collins views this period from both the Australian perspective and that of the migrants themselves, and in terms of the political atmosphere of the time. Immediately after the Second World War there were labour shortages and there was concern for Australia's defence capabilities (21). As well, states Collins:

[There] were approximately eight million Displaced Persons in temporary shelter in Germany, Austria and France. By 1947, 1.6 million remained. As late as 1946 the Australian Government was "opposed to the principle of large scale settlement of refugees" but by June 1947 Calwell had taken the closely-guarded decision to take in Displaced Persons to fill the immigration targets (22).

It was not possible to obtain British migrants, which meant the White Australia policy would be violated. Calwell had to then sell the immigration program. Collins states:

The union movement was placated with promises that migrants would not compete with Australians for scarce jobs and housing. A two-year indenture system, which guaranteed the Displaced Persons would be directed to unfilled and unwanted jobs, often in remote regions ... 180,000 Displaced Persons were brought to Australia from 1947 to 1951. Net migration in these years was over 450,000... In addition over 50,000 Southern Europeans, 34,000 Northern Europeans and 7,000 Asians were admitted... The Displaced Persons – or D.P.'s

or *reffos* as they were disparagingly called – were wanted only if they did not compete with Australian-born workers ... non-British migrants were from the outset pitchforked into manual labour, dumped in outback concentration camps and regarded as foreigners and cheap labour (1991: 22-23).

Throughout the conservative Coalition Government headed by Menzies, from 1949 to 1966, the policy of assimilation was promoted, which, coupled with Menzies ideologies of ‘anti-Asian racism and anti-communism’ (292), exacerbated hostile attitudes towards people from other countries. According to Collins, Australian ‘racism and xenophobia was to influence greatly the relations between the ‘new Australians’ and their established Australian neighbours and made life very difficult for the non-British migrants (207). Collins refers to the large numbers of migrants from Southern Europe who came to Australia in the 1950s. The migrants came from Italy and Greece – ‘200,000 Italians entering Australia between 1950 and 1961, making them the largest non-British group’ (209).

Australian expectations of the migrants at the time were that they would assimilate into Australian life. This was an ‘official government model of settlement [and it meant that] migrants should discard their language, culture and values’ (209). Collins quotes Gianfranco Cresciani, a scriptwriter for the ABC television series, *The Italians*, who recognised the absurdity of this. Cresciani wrote:

‘He quickly recognised that he was expected to cast away his personality, his language, his traditions in order to *assimilate*, that is to become similar to people whom he could not even understand, whose values and attitudes were as strange

to him as his values and attitudes were strange to them. It did not take him long to understand ... that he was not welcome' (Cresciani in Collins, 1991: 209)

My only reference to working and almost immigrating to another country was when I went to live in England in the mid-1970s. There was never any discrimination as to what work I could or could not do, or any victimisation for working in a foreign country. Eventually after eight years, the Home Office sent me a letter telling me I had to return home. And that was a shock, as after eight years I was ensconced in England among friends and a life I had created. I wanted to write back saying 'I return home every night', but of course they meant back to Australia. I was being exiled back to a country I no longer knew. I no longer knew my parents, my brothers and sisters, the roads, the desires, the interests. I had left three years after the vestiges of White Australia were formally removed from immigration policy by the Whitlam Labor Government (Collins, 1991: 26), as did many curious people at the time wanting to find out about other cultures and ideas. Luckily I got a job when I returned to Australia writing for a film about European exiles in Australia, which helped me understand the experience of cultural dislocation.

I do not know if any of the Italians working in the cafés immigrated through the Displaced Persons program and were contracted by the government for the first two years, or if they just immigrated around that time. But during this period cafés were being set up by migrants, and migrants went to work in the cafés, and had to deal on a daily basis with discrimination.

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When Betty walks into Pellegrini's in the 1950s, and is surrounded by a new experience, she wants to understand a strange menu and learn about coffee, she is also dealing with the White Australia policy, the assimilation policy of the conservative Menzies Government, and what the historian Collins calls institutionalised racism (1991: 204-207).

'You wanted to learn but they weren't about to tell you,' says Betty. 'The more you got to know about, of course the more interested you were.'

'That was the other thing,' says Betty. 'I suppose it's a generation thing too. In a way when you didn't go out often, you wanted a situation that you would enjoy. It wouldn't be something that you'd feel ill at ease so much but perhaps feel that you wouldn't enjoy it. Too noisy, too much going on, perhaps you didn't understand some of the things on the menu, although it became clearer the more you came. And sometimes if you asked it was not clear because of the waiters' accent.'

Betty seems to be saying this in a way to understand the situation herself. It is interesting that the café experience, a lifestyle by the twenty-first century, was imbued – in part – with an antagonistic atmosphere for the residents in the 1950s.

'You're saying you found it difficult because of how the café operated?' I say. 'So was it the frenetic pace of the waiters and the noise, or maybe how the café space was used differently to other places you went, like Gibby's or the Russell Collins?'

'It wasn't so much that we didn't know how it worked,' says Betty. 'It was more a feeling of being at ease there because simply they knew about coffee. There were so many different types of coffee, what did *macchiato* mean?' Going out was an occasion

which rarely happened. Spending time organising babysitters, getting in to the city with friends maybe, you do not want to have to negotiate another situation that requires effort. It is not remotely comparable to my experience of urbanity, where I can nick around the corner for a sit and a think and a coffee.

'The other thing that was different then,' says Betty. 'Hardly anywhere could you just go and have a coffee. Coffee and tea were served as part of the meal. In between meal times, you couldn't get a meal either. In the 1960s things began to change and coffee was much more known, and there were articles in the paper and people knew about coffee, and that was how it came to be accepted.' For many reasons there did not seem to be among Betty's peers that space Norma, who first went to the Carlton cafés in the 1950s, talked about, of just sitting and talking as an informal experience.

'Coffee had a mystique about it,' says Betty, 'and there were certain beliefs that it wasn't good for you. And people knew that when you made it, you probably made it too strong – it kept you awake at night. [In] the 1950s, you were just learning about all those things. I mean Australia was incredibly isolated really, and it wasn't that you didn't like new people. It was simply there was so much new to learn about. We take it all for granted now, but during the Olympic Games in 1956 I remember going into the city with my little girl and her brother in a pram. She must have been about twelve months and Neville, who was about four then ... walking along Flinders Street, when he saw a black man coming towards us. He was absolutely black, a tall man. And Neville called out "Mum! Look at that black man," and I said, "Oh dear," embarrassed, but the black man leant down and patted his hair and said, "How are you, sonny?" in this most beautiful speaking voice and so he saved the situation. Neville had never seen a black man and that was the case for a lot of Australians. I would have personally been interested in getting to know new Australians because you wanted to know about their

world and how it worked.' Betty says that instead they were busy building a house and starting a family, and there was not a great deal of money to spend on entertainment.

'At that time a lot of people were doing the same thing.' I prompted.

'And you wanted to have things paid for,' says Betty. 'And women didn't work – they looked after their families. If you wanted to buy a lounge suite you'd do without to pay for it. We had a patio and a barbecue and we'd have afternoon tea on our patio, rather than go out and buy it somewhere. People didn't go to coffee shops, not too many went to tea shops either, they didn't have the money. You bought the stuff in and you cooked more often than people do now. We didn't know about stir-fries then. Meals took a lot longer to cook. You had nobody to help in the house and you had children, and you sewed, and if you were a reader as well, you had no time to go out for coffee. If people met, they met in someone's home, whether in the afternoon or in the evening, depending on how old your kids were. There's almost a certain feeling of having let the side down if you couldn't provide a good meal. It was conditioning. You also couldn't get the nutrition when you went out. In those days food was so much fattier.'

Betty seems to know a lot about the meaning of social improprieties, which includes what girls shouldn't do. It gives me a very acute understanding of what was acceptable, like where you shouldn't go, what was seedy – but Betty is also worldly enough to understand life beyond those boundaries. So I too push the boundaries.

'When you went to the city with your girlfriends, did you ever go to a pub?'

'Definitely a no-no.' Betty shakes her head. 'You just wouldn't have gone to a pub. If you went to the Federal or the Menzies, it was always with the family. There was a feeling that only certain sorts of women went to hotels alone. In my day you just weren't allowed to go into the city on your own. You were discouraged from that, and your friends were the same.'

‘What about the etiquette of a café, did that have to be learned?’ I ask.

‘I think there is that sort of uncertainty to start with,’ says Betty, ‘of what was expected. But as people loosened up and were not quite so formal about what to do, it was easier. And perhaps because I’d gone back to study I was the one who knew what to order, because [not understanding the menu] does keep people out of places. As I walk along Chapel Street now, you see how many businesses depend on coffee for their income. I can remember Joan Kirner saying we were going to have a “cappuccino-led recovery”, when she was Premier and Victoria needed an economic recovery.’

I wind up our conversation. It’s starting to rain and I know that Betty is taking some relaxing time between her stints as a tour guide at the exhibition.

But what about coffee now, I ask.

‘It’s the taste,’ she says. ‘It really is very nice. Also, if you meet someone it is a way of saying, instead of standing and speaking, why don’t we sit down and have a cup of coffee. It’s companionable. It’s no more companionable than having tea. But I do enjoy coffee. I love the flavour of it; I love the smell of it, and I like the idea of finding out about it. When I was teaching I used to work with a fellow from Egypt, and every morning he made his strong coffee in a little tiny metal cup. I used to say to him as I passed, “Smells great but it’s going to rot your socks”, and he’d say, “One of these days I’ll get you on the stuff and you’ll never be the same again.”’

‘I would have once called coffee exotic, not so now,’ says Betty. ‘When I didn’t know how to make it successfully, if I had people for dinner, I would offer them tea and coffee, but it was always with a certain hesitation and depending on how well I knew them. Did they know more about how to make it than I did? Sometimes I asked them. There was always that aspect to it. As I had done some reading, I also realised how old

it was, how it came to be used in the first place. I read about the coffee houses in Britain in the sixteenth century. It's important to know about the social history side of it.

'You have to remember it was new, and as I say, people didn't know how to make coffee, it was trial and error, and people, my friends swapped recipes, so you would say to one another, "How are you getting along with the coffee?" and there were those who said you mustn't put it on the stove and stew it, and others said that's what they're doing in Europe. And not too many people had European friends. And there were those who didn't want to know because they didn't like change, and those who were all for change, and I was somewhere in the middle. I like to know so that I can see that it fits in with my idea of how we should live our lives.'

When the tape is turned off Betty talks about being a student in the mid-1960s. Other housewives around where she lived couldn't understand why she wanted to return to study, but Betty had too much interest in learning to care. She is still an avid reader and a wonderful person to listen to. Betty calls herself a latte drinker, and I think of her as a latte drinker among the cappuccinos.

In the mid-1970s after living in the nurses' home, where you had to live when training to be a nurse, I finally move out to a large terrace house in Carlton. Around the corner in Lygon Street was Tamani's, now called Tiamo's, an Italian café that had been there since the 1950s. At the small counter at the front there was a large espresso machine, and a refrigerated counter that held plates of different antipasto like stuffed curried eggs, olives, and rolled slices of salami, and also a long square dish of sweet tiramisu and small containers of home-made cream caramel. The menu consisted of mainly pastas

with sauces of pesto, Neapolitan and Bolognese. Along the counter there were high stools, and the rest of the café had small square tables with wooden chairs, and several very long wooden tables. The high walls, especially one major wall opposite the counter, were plastered with posters advertising productions in major theatre houses and at the local Pram Factory and La Mama theatres, art exhibitions, films and music gigs. Posters were plastered on top of each other and the ones underneath had yellowed over time, so too the sticky tape once attached to their corners.

You always have a great time at Tamani's. Someone you are with always meets someone else. I am training as a nurse, but as usual in Carlton there are many university students. My new boyfriend has been shooting a Super-8 film on a shoestring. He and the crew have been working all morning, setting up the shots in someone's house – a living room drama. As I watch from the balcony I am awestruck at the energy and concentration that goes into this artifice, especially the attention to lighting the set, which is constantly reset between shots because of the ever-changing daylight. I watch on, as the director's girlfriend. The script is written in a very naturalistic style, and it surprises me the extent of which the lights, make-up and camera shots are manipulated to create the naturalistic interpretation.

I am inspired by this world of ideas and camera shots and film that needs developing, and the apprehension of waiting for rushes. I am a nurse whose life is about fixing real events – although I had once wanted to go to a school catering for the arts.

At the end of filming, all the crew wander into Tamani's. We sit at one of the long wooden tables, bunching up to get everyone on the long wooden stools. We all order cappuccinos. I am now part of the crew. I am now part of the posters that are pasted on the wall of the café, the advertising for local concerts, and plays and films. I have arrived in Melbourne from the suburbs of Geelong. I can order ravioli, I can order

crème caramel, and I can order coffee. The froth touches my nose and the brown dust on the top is chocolate, not cinnamon. I cannot go back. I am now one of the crew. We leave and go to see the previous day's rushes, and then I return to work the following day. It takes me another five years and travelling overseas to develop my own artifice, as I continue to stay within reach of a coffee. Today, when I walk into Tiamo's, the café is the same, with a similar menu, except now it is licensed and they have replaced the espresso machine with a newer model.

Chapter four

Clatter and comings and goings

... the invasion of the chrome-plated, octopus-like machines.

Brown-May (2001: 49)

When I think of Betty's experience of the cold shoulder at Pellegrini's in the 1950s – the lack of interest in making a foreign menu accessible to an Australian – I think about the more common reverse situation: the enforced alienation and ostracism of migrants themselves at that time by the Federal Government and other citizens. I also think of other forms of isolation, and displacement, and exile, much closer to home. I think of one of my great grandfathers who couldn't speak any English, and I also think of his son, my grandfather, my mother's father who – although born in Australia – would have been interned during the Second World War because of his Italian background, except that he lived in a small town where everyone knew him. I am now thinking of my mother's experience of exile, if you could call it that, of dislocation and isolation, the result of living in the countryside in the 1950s.

My mother grew up in a little town in the Mallee, three to four hours north-west of Melbourne. I had always assumed that because this town was very small and provincial and so far inland, it did not offer much of a social life or cosmopolitan experience, that my mother knew only an isolated rural existence. Her family lived right in the centre of town, opposite the Catholic primary school, where my mother went to

school. The hospital was around the corner and the telephone exchange, where she worked after leaving school, a few blocks away. Every Saturday evening both a weekly dance and the pictures were only two blocks away. Often my mother's father went to the pub on a Friday evening; when it was hot in the evenings, which it usually was, the family would sit on the front lawn and any person walking by would stop for a conversation. My mother also tells me that my grandparents met doing the rounds singing in pubs, and that my mother's eldest sister played in a jazz band in the surrounding towns, even during the week. It seems that much happened socially in the 1940s and '50s in this little town. My first experience of going to the cinema was when my mother went back to visit her family in the mid-1960s. In those days you would see two black and white films, and often there was a short talent quest at interval and the lyrics and music of a song projected on the screen for all the audience to sing as a ball bounced above the words, keeping the time.

Much later I look at the photographs of my mother growing up and marrying. She is always beautifully dressed, wearing clothes she used to make with her mother. She tells me she had lots of friends at work, and dances to go to on weekends. My mother's aspiration was to go nursing but she was unable to leave the town to study. Her family was not wealthy, but in the photos I see a spritely happy person, dressed up to go out. I see other photos of my mother after she marries and leaves her town to live in a more isolated country area. I see her with one small child, still happy and confident and well-dressed. Then a photo of her with two children, dressed in beautiful little woollen coats with velvet collars, walking along a lake, and she still looks happy. Next a photo with three children standing in front of a new weatherboard house. The house is surrounded by flat land; an occasional dead gum tree in the distance breaks the bleakness. My mother looks tired, the children are still well-dressed and warm, but she

does not look happy. She and my father have five more children. I always thought the fatigue and the sadness, or frustration, came from caring for so many children, but after talking to my mother much later, I believe it was the isolation and the loneliness, and the lack of community, that was so trying. And yet, my mother's experiences of life as a busy housewife in the countryside were similar to many other women who had children and lived on a farm. There was not much time to leave the house, and its chores; there were sick children to look after, and meal preparation for the family and shearers. I think having a telephone number of only two digits and having to contact a telephone exchange to phone out encapsulates the time and sense of isolation. This was the experience of the 1960s and most of the '70s for my mother. There were two pubs in the town, a general store, a hall where a ball was held once a year, the church where we went every Sunday, and a local primary school, which occasionally held a function. In 2002 in this same little town, on the notice-board of the general store, there are advertisements for mothers' groups and even yoga classes, and seven-digit telephone numbers. The same town is now well-known for its local industries and has an annual rock festival.

Although the distance from the town where my mother grew up to her new home is four hours, it only took that short time to create a dislocation from her original family and friend network, which added to her isolation. I think of her loss of a community, of family, friends and a social life, a condition shared by many other Australians and caused by distance and a rural life, and I wonder how much they recognised the effects of the isolation and loneliness – and especially that of the women, who went where their husbands could get work.

My father seemed to like the isolation. In many ways it suited him, as he had only recently returned from the Second World War, during which he was based in

England in the RAAF flying Lancaster Bombers. He wanted solitude, too much solitude, perhaps as a way of coping with his traumatising war-time experiences. This is what they gave the veterans then on their return – solitude; a piece of land if they wanted it and, unwittingly, solitude as a form of therapy. I think of my father's journey as enforced exile, a veteran's response to his experiences and a need to find work after a war. And I think of my mother's experience too as enforced exile, as needing to be where her husband could support a family. My mother says she has never been so lonely and isolated as she was for those ten years living on the farm. I do not think that my mother and father recognised their prolonged isolation while going somewhere to earn a living and bring up a family as a form of dislocation and exile. And there was no prejudice attached to their exile – unlike that attached to migrants at that time.

Understanding my parents' experience of isolation is important to me as I follow other people's experiences of community and the urban. I often wonder if there had been a few cafés, even one café (or even a tea-room), it might have changed my mother's daily routine and allowed her to make contact with other people in the community, or given her the opportunity to sit alone and think or read for a small moment, to break the monotony of her working day. These days when I visit my mother we go out to a café. Sometimes we sit in silence and read the paper, sometimes we talk. We find our own ground as to what we want to say, away from her household chores and roles, our lives important in their publicness.

In March 1999 I interview Angela, a painter and installation artist who studied art in the early 1960s. To supplement her income, Angela worked as a waitress. She worked

around town in various cafés in the 1960s and especially at the renowned Legend Espresso Bar set up in the 1950s in Bourke Street, modelled on European cafés, and run by a Greek family, with one of the first espresso machines in Melbourne. Angela waitresses at The Legend around 1964, at Dinos and Papa Albertos around 1966, at the Hopetoun Tea Rooms in 1979, and at Matildas in 1981. In fact, Angela has experienced quite an array of establishments, ranging from a very posh tearoom, to Greek cafés that sold fried foods, to an innovative espresso bar. It is not only Angela's experience of working in these places I am interested in, but also her continued interest in frequenting cafés since her art student days. Angela was part of the social and cultural transition of the 1960s and spent a lot of that time working and studying in the city. Much later I learn more about the way she negotiated the city then, which gives me a greater insight into how the city was perceived.

I meet Angela in Tiamo's in Carlton, a café with many strong memories for her. It's early evening and Tiamo's is busy as usual. I forget to bring my writing pad and have to race out and buy one. Angela is not fazed – she treats Tiamo's like her living room, happy to sit and watch, and just be there. Angela also frequented Tiamo's in the 1970s, when it was Tamani's. The name changed but the posters on the wall and the menu remained the same. Angela was around when Bibi Succi, who was still the manager in 2000, installed a new espresso machine in the 1970s. It was a big thing and she took a photo when it was being installed. Angela and her friends preferred the old machine because of its art deco shape and were annoyed Bibi was replacing it. The old machine now sits in the window as a museum piece. This part of my journey is to find out about early cafés with espresso machines. Not only were cafés opening in Melbourne in the 1950s, with European migrants setting up cafés for themselves, there was also a big innovation in the way coffee was prepared – the espresso machine. I

think it must have been fascinating to be around when all this was happening, the discovery of a café and the discovery of espresso coffee, the excitement of that transition. I know what I am like now when I discover a café off the beaten track in the country when I am not expecting it. It seems that the café gives me time to ponder the new surrounds. Angela has done more than encounter Melbourne's first cafés – she worked in them when they were new.

The Legend Espresso Bar at 239 Bourke Street opened in 1956, and was one of the first hip cafés in Melbourne to use an espresso machine. In Tiamo's, sitting opposite Angela, I hear the hiss of pressurised steam from across the room. Coffee is happening, and Angela is talking about the Legend of the 1960s.

'It was set against the cafés in Lygon Street, which were the [European] men's cafés,' says Angela. 'In other words, cafés that were appealing but were not accessible to other people.' Angela explains the 1960s as a time when the music hall era was nearly over, and that meant the end of going to the Tivoli, a famous music hall theatre fraternised by people interested in the performing arts and one of the main entertainment venues and reasons to go out in the city at night.

'People went to pubs but at that time they closed early, very early, to promise a relaxed evening after work,' says Angela. 'With six o'clock closing still existing, people spent their time finding out whose house the party was at and arriving with flagons of red wine.' The flagon of wine defined an era in terms of how and where people spent their relaxation time. It meant finding a location and settling in for the night.

‘These parties often turned into drunken brawls, or plain drunken debauches,’ says Angela, laughing over the fact that they were often at her place. ‘It was the pre-drugs sixties.’

The other alternatives for entertainment were the jazz clubs, which were mostly transformed old cafés, and poetry readings, which were alcohol-free and where Nescafé, or some other instant brew, was served in mugs, often chipped. Gathering at people’s houses rather than a licensed public venue was a common occurrence, even when the drugs era did arrive. There was nowhere else to go after 6 pm. After all, it is often not even dark then. I skim the surface of a time when bohemia was university students and artists, living in shared housing, on socialist politics and the smell of an oily rag, wanting more than the family life and brick veneer in the suburbs of the previous generation, and meat and three veg on their dinner plate, a truly excellent combination yet predictable as the bus or train or tram ride home.

‘The Legend was an Italian restaurant run by Ion Nicholades, selling pastas and schnitzels,’ says Angela. She remembers wearing a large orange shirtdress with a zip up the front. I forgot to ask her how short she wore it, considering it was the 1960s and mini-skirts had arrived as a provocative fashion statement. ‘This was the uniform of all the waitresses at the Legend. It was also interesting that the Legend had women waitresses, which [at that time] tended to be unusual, as it used to be men who were waiters.’ We forget so easily about certain jobs not being accessible to women. ‘People drank machiatos.’ What were they? ‘Tall black with a dash of milk.’ The coffee was now good coffee made from an espresso machine, not brewed or driplated. ‘The coffee machine [espresso machine] had a large handle that you had to pull down under pressure. The machine was solidly made and you had to get the froth just right.’ We are

sipping our coffee in Tiamo's surrounded by noise and people queuing for a table.

Angela continues.

'The Legend was very good-humoured,' she says. 'Those who fraternised the café were artists, actors, students, and people, who worked nearby ... as well as people who liked drinking coffee because, at that time, that in itself was a novelty.'

'The place was mostly fraternised by young Italian men who came in alone, and would stand at the bar counter and drink their coffee,' Angela continues, 'often for just enough time to drink it. At that time Aussie men wouldn't have done this, as they would have thought it quite effeminate.' Angela was impressed with the decor, the chipped marble of the terrazzo floor, and the wire metal chairs designed by Clement Meadmore.

'The café faced north which meant that light shone in all day, especially across the floor, enhancing the terrazzo effect,' she says.

Angela talks about the 1950s as a time when people still got dressed up to go into the city, treating it as an occasion, as it was for most. Women wore gloves and hats; men wore suits in fawns and greys. Angela was an art student at RMIT in the early 1960s and wore short tartan woollen skirts with black stockings, when only old Italian women in mourning wore black. The Legend created a new type of leisure at a time when rock music and bohemian life catapulted young men and women out of their tweeds and formality into the more unconventional 1960s and '70s. Angela and I pay for our coffees while three more cross the counter waiting to be taken to other customers, and we leave the cosy surrounds of Tiamo's and head out into the cold grey evening.

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At the Immigration Museum in Flinders Street, among the permanent exhibitions, is one called *Impact*. It is about the contribution of immigrants to Australia. Among the references to Nouria Schetic, a physicist from Afghanistan, to a garden designer from England, and to the origins of the Australian ballet, to name a few, can be found the Legend Espresso Bar under the title *A café society*. An accompanying blurb states:

From the moment it opened in 1956, students, artists, the theatre crowd and recently arrived Europeans delighted in its espresso coffee, cosmopolitan menu and totally modern look. With sculptor Clement Meadmore, Ion Nicolades transformed the Anglo American Café at 239 Bourke Street, which his Greek grandfather started in 1906. New features included its mosaic tile exterior, drop lights, Italian style stone floor and Leonard French's seven-panel painting *The Legend of Sinbad*. Like many other Greek run cafés, the old Anglo-American had catered to majority tastes. Steak, eggs and chips were popular. In contrast the Legend sold style (*Impact* exhibition, 1999).

The exhibit displays large photos of the interior of the espresso bar, including one of French's paintings that span the wall behind the counter. On the menu cover is a logo of a minimalist, abstract sailing boat with three masts, but without sails. The masts could also be interpreted as three crosses, and initially I mistake the logo for a Jewish sacred candleholder. I later come across a photo of a small sculpture by Meadmore in the publication *1956 Melbourne, Modernity and the XVI Olympiad* (1996: 37). It is an abstract metal sculpture in a similar shape, called *Untitled* (c. mid-1950s); it uses welding technique to create criss-crossing spikes, the vertical ones heavier, with small stone-like pieces of solder beaded into the spikes at different intervals. This abstract sculpture seems connected to the Legend logo, as it reflects the shape of the sails in its

abstraction. The café name itself, the Legend, French's paintings of Sinbad hanging behind the counter, and Meadmore's sculpture, all resonate of a transplanted history. The quote on the menu card about the French paintings of Sinbad's journey reads: *[Through] life from immaturity to wisdom. In painting the mural, Leonard French has interpreted this story freely in a modern idiom* (Legend menu, c 1950s). The menu gives us some understanding of a lifestyle.

Opening hours are stated as 12 midday-2 pm and 10.30-11.30 pm, which by present standards seem minimal. The later times would have coincided with the theatre or cinema crowd leaving a show. The coffee list reads: espresso (black coffee), long black coffee, cappuccino (fluffy white coffee), Vienna (short black with whipped cream), machiato (black with a dash of cold milk), mocca (coffee, chocolate and milk) plus cioccolata (espresso hot chocolate). There is also iced coffee, malted milks and granita. Sweets include cassata, fruit salad, and waffles. There are poppy seed and savoury rolls with salami, Mortadella, ham, pineapple with eggs, and pink salmon and anchovy open sandwiches. Hot food includes minestrone and ravioli, and pastries include croissants, baklava and galatobouriko. A mixture of French, Italian, and Greek delights. A menu like this is now not unusual, but this was one of the first such menus in 1956. According to the historian Andrew Brown-May (2001), Nicholades was inspired by Pellegrini's, a modern espresso bar which had opened a couple of years earlier in 1954, only a couple of blocks further up Bourke Street.

The Immigration Museum exhibition displays an original shiny stainless steel art deco espresso machine, a La Pavone, with the long handles you pull down to push the steam through the coffee. It rests on an aqua laminated table, beside a psychedelic glass panel of an abstract mosaic in dominant oranges, reds and greens. I do not recall seeing a Meadmore-designed metal chair. It is strange to see the makings of a café as a

museum exhibit. For me, museum exhibitions are about a past history, whereas the story of espresso coffee and cafés is a recent phenomenon and part of my recent history. I still think of dinosaurs and stuffed marsupials as museum exhibits, but the concept of a museum exhibit has changed to express more contemporary cultural history and social experience, and this exhibit of the espresso bar informs a new experience of the urban, of the informal meeting space, that was crying out to happen. I wonder though why the Legend Espresso Bar has been used to identify this new experience, rather than other bars like Pellegrini's. Does the Legend epitomise the collaboration between the arts, design and café life?

In 1996 the Museum of Modern Art at Heide publishes *1956 Melbourne, Modernity and the XVI Olympiad*, a series of essays by artists and academics about the 1950s to coincide with the 2000 Sydney Olympics. The essays look at innovations in painting, architecture, and interior and garden design (7), as well as the expectations and style that informed the period. The essays give me an overall grasp of the cultural and artistic milieu of the 1950s. This is also a time when more and more Italian and Greek cafés are being established and becoming a curiosity for Melbourne people, and when the artistic developments of abstractionism, and the invention of new interior design materials, influence the design and experience of the café.

In the introduction, the journalist Simon Plant states that '[1956] was the year we tuned into television, read Patrick White's *Tree of Man*, watched Ray Lawler's *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*, and embraced those powerful symbols of modernity – the motel and movie drive-in' (Plant, 1996: 9). Alongside these symbols of modernity I

would include the espresso machine and the café space, for it was around 1956 that the espresso arrived. Plant considers this time as a period of important transition ‘between the grey austerity of post-war life and a brighter, prosperous and more modern future’ (9).

Geography and parochialism had insulated Australians, but now they looked ‘outwards for broader definitions of themselves’ (9). According to the cultural commentator Katherine Brisbane (cited by Plant), ‘[self-assertion] was in the air, uncertainly expressed in a yearning to mix on terms of equality with those older civilisations thousands of servicemen had glimpsed during the war and from which a daily increasing number of new Australians had come’ (Brisbane in Plant, 1996: 9). The mid-1950s was therefore a period of social, cultural, and economic transition. Plant’s comments about the changing perception of the city are of great interest to me. Where previously ‘radical modernists tended to regard cities as sites of alienation, poverty and dislocation … by 1957 the city was coming to be regarded as a vortex of energy and a place of opportunity’ (Plant, 1996: 19).

I think of the changing concept of the city, not sociologically or economically, but of how the city is navigated and for what purpose, of cafés and espresso bars opening up the city and the way leisure time is spent – momentarily between work hours, or as a shopper, or as a migrant, where the private worlds are made public.

During the 1950s period of transition in design and invention, the artistic discourse became focused on abstraction and minimalism. Simon Plant’s essay includes three wonderful photos of the Legend Café that illustrate its design and atmosphere. One shows the mosaic-tiled exterior wall that separated the thoroughfares between the café and espresso bar sections inside. The men in the espresso section wear suits and hats stand at the counter, which looks more like a bar at a pub than a café. Another

photo shows Leonard French's large *Sinbad* series hanging side-by-side behind the counter, and the last photo is a long shot of people sitting at round tables. The chairs with black steel legs and backs, and vinyl-covered seats, are designed by Clement Meadmore. According to Plant the uneven pattern of the terrazzo floor adds to the overall minimalist and abstract design of the café (21). The visual experience of the Legend must have been integral to the informal experience of having just a coffee and not a main meal.

In his essay the curator Max Delany gives another context for the arts movement of the 1950s, which has influenced the Legend's design, by quoting Joseph Burke, who argued in 1954 that “the architect can perhaps do as much as anyone in creating the conditions for a wider recognition of progressive movements” (Burke in Delany, 1996: 64). Burke called for the integration of architecture, painting, sculpture and industrial design, as he believed the artistic revival in Australia depended on it (Delany, 1996: 64). According to Delany, collaborations between artists, architects and industrial designers ‘found expression in a range of domestic, commercial and civic projects in the mid-1950s’ (64), including Clement Meadmore’s *Legend Café* (1956), ‘designed around mural scale paintings by Leonard French’ (64).

Delany sees the 1950s as a ‘*zeitgeist* of innovation and experimentation [when] international-style modernism [was being transformed into] the specifics of a local context’ (59). Delany writes of how the ‘[new] building materials were regularly announced, and vigorously promoted … of Perspex, vinyl and laminex; the Stegbar window wall, ready mixed concrete, aluminium, bitumen; and steelwork frames’ (61). The initial use of these materials would also define social experience. I remember, for example, the house I grew up in, with its lamina kitchen table and vinyl-covered kitchen chairs.

The architect Derham Groves states in his essay that the arrival of television in 1956 ‘signalled an end to post-war austerity [and the television soon took] pride of place in the lounge room, the showplace of the home’ (Groves, 1996: 71). This meant that lounge seating became much lower, and so too coffee tables, which then became a focus for eating in the lounge room, as eating habits accommodated television viewing. Initially, easier-to-prepare meals became more fashionable, then came frozen TV dinners, and snack foods (70) – all designed to eat in front of the tellie. This meant that there was less conversation between family members, as there was less formal sitting at a table and eating together at meal times. It is interesting to me how television so quickly invaded communal family rituals, like meal times, whereas listening to the radio was seen mostly as an experience that could be shared after meals but not during them. At the same time, in the 1950s, the space between the inside and outside of a house was becoming more fluid, as garden design became incorporated into overall house design. Large glass panes and doors replaced brick walls; this allowed for more outdoor living because of the warmer Aussie climate, and so the patio and the barbecue became a focus for entertaining *al fresco* (83). In the 1950s gatherings and entertaining still mostly happened in the home, and often on the patio and around the barbecue – this could be as formal or informal as desired. If the weather was fine and there was enough food, family, friends or neighbours would be invited around, and some meat or fish thrown on the barbecue. In this way the barbecue helped to break down previous formal eating habits – there was no need for people to dress up or be placed in formal seating arrangements, food could even be juggled on one’s lap. And at a time when most entertaining occurred at home, formally or informally, migrants were bringing their informal experience of cafés to Australia.

I wonder about a possible correlation between the reductivist principles in art and design that Delany mentions and the nature of a café, as a place of informal eating and meeting. The design of café space is also reductive – no separation between the kitchen and the dining space, the sink just behind the serving counter, and a menu that can be eaten at any time during opening hours. Surely spaces, not only in their design but in their intent, can also be reductive. I think now of how informality and reductivist principles might change the nature of conversation that is not defined by formal work and familial relationships.

In September 2001 the Melbourne Museum in Carlton has an exhibition on the history of local coffee culture, which is also a springboard for the launch of Andrew Brown-May's book *Espresso! Melbourne Coffee Stories* (2001). My recollection of previous visits to the Museum involves displays of fossils, and large dinosaur skeletons and stuffed animals, and dead butterflies pinned to display boards. Now there are more contemporary cultural exhibits, often with interactive components. And the Museum is a vast modern building, with angular verges and an interior of very large open spaces divided by walls and doors of clear glass panels. I am still confronted by a dinosaur skeleton, but also by a living rainforest which I can view from both the level of the treetops and that of the root system through Perspex windows.

Copies of Brown-May's book are surrounded by luscious bags of whole coffee beans, alongside bags of chocolate-coated beans and of a ground coffee called Irish Cream. The expensive paraphernalia of aprons and tea towels emblazoned with coffee iconography frustrate me, as they don't relate much to local coffee history. Brown-

May's book is quite small, unlike other grandiose books on coffee recently published overseas. In the centre of the faux hessian bag cover is a small photo of a man wearing a white shirt and apron using an espresso machine – the 1950s-style machine with the large lever handles. The man is Peter Bancroft, the original importer and manufacturer of espresso machines in the 1950s, at his Gaggia factory in Melbourne.

An exhibition of original imported coffee artefacts, and workshops about coffee by people from the industry, coincides with the release of Brown-May's book. The workshops are held in an exhibition area focussed on the development of city life in Melbourne. There is an old newspaper stand, or barrow, a flower display around a little old caravan. As I wander around this exhibition I imagine Gene Kelly and Debbie Reynolds tap-dancing in a Hollywood storm and singing *Singin' in the rain* from the 1950s film of the same name, and then all of a sudden a tap-dancing troupe of adolescent boys enter and hit the floor in tune with a live Dixieland jazz group on a makeshift stage somewhere between the flowers and the old newspaper barrow.

A coffee specialist, Gary Tyre, gives a workshop entitled 'The art of domestic coffee making'. I am more of a café-going girl, my desire for a coffee gets me out of the house. As the workshop progresses people keep arriving in droves. Chairs are grabbed as fast as the organisers provide them, and there are never enough. Children are enticed to sit on parents' laps in silence, as the grown-ups become engrossed in the talk about coffee. Tyre gives a potted history of coffee, accompanied by photographic slides ranging from an engraving of the interior of a seventeenth-century English coffee house to a photo of the coffee bean tree. Tyre's talk is interspersed with the occasional joke about the obsessive nature of the coffee journey, but the audience seem so earnest in their interest in coffee, the jokes are lost, or maybe the audience do not yet have the information to be critical of the journey.

‘Behind coffee came a culture,’ says Tyre, connecting coffee to communication, to cafés and to the development of the arts, the sciences, literacy, literature, navigation, and commerce. He tells of how coffee grew naturally in Ethiopia and eventually arrived in Yemen, and of how it brought all social classes together. He tells of the first export of coffee from Yemen, and of the first café in Cairo in the early 1500s, where coffee was drunk in its own right and not attached to any religious ritual. He tells of the first coffee stock exchange in New York in 1882, and of the two million slaves taken to Brazil to work on the coffee plantations, of coffee being the single biggest destroyer of rainforest, including that of Sumatra in Indonesia, of coffee being first grown in Australia in 1873, of the invention of the espresso machine in 1937, of how it forced water through coffee under pressure, and of the arrival of the first espresso machines in Australia, imported by Peter Bancroft in the 1950s.

The talk spans hundreds of years in half an hour, then tells of the different kinds of coffee pots and the size of the grinded bean to suit the pot, of how to use espresso machines at home – the importance of the correct water temperature, of not over-heating the milk, of storing the coffee beans not in the fridge, but in a dark cool place so as not to lose the moisture from the coffee. The history of coffee fills the coffee pots, it brings new meaning to a daily ritual. I listen acutely to every detail about how to make a good coffee at home. At the end of the talk we are invited to wander through the display. Crowds press around the tables, picking up the different coffee pots. Like everyone else, I run my hand through a bowl of roasted coffee beans, and then raw coffee beans, feeling the different textures. I dip my hand into a bowl of rich red fleshy coffee berries, that have not begun the process to extract the bean; I put a few in my pocket to take home, and then poke around the pots of varying shapes and sizes. When I understand the many aspects of coffee, it is not a linear understanding. I think of a short story by

the South American writer Jorge Luis Borges, *The Aleph* (1971), where all dimensions, known and unknown, meet at one point, and this point is finally discovered – or not discovered, if I recall correctly. I think of different dimensions intersecting.

I do not yet know the origins of many products of everyday use – like salt and pepper, which I place on my table every day, or sugar, or plastic, or aspirin, or even chocolate. But I now know about coffee. Next to oil, coffee is the commodity most traded on the stock exchanges, a present-day Eureka. I fill in a coupon to guess how many coffee beans are in a jar to win an espresso machine. I have a coffee at a mobile café counter, a modern form of an 1880s street coffee barrow, on the upper level of the Museum, near the showcases of historical exhibits.

In the first display case are rows of identical small dead birds, all individually tagged and classified. This exhibit by Janet Laurence is entitled *Shared lives of dead birds* (2000). The birds came from a display in the old Museum, and Laurence uses them to explore the concept of categorizing; now the birds have returned to the new Museum as an exhibit. The display of coffee paraphernalia begins in the second case.

I read a blurb. *Coffee in Melbourne has a long and complex history. But it is the espresso machine that has come to symbolise a dramatic shift in our coffee drinking and leisure habits.* The smell of coffee from the nearby barrow pervades the Museum floor. One of the showcases displays original espresso machines. Another blurb reads:

Giovanni Gaggia – a Milan café proprietor developed his first espresso machine in 1947... After just seven years – first models trickled to Melbourne ... 45 years later the machine has become symbolic of the huge change that post-war immigration has brought to the streets and daily life of Melbourne (*Espresso comes to Melbourne*, 2001).

There is a great photo display of early espresso machines. I see them as art exhibits, as sculptures in space. The Gaggia c. 1948 *Crema Café*. Made in Italy. The Gaggia *Monte Carlo*, late 1950s. The Austex *Sputnik* or *Fiesta*. The *Scia Arca* (or *Avca*) Grinder, 1950s, made by Bancroft. A caption reads ‘Espressos for home. Expensive toys for intelligent people’ (a quote from Bancroft). There is a Gaggia *Gidee (Gida)*, La San Mareo, *Model No. 2*. Made in Italy for 80 pounds (three weeks’ wages). R. Radaelli, *Caffomatic*, an Arranex *Caravel* (Italy 1960s), a More *Quick Mill*, (Italy 1960s), and a Gaggia *Mini Gaggia* (Spain 1970s). The designs are remarkable, the most interesting-looking machines I have ever seen. They look as if something special would have to be made by them. Shiny stainless steel, Art Deco circles interspersed by off-centre straight lines, even on the earliest espresso machines with heavy lever handles that had to be pulled down to pass the pressured hot water through the coffee grounds. I cannot imagine standing in front of cars and being as interested as I am now in espresso machines.

I recall the local writer and historian Brian Matthews talking about his experiences of the 1960s (2002), when he began teaching in a secondary school. He said that it was a time when you were called ‘Sir’, and students still received corporal punishment. I also remember when you could get the strap for not being able to spell. Hats and gloves were routinely worn at least until the mid-1960s. Matthews talks about being restless for knowledge and wanting to go overseas. He mentions the fear of losing yourself by taking up a teaching post in a small country town where you were guaranteed to become principal and to remain comfortably for the rest of your life, and that was it. But Matthews went searching overseas for another life. I identify profoundly with his desire to look beyond a small comfortable town, and with his desire to travel. I

write this as if I still see that landscape in front of me, inside of me, the landscape of not wanting to be confined, by staying in the same job and getting married or rather having to be married to be respectable, that restriction and confinement of the intellect. I too went overseas, but I left much later in the mid-1970s and, unlike Matthews, I didn't return for eight years, and I dreaded the return to the isolation of the suburban. And you know what fixes that sense of isolation? A bloody decent cup of coffee – at least it quells the gut response. There is still the necessity for community, and for cultural and emotional dialogue, but a good espresso coffee quells the isolation, the dislocation.

Leaning over the last cabinet, I gradually doze off over my notebook, pencil in hand. The cabinet is the right size to take my weight. I hear a voice ask me why I am taking notes. He is the public relations manager for Coffex, the coffee distributor for the Museum. He is very excited that there is a coffee exhibition and is fascinated by the number of people who have come to see it. Many of his peers in the business are giving lectures. I take his card so I can see the Coffex factory.

During the early 1960s when we live on the farm, my father would sometimes take me with him to Melbourne for the day when he had to visit for business. We would either go to Coles Cafeteria for a toasted sandwich, or to Myers Cafeteria for a pie and sauce or fish and chips, while my father also had a coffee. I remember these days well. We are rarely in the big city and we rarely eat out. I remember most the long cafeteria queues and the sound of clanking cutlery. The thing I remember most vividly is that we always end up sharing our table with someone my father's age. Either my father chooses a table or another man chooses my father's table. And they talk. They talk for a very long time,

an hour or so. I am irrelevant to my father's conversation and I get very bored. They talk about everything, the war, farming, cars and other things I do not want to understand. They laugh and are very cheerful and say goodbye as if they have been good friends for a long time. It is almost time to eat again by the time we leave. This is the only time my father gets to talk to strangers. I do not know how I sit there for so long while my father talks.

Chapter five

A different sense of city

To understand cities is to understand ourselves.

Brown-May (1998: xii)

There are many conflicting stories about who had the first espresso machine in Australia, and especially in Melbourne. The 1950s was a time of ‘firsts’, with neighbours boasting about who had the first television, or who had just bought the latest model Ford or Holden. It was the era of innovative white goods, and housewives were as competitive as their husbands, boasting about who was the first in the street to get the newest kind of electric stove, electric frying pan, or Hills Hoist. Even I could boast that my father was the first to acquire an electric generator in the little country town where we lived. The claim for being the ‘first’ to have an espresso machine in the 1950s is still being heard today.

In 1993 Ian Bersten, a coffee importer and wholesaler in Sydney, published *Coffee Floats, Tea Sinks*, one of the first Australian publications about coffee history, that contained a broad documentation of coffee pots and coffee paraphernalia, based on Bersten’s own extensive private collection. Late one night I head to the State Library in search of when the first machine came to Australia. I check the massive inventory of espresso machine inventions and their dates of manufacture in Bersten’s book, only to

find the inventory ends with the latest machine manufactured in Italy and Europe. It takes until Andrew Brown-May publishes *Espresso! Melbourne Coffee Stories* in 2001 for the manufacture and ownership of the initial espresso machines in Melbourne to be documented. To my surprise, it is a young Australian, Peter Bancroft, and his father, who start importing and distributing Gaggia espresso machines to Australia. As a young lad in the early 1950s, Peter goes travelling overseas and discovers the delights of café life in London's West End. He is also seduced by the espresso machine itself. His father, who has just sold his dry cleaning business, ends up in Europe looking at espresso machines as a business venture, and in London the Bancrofts order a four-group Gaggia machine and become the Australian agents for Gaggia. The Gaggia machines with the spring lever had only recently been patented in 1947 (2000: 31-37). There was a great demand for espresso machines but the import licence controls of the time prevented the Bancrofts from meeting the demand, so they also got the licence to build and distribute Gaggia machines (2001: 33).

Can you imagine the fervour when espresso coffee first arrives in Melbourne in the early 1950s? The occasional machine even filtering through in the luggage of a family member. An art deco design, long chrome handles, lots of shiny polished chrome, steam passing through coffee under pressure, sassy hissing sounds of steam sending the coffee into the cup, and a milk frother with a lower, louder, steamier hiss. This is not the latest model Holden, or a kinky electrical appliance for the suburban kitchen – not yet, anyway. Who wouldn't want an espresso machine? The gossip must have been overpowering, people hearing about them from overseas, seeing them in photos, as they took pride of place in the local café, pride of place with the owner standing behind the machine, pride of place on a counter for every customer to hear and

see, not hidden in a kitchen out the back. Where can I get one? When will they arrive?

Surely on the next boat. Rumours.

Brown-May documents the families of the espresso trail, and the cafés of this period:

On 22 March 1954 the *Herald* announced: “Melbourne has an espresso coffee machine, the only one in Australia”... [It] was reported that from New Year’s Eve 1953, Mario Brunelli’s grocery at 262 Lygon Street in Carlton [serves espresso but not from a Gaggia] ... Nando Varrenti’s espresso café at 95 Elgin Street ... opened on Easter Sunday, 18 April 1954, with a three group Faema Duchessa espresso [Faema is a breakaway group from Gaggia] (2001: 32-36).

On 1 May 1954 the Bancrofts open their café Il Capuccino, named after the Il Cappuccino Café in Hanover Square in London, one of the first espresso bars opened in England, which Peter frequented and where he fell in love with the café lifestyle. Brown-May states that the Bancroft’s Il Capuccino in Fitzroy Street, St Kilda, was ‘Melbourne’s first espresso café with a commercial espresso machine’ (37).

In 1954 Pellegrini’s opens at 66 Bourke Street, and University Café in 257 Lygon Street, opens with a Gaggia supplied by Bancrofts – the first one ever bought from the Bancrofts circa 1953. Brown-May reports that in 1954 Di Santo, also seduced by espresso machines, returns to Italy for the Milan Fair only to discover the Bancrofts have recently acquired the Gaggia agency for Australia. But Di Santo becomes the La Cimbale sales and marketing representative with Russell & Armstrong who have the import licence for La Cimbale. In December 1954 artist Mirka Mora opens Mirka’s Café at 183 Exhibition Street, next to a newly opened Café Lexington. Brown-May

states that ‘[by] 1957 it was estimated that there were around 400 machines in Australia, half in Victoria, mostly in Melbourne’ (2001: 42).

There are occasional stories, however, of espresso machines in Australia prior to the Bancrofts’ importing business of the 1950s. During the Second World War there was a café in Maryborough in Victoria run by Nance Marturano and her husband that had an espresso machine. They had ‘imported [it] from Italy just before Mussolini entered the war’ (Potts, 1985: 141). Maryborough was one of the towns where Americans were stationed during the war and they bitterly complained about the terrible way Australians made coffee from essence; it was quite a surprise for them to encounter espresso coffee. It is quite surprising where original espresso machines pop up; there was a trickle of new or used espresso machines arriving as personal luggage with individual Italian families up to the 1950s. One of the original owners of the Arab Café in Lorne tells me they were one of the first to have an espresso machine. The Italian swimming team, out here for the 1956 Olympics, had brought out some of the first generation espresso machines with them. The team were training down at Lorne and sold a machine to the Arab, which was just starting up.

I return to the year of 1954 and it becomes clearer why I may be so interested in espresso machines. I am born in 1954, just when the first espresso coffee flows in Melbourne, when espresso machines are arriving in Melbourne. It is ‘in the air’, and there is such a fuss, and they are so exciting. When I celebrated my fiftieth birthday, I also celebrated – inadvertently – the journey of the espresso machine to Australia. Like so many of us born at that time, we are the generation who crave a coffee, who have been seduced by the new culture of informal meeting places, of espresso coffee as an urban lifestyle. Perhaps my journey was predestined: no more tea parties, instead a life informed by migrants, and travel, and overseas inventions and overseas interests –

mainly European, and Italian. When I look at the original three-group Gaggia espresso machine in the window of the University Café in Lygon Street, the first of the Gaggias sold by Bancrofts (Brown-May, 2001: 40), I consider I am the same age, I am that shiny old.

Over fifty years after the University Café buys their first Gaggia from Bancrofts I walk into Brunetti's in Faraday Street. Brunetti's has recently been renovated, and has become much larger. There's an extremely long space with many counters – for coffee, for savoury food, for gelatos. There are stools at the counter, there are stools around tables, there is a long row of small tables down one side. There is a large high frosted pale green window with a modern abstract design, and I think I am in Milan, with its style; Brunetti's is full of migrant generations who are now mostly 'Australian'. I see two espresso machines facing each other, with two baristas working away. The workspace for the baristas is cut off from where the waiters serve customers, their space on a higher platform to the other workers. Not only are the large machines on display, but so are the baristas as they work the espresso machines. I try to count the number of coffees they can make at once. I ask a waiter, he says four; a waitress interrupts and says seven. Fourteen coffees can be made at once by two baristas. I check the machine, a Faema 7-group. I am aghast that the machines are so large and the baristas are locked into their art, separated from the other workers. I wonder if other customers are interested in the machines. Does the arrangement strike them as symbolic of middle-class leisure and sophistication? The rich aroma of coffee fills the space as I carry my tray of cake and espresso to one of the few vacant tables on the footpath.

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I go back to see Angela, the artist who worked as a waitress at the Legend. This time I want to know about her personal experiences of having a coffee, not just about working in the industry, to find out about drinking coffee in the 1950s and '60s. Who acquired an espresso machine and their family stories is only part of the tale. What it meant for the people who came to the cafés and experienced them for the first time is also important to me. This time I bring my tape machine.

We meet at Angela's house for dinner as it is difficult taping in a café with loud music. Angela lives in a converted shop front, using the front area as studio space and the back as living quarters. Through the manipulation of space, the living area differs markedly from the conventional suburban home. Angela has cooked a pork casserole with vegies and fruit; I love the combination. I bring wine but am afraid I'll lose my train of thought if I drink before I interview her. I need a coffee instead.

'I think it was my stepmother,' says Angela, standing at the stove frying potatoes in olive oil. 'She was a bit of a coffee addict, and she used to make fresh coffee. That was fairly unusual in those days. We always had nice fresh coffee. Although she's Australian she was a bit of an intellectual and a bit of a modernist, and I think she probably was a big influence on me. She used to grind the coffee herself, so it was quite a ritual. I was a teenager.'

Angela doesn't think there were many cafés when she left home to go to art school.

'There were milk bars but they didn't have what we call coffee,' says Angela. 'It's hard to imagine, isn't it? Pre-cappuccino when you were served something grey for coffee, maybe out of a big urn. Then came percolated coffee, and later all that dripolated, and they thought that was real coffee.'

When the Americans were stationed in Australia during the Second World War they left behind a legacy of drinking driplated coffee, or coffee made in percolators but served mainly black; you could have as many cups as you wanted. Australians didn't drink much coffee, they didn't really know how to drink it, and if they did they added milk. Australians began to assume the American way of percolating coffee was the best way to make it.

'I used to go to cafés on my own in those days,' says Angela. 'It was something new. It was not tea, which was for most people associated with their parents. Coffee was a bit daring. You broke away, you had coffee. It's hard to believe that that was a reason. It was also associated with people from different cultures back then. It was putting yourself squarely with the Italians, when a lot of people were giving the Italians a hard time. And also, cafés were just interesting places. They were different to what we'd seen before. It was like where men all hung out together and elderly men too. That was unusual, seeing men sitting in cafés drinking coffee. Aussie men went to pubs and drank beer. That's what blokes did. Cafés seemed to have a club sort of feel to them, too. Especially the early ones, and ones around Lygon Street. Initially they weren't a place for women to go.' It's hard to believe the word 'daring' describes why people drank coffee or went to a café in the 1960s.

'Terrazzo floors, stainless steel benches,' recalls Angela. 'That was all new, like post-war furniture. It's everywhere now but it all sounded different. Its clinking and clanking. It was amazing and sharp. The noise of the steam, that's what I remember about the Legend, the clatter and noise, and washing up in the sink in the café rather than out the back, and putting glasses on those racks, and all new. It was hugely exciting. Lots of glass, and sun coming through glass, and the clinking and clattering. It was great. For me it was ambience.'

‘In tearooms things were a bit shrouded,’ says Angela. ‘Everything had a little doily. It was all confined and small, with curtains and carpets, and the kitchen was way out the back, and you never saw what was going on, and it was about gentility, whereas at the Legend people would yell, “What do want? You want a coffee?” and point, with bigger and more open gestures compared to what was the norm. The Legend encapsulated that and took it further by having arty furniture, and having art on the walls. I mean, that’s normal now but back then it wasn’t.’

‘I recall the older women I have spoken to talk about the formality of “going out”,’ I say. ‘They would go to a restaurant for a main meal, whereas at cafés you could have pasta or something else small. You didn’t have to sit down to a three-course meal.’

‘Or else have afternoon tea,’ says Angela, ‘with a choice of toasted cheese, toasted ham, and toasted Vegemite. The tearooms would have Welsh rarebit. The Hopetoun Tea Rooms had asparagus rolls and they had a kind of a rolled club sandwich called a pinwheel, which was pretty good. They still do. They had coffee but you went there for the pot of tea and scones. There was an amazing place called the Russell Collins, with lots of booths and carpet. Very dark.

‘The Legend had a very mixed clientele,’ says Angela. ‘There were a few artists but there were a lot of single Italian men and there were a lot of just all sorts of people, because it was such an open plan space that it wasn’t totally intimate. There was space. It wasn’t like when you went to a tearoom there would be someone sitting right on top of you. I think it had a very mixed clientele because it was in the city too. You had a “drop-in” sort of trade, and you had regulars. There weren’t really any Italian women but I think Italian women worked out the back as cooks. I was just working there to earn money to live, but I sort of liked the place. It was often a grind but it was interesting. I was just a waitress, I wasn’t terribly involved in either the clients or the running of the

business. The atmosphere and the ambience of the place were very fresh. A breath of fresh air, certainly for Melbourne, and it was good to be part of that. There was something about the whole. I think that was where I fell in love with the stainless steel and terrazzo. All these surfaces that were sensible and easy to keep clean.' She laughs at her comment. I don't blame her for falling in love with terrazzo and stainless steel.

'The Legend faced north, that was the thing,' Angela continues. 'There were well-placed glass windows, and it was actually one of the few spots that got sun, especially in the morning. I reckon that had a lot to do with it. It had sunbeams in it. Somehow I have this memory of sun.'

'And clatter,' says Angela. 'Clatter and "comings and goings", and movement and ... life. Pellegrini's was a similar thing in some ways. It had chrome and stainless steel. It wasn't the same aesthetic but a different way of serving food than the Anglo way. You had the basin and the washing happening in the front, and the squeezing of the juice, the cakes right under your nose, behind glass. All that was really different.'

'At the Legend these cakes started appearing,' Angela recalls. 'You had a choice of a vanilla cake or a chocolate cake, with cherries around the top, and when you cut through they were in three or four layers. It was pretty novel then to have coffee and cake. That's all we had on the counter under glass rings. You didn't get a lot of choice but I liked what there was. In some places they only had those little rectangular tea cakes in a packet. Now all cafés have these over the top seven-dollars-a-slice cakes.'

'And what was it like using this new espresso machine?' I ask.

'There's something about the noise. They were just so extraordinarily well-made, and they were wonderful to use. I loved pulling that lever down. It required all your force to physically make one cup of coffee, or two, you used to divide it, and it felt like you were doing something pretty real.'

It is that physical strength, I think, especially when you are applying force against something pressurised, as if you are personally squeezing the flavours out of the coffee yourself and creating that smell. ‘It’s something about working those machines,’ says Angela.

‘It’s still an art form, being able to do it properly. And the whole paraphernalia, the banging of the coffee grounds out, and I used to go click, click, click, to put the coffee in.’ Angela demonstrates the lever at the base of the ground coffee container. ‘I loved all that, and frothing the milk.’ I wonder if most customers relate these sounds to the perfecting of a decent coffee. I know I do.

‘I think even after the Second World War coffee, real coffee was still a luxury,’ reflects Angela. ‘I think a lot of people didn’t like coffee at first but they needed to drink it in order to be considered worldly. Some people wouldn’t drink coffee. My auntie Mollie wouldn’t drink coffee, it would have never passed her lips. “I’m not having any of that fangled, foreign stuff.” But Nescafé broke that taboo, and then they drank so much of it at home, it was unbelievable.’

‘Do you remember the expectations of customers when they walked into the Legend, considering it would have been a different experience to a tearoom or a pub?’ I ask. I recall recently sitting in a Starbucks café and noticing two elderly couples who I think live in the country and have come to Melbourne by bus to see a musical at Her Majesty’s. One of the men picks up a leaflet and reads about the different varieties of coffee Starbucks provides, and becomes very enthusiastic, discussing this with his friends and one of the female waiters. The fact of being able to discuss something new seems important. At the Legend in the 1950s and ’60s there must have been a similar excitement, and perhaps trepidation, too.

I ask Angela if the Legend was considered a bohemian experience.

‘The Legend wasn’t really a bohemian place,’ says Angela. ‘Bohemians hung out in much seedier places. Although the Legend had a connection to the art world, I suppose. It was like a gallery in a way. It wasn’t the seedy, sleazy, divey sort of stuff that bohemia was famous for. If you wanted to go to bohemian things you went to a room that was all painted black, or purple and gold, with a million people drunk, like a party, but the Legend was open and airy and spacious.’

I forgot to ask her about what it was like coming to live in the city after growing up in the country, but I wish I had, because she so clearly differentiates between the sound and rhythm of café and tearoom. The transition between the city and the country must have been a sensorial overload. But, Angela has a cosmopolitan awareness and inquisitiveness for the new and different, as did her parents.

‘I was so smug,’ says Angela. ‘My stepmother and father were a bit unusual in that way.’

Angela comes into the city to study art, not necessarily a respectable career at this time. She doesn’t dress up in city clothes of a hat and gloves; she doesn’t use the city in a formal way, like coming in to go shopping as a housewife, or as a girlfriend meeting her boyfriend. She wears black stockings and anything that aims to ‘shock everybody’, as art students do. I get this sense of Angela’s comfortableness with the city in the 1960s, outside the expected places that someone from the suburbs or country would normally frequent. Angela attends classes, works round the corner, goes for a stroll, and still does not have to leave the city. What fun to find new coffee places, to rest and ‘people watch’, and explore, the formality of working in a proper job as a business man, or shop assistant, or secretary, separate to her experience. Angela can decide where she wanders – not just to shows, department stores, but up lanes and to

little café-type places. I too am excited at the experience of anonymity, freedom and curiosity in the city. Angela is introduced to Pellegrini's.

'I was about fifteen and I'd come to Melbourne to go to art school,' says Angela, 'and my parents said, "You've got to come to this fantastic place and I'll show you where it is". We used to go there a lot. We'd have meals. And you'd order a cake. You'd have different ice creams you'd never had before. They had a restaurant out the back in those days too. It's funny. I've always liked it. I realised the kids have got it too, that they have that same feeling that I had about it.'

Angela seems to have spent a lot of time wandering or sitting in cafés on her own. When I grew up in the country I spent a lot of time exploring on my own, and I wonder if Angela's desire to explore comes from her early country experiences. There are the wide open spaces, unexplored river beds with pure clay creek facades, old mine shafts, and never-ending haystacks. There are long bike journeys into town for sixpence of mixed lollies, and mushrooming in vast open paddocks, and gathering sheep with your father whose life is also a solo existence of ploughing paddocks miles from home, weeks from the local pub or a trip to the city for groceries, and decades from a café. The seaside in summer is another solitary place if you are into exploring, with another world on the seabed, landscapes under wooden boats, long swims from the seashore, distant from people – another world to explore in silence. Not all this time is spent on my own, but there is something very solitary in the surrounding silence and the lack of people-watching.

'Just on my own,' says Angela. 'I was pretty solitary. I'd go off to films I couldn't understand a word of.' She laughs. 'And drink coffee.' Angela's final response to her bohemian lifestyle is this. 'How that was going to change the world, I don't know.'

‘What about going to pubs in the 1960s, especially with six o’clock closing?’ I ask.

‘There were pubs that artists went to but they were absolute sleazepits,’ says Angela. ‘They were sort of beatnik dives, but the Legend was something else.’ Angela mentions the parties people created once having to leave the pub so early, where they brought along flagons of red wine, because ‘there didn’t seem to be other places to go’.

‘That was the sort of arty crew,’ says Angela. ‘I don’t know what other people did. That was what art students got up to and they hung out with artists and musicians, and you had to make your own fun, and you had to know where to buy sly grog from, and we used to go to a lot of folk stuff as well.’

‘I remember back in the early 1970s going to some folk nights where only coffee was served,’ I say. ‘I’m sure it was Nescafé. It was passed around in mugs, a bit like what happens at La Mama Theatre in Carlton now during an interval. A friend recently mentioned the folk cafés of the 1970s around near Collins Street as dark, dark places open late at night where there was folk singing and coffee in mugs. She mainly remembered how dark they were.’

‘Coffee in your duffle coat,’ says Angela. We both laugh at the inference.

‘It had no espresso in it whatsoever,’ I say.

‘Sure, but it was coffee,’ says Angela.

It was interesting that instant coffee was preferred to tea in this case. The Bob Dylan in Greenwich Village feel, and the cheap dives, dark with hard wooden chairs and a place to boil water. Tea wouldn’t have implied bohemia.

‘Nowadays I go to cafés a fair bit,’ says Angela, ‘and I’m quite happy to go on my own. I don’t go there necessarily to talk.’ I want to know if having a coffee is the same as going to a café.

‘I think meeting at a café and having a coffee is a respectable, legitimate thing to be allowed to do with another person,’ says Angela. ‘To just go and have a cup of coffee. If you went and had a drink together it implies something a little bit more. Coffee has an element of propriety about it compared to having a drink. I think coffee became a predominant beverage and a focus for cafés because of the physical effect of it. It’s the caffeine. A really good cup of coffee does put a smile on my face, so I pick the places where that will happen. The way I use coffee is to have one really strong coffee in the morning after breakfast, and that gets me going, and then I try not to have any more for the day. I don’t like having a bad cup of coffee, because if I’ve had it then I’ve had my one cup.’ Angela laughs almost self-deprecatingly and I consider the important issues I have seen represented in Angela’s art work – world peace, the safety of children from child abuse and domestic violence, saving the environment – and here we are in her studio kitchen discussing the taste of coffee and how important it is to her from the mere point of view of pleasure.

‘I have my favourite places. I think I enjoy people watching,’ says Angela. ‘I enjoy being around coffee, and all the paraphernalia, even if I don’t drink it. I just like being around all those smells, including the smells of the cakes that go with the coffee and the whole environment.’

‘Are there other public places where you feel happy just sitting,’ I ask, ‘or does a café give you licence to just be in a public place?’

‘I guess you could in a pub but I don’t like the smells,’ says Angela. ‘I guess there are places but I tend to feel comfortable in a café. I can go and sit and read a book or something, but I don’t do that terribly often. I might go and write a letter. I think the people who run coffee lounges [Angela uses a 1950s name for a particular kind of café] value having people that return, and there’s something about coming back to the same

place. Sometimes I get concerned with people who totally dominate a whole café, like using mobile phones, taking up air space, but I'm fairly friendly. If someone needs a table for two and I'm sitting on it, I'll move.'

The pork casserole hasn't even hit the table, the wine is not yet opened and I'm starting to rave about the opening of coffee houses in England in the 1650s while Angela is still frying potatoes to complement the casserole, and probably she has been working all day in her studio. I wonder why it seems easier for me to discuss the coffee houses in England in the 1650s than to look back at the first cafés of the 1960s in Melbourne. I wonder if it is me dealing with first-hand oral history, or if I'm more comfortable reading archival texts. Maybe I'm trying to analyse too much about what is being said, rather than waiting and chewing it over later. The casserole smells good.

If I asked a sober working man from the 1650s in England what he thought about the coffee houses, he might talk about the terrible grains that stay in his mouth while drinking coffee and the very bitter taste but 'God it feels good'; he might tell me about the long wooden benches he sits on and about who sits next to him, about the large coffee pot taken around the tables and poured from 'If you have paid your penny', and about the thick mug that he drinks from. And when he goes drinking ale he cannot remember whether he stands or sits, who he speaks to, and why he gets another black eye – yet he still may have talked about art and politics, of a kind. But when he talks about the coffee house he might just be able to tell me about the conversations he has overheard, and how if you get too rowdy or start a fight you have to leave, and how he sometimes goes to sit and listen; he might talk about the company at the coffee houses

where you can sit at a table with anyone from a tanner to a poet, and people talk a lot about many things, sometimes it is difficult to understand what they are saying and other times they won't give up till you understand. 'I could stay up all night listening, and sometimes I do and the next day I can remember everything that was talked about.' He might talk about finding a newspaper there he can read or someone else reading aloud so everyone can hear, or just listening to someone discuss poetry or politics, often interjecting with his own points of view. He might laugh so much he falls off his chair, he might decide to go into business and set up shop in a corner of one of the coffee houses, he might learn to write, he might go home sober to his wife, his wife may be happy knowing she will not be beaten, he might be able to labour all day without falling into a ditch in a drunken stupor. Later he might talk to his wife about what he has seen and heard and spoken about. But she would not have been allowed in the coffee house, and by petition she could not drink coffee for fear of her reproductive system not working.

Would he be able to tell me how lucid discussion was changing his society, and how sobriety was replacing daily drunkenness, and how even though prostitution and drinking alcohol still happened in the coffee houses, people were no longer as drunk.

'I don't just start chatting to anybody and everybody,' says Angela as we tuck into the casserole, the tangy flavours of the fruit pieces permeating the meat, 'but occasionally that will happen and sometimes it's really nice to go in and have someone, a waiter or someone who knows you, so there's a little bit of acknowledgment. I don't have a relationship like that with any particular pub.' But many men do. They get to know the

managers and staff, and the people who go. I have a brother who walks into a pub not knowing anyone and is soon chatting to people as if he sees them every night. I don't have that skill, or more to the point that sense of location, that space where it feels okay to bridge the gap of conversation with strangers at a bar. I envy this kind of socialising, yet the conversation often leads to lots of getting drunk rather than the intimate experiencing of the company.

'There is probably certain etiquette in a café,' says Angela, 'but half the time I don't know what it is. I think I have the right to be there, and feel I'm probably supposed to be much younger, but I think, "Well, I don't care, I'm interested in what goes on in here". Recently I went back to the Hopetoun Tea Rooms and the waitress was speaking too loudly and I thought, "She can't speak so loud in here". Come on. It's twenty years later and gentility is not quite what it used to be.' Angela laughs, maybe because in the past she railed against gentility for its own sake, and now seeing a change in established tearoom etiquette makes her indignant.

'In relation to coffee I don't know that there is etiquette,' says Angela 'Maybe that's what makes it a bit daring and that it's more the bohemian aspect of it, isn't it? I don't know what makes it wild and free. Coffee doesn't hold any significance for me. It doesn't send me back to some family ritual. It's just something I like to do. I'm happy to do it on my own. I use it to give me a lift. I savour it. But I don't do it very often. It was the same with my stepmother. She did it every day in the morning, and if visitors came on a Sunday she'd make real brewed coffee, which was unusual then. Most people would have served Nescafé, but she'd have real whipped cream. That was like "real food", and I think that did affect me. I don't even think of coffee as exotic.' Angela laughs. 'No. No. Necessity. I don't think it's exotic at all. I think it's no more exotic than anything we get from ... tea is just as exotic.'

‘We have access to just about everything here,’ says Angela, mopping up the sweet sour gravy with the fried potatoes. ‘Don’t we? We’re so lucky really. I don’t know what I would call exotic now.’

‘Exotic to me,’ I say, ‘means something brought by merchants.’

‘Coming from afar,’ says Angela.

‘Finding something different at a market,’ I say, ‘but that’s not the case for coffee these days.’ Then I recall recently going to a market in Footscray, and coming across small plastic containers of coffee mixed with different herbs and spices at an African stall. I buy some Spiced Somali Coffee, Djima coffee mixed with ginger, cassia, cloves, nutmeg, and cardamom. It smells delicious, and exotic.

‘No, coffee is a luxury,’ says Angela. ‘I think. It’s not a necessity, even though I just said it was.’ She laughs wildly.

‘It’s one of life’s luxuries,’ she says. ‘But I’ll go without a lot of other things before I go without coffee.’

For me the term ‘exotic’ denotes something rare and maybe not expensive, but most of all coming from another culture. When I think ‘exotic’ I think ‘merchant’. The Macquarie Dictionary defines ‘exotic’ as ‘of foreign origin or character; not native, introduced from abroad, but not fully naturalised or acclimatised; strikingly unusual or colourful in appearance of effect; strange’. ‘Exotic’ comes from the Greek word for ‘foreign’, but we have taken it to mean ‘strange’ and ‘unusual’, the appeal of ‘the other’. I still say mangoes are exotic and they come from Queensland. The word ‘merchant’ sounds very antiquated, and is rarely heard today, yet I wonder about its meaning. It’s a

very colourful word that conjures the aura of the exotic, of haggling in a market stall for something from somewhere across the sea. The Macquarie Dictionary defines a ‘merchant’ as ‘a wholesaler, one who buys and sells commodities for profit, a shopkeeper’. One who buys and sells commodities does not really have the resonance of the term ‘merchant’, which seems to make the sought-after commodity more desirable. And ‘commodity’ is a rather bland term, which does not seem to capture the mystique that most people hanker for when they go shopping for luxuries, for the exotic. Something from another land, something that has crossed the waters or the desert, something that has been discovered in a strange bazaar or market, like a Persian rug, pure silk from Laos, coffee from Aden, tea from Sri Lanka. But now these luxuries are considered just commodities. The Macquarie Dictionary defines ‘commodity’ as ‘an article of trade or commerce, a quantity of goods. It is also a thing that is of use or of advantage’. I do not think when we go shopping we just think in terms of ‘use’ or ‘advantage’. I think there is more at stake. Maybe when buying a Volvo from Sweden, but what about a Tamagotchi from Japan, or coffee from Brazil – are they just about use or advantage? The mystique has gone, the savouring of delight is waning, the connections, once made by a merchant, are being lost. These days, however, for commodities as well as luxuries, we do not have to go ‘across the sea to another far land’ to find the wares of a merchant. Now there is coffee from Queensland or chardonnay from Anakie, only a few miles from Melbourne. Can we still consider these products exotic and luxuries, when they are produced on our own doorstep? When coffee arrives in the Levant in the eleventh century, it is considered exotic; when coffee first arrives in England in the mid-seventeenth century it is considered exotic.

The American journalist Stewart Lee Allen writes about the history of coffee by physically following the historical path of its adoption, from its first use in Ethiopia to

its later cultivation in Aden. From the Levant Allen heads to Europe and then back to America. His travels through Ethiopia to Aden in the late 1990s are fraught with civil war, pirates and bandits. His journey reads like a Tom Sawyer adventure written by a ‘gonzo journalist’. In *the devil’s cup* [sic] (2000), he gives a quintessential description of an exotic experience. It is exotic because at some time we as Westerners have been fed a certain concept of the ‘exotic’. Allen writes about how the French in the 1670s – who are not then interested in drinking coffee, although they have known about it for some time – are enticed to try it a fashion statement.

The Turkish Ottomans, intending to invade Vienna and wanting France not to interfere, sent an ambassador Soliman Aga to seduce Louis XIV. Allen writes that ‘[for] six months the Turk Soliman Aga invited Paris’s crème-de-la-crème, one by one, up to his apartment to chat and, in the Turkish tradition, share coffee’ (2000: 145). Coffee became too exotic to resist. The seduction happened like this:

Guests were received in chambers hung with priceless Turkish carpets. Before taking coffee, they were washed with rosewater. Then their heads were enclosed in a silk tent under which myrrh was burned to perfume their faces. Finally an African ‘kahvedjibachi’ in gorgeous costume would roast, pound, and brew the mysterious “black wine” and, according to Isaac D’Israeli, ‘on bended knee serve the choicest mocha … poured out in saucers of gold and silver, placed on embroidered silk dollies fringed with gold bouillon’ (Allen, 2000: 145).

Louis XIV eventually did see the ambassador but only at Versailles, where Louis was dressed in a robe that would now cost thirty million American dollars. The reception hall was decked out with silver furniture and hundreds of courtiers. In contrast, Aga had

dressed simply, and had few servants but, did have his very expensive coffee service with him, of ‘solid gold “ibriks”, diamond-studded “zarfs”, rarely seen Chinese porcelain’ (145). Soloman Aga won, and the coffee fashion statement became Turkish décor, Nubian slaves dressed in Arabic duds serving mocha while ‘anybody who was anybody’ would laze around sipping the ‘black wine’ (145).

According to Allen, three years after the siege of Vienna, the popularity of coffee waning in France, a Sicilian named Francesco Procopio – knowing the fashion statement to be still important – opened Café Procope, which is described thus: ‘It had marble tables and mirrors and chandeliers. There were waiters in powdered wigs. There were Turkish sherbets and liquors’ (146). Allen calls it ‘a Disneyfied version of a nobleman’s coffee salon’ (146). Voltaire, Napoleon, Rousseau were some of the regulars, and this café lasted ‘on and off’ for three hundred years, and became a model for future French cafés for its grand surroundings (146). Perhaps the notion of coffee as exotic stems from the Turkish style of making coffee, with all its accoutrements.

One of my favourite exotic stories about coffee is by Claudia Roden (1978), who was born and brought up in Cairo, is now based in England, and writes about the food of the Middle East. In *Coffee* (1978), Roden relates her very early experience of coffee:

I have loved coffee ever since, as young children in Cairo, we waited outside my parents’ bedroom door for signs of their awakening. When the shadows on the frosted glass began to move, a signal and an invitation to come in, we pounced and raced for the coveted places in the large double bed where we waited for the coffee ritual to start. Maria, our Yugoslav nanny and housekeeper, brought in a large brass tray ornately engraved in praise of Allah, on which were placed five small cups in delicate bone China with gold arabesques near the rim. A glass of water held a piece of ice chipped from the block in the ice box, and was scented

with a drop of orange flower water. A small plate carried a pile of oriental petits fours filled with dates, pistachios or ground almonds. My father poured out the coffee from two small copper 'kanakas' (or 'ibriks' as they are called in Turkish) with much ceremony, carefully shaking his hand so as to drop a little of the much prized froth in each cup. We passed the water around, then drank the syrupy black brew in little sips and with much reverence (1987: 15).

These stories make me think about my own initial reveries of coffee as exotic. My stories have an Italian influence, and are of espresso, and cappuccino, served by old Italian baristas, and hissing machines and clanging of cups, and the baristas singing out across the café. And they are of croissants with ham and cheese, and crème caramels, and tiramisu. My stories are also of people sitting at tables talking.

These days the exotic objectification of 'the other' calls into question our understanding of the real stories of other cultures. In the early twenty-first century an instant coffee television advertisement shows a white Australian woman selecting coffee from a supermarket shelf. A tall black man stands alongside her. The woman sidles up to the black man, and assumes he comes from Africa, where she assumes her coffee comes from. She wonders if perhaps the coffee might come from where he comes from. 'What Shropshire?' he replies, in a very East London accent. The woman's exotic reverie is crushed, her desire for the exotic, manifest in her desire for coffee, is exposed. The woman's concept of the exotic is confronted by the daily reality of a man who comes from Shropshire. In a multi-cultural society, reality and reverie are constantly re-evaluated and renegotiated. The woman is left with just the coffee. Her desire can still be experienced in the coffee, but not in her dreams.

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‘It’s a drug,’ says Angela, half-mocking as she places a big bowl of fruit salad on the table. She talks about the caffeine hit in the morning that she needs. But what then of the other properties of coffee she loves, like smell and taste, the paraphernalia, the ritual, and social gestures that come with drinking it?

‘I think we are all hugely addicted,’ says Angela, laughing again. But she doesn’t believe she is part of a coffee culture.

‘I kind of think coffee culture is about people who spend hours and hours sitting in Brunswick Street or somewhere, for days on end,’ says Angela. ‘I don’t do that. I’d be more likely to go for a meeting or something, then to a place like that. I think it’s leisurely. Yes, it’s kinda combined with shopping and people watching, and leisure, all tied into one, isn’t it? You say you’re going to have a cup of coffee but really it’s a euphemism for doing a whole lot of things. You mightn’t even have a coffee, but you’re going somewhere where all that’s happening around you, all those things that aren’t really basic necessities. You’re not going to the supermarket; you’re going where there are book shops and clothes shops.’

I’m sure Angela can tell me more about what has informed the present preoccupation with coffee because of her encounters with coffee in the 1960s and because of the way she so freely negotiated the city as an art student. Angela’s experience with cafés and Melbourne prior to that time might tell me more about an addictiveness of experience, other than the physical addictive properties of coffee.

‘So what does a café represent to you Angela?’ I ask. Angela stops eating and bends her head sideways, her spoon suspended in mid-air.

‘You go there, I mean you could stay at home and have a cup of coffee,’ says Angela, ‘but it’s not the same as sitting in a space with people who are coming and going. All the sort of noise and sounds, and you sort of people watch. You’re free to just

be with people. I guess it puts a little bit more interest in or excitement in your day but it's in a controlled environment. Why do human beings want to be together? It's something about wanting to congregate, isn't it? Do something together; even if you're doing it singly.' We go back to eating our fruit salad in silence.

'You mightn't be doing very much but, when I go to the Preston Market,' says Angela, 'and sit down and have a cup of coffee, because there's so few tables and chairs where you get the good coffee, quite often you are sharing a table. You do talk because it's the market, people are a bit more sociable, and that's good. I've just started up conversations, and that's partly aided by the coffee, I'm sure, which makes you feel chatty, and you know that they're only going to sit there for a few minutes. They're not going to be boring you for weeks or something. You haven't invited them into your life. You're just sharing a cup of coffee. There's a duration to it.' I munch over large pieces of fruit and think about the sense of duration.

We have a small espresso from Angela's prized possession, a stove-top Bialetti, and it is only daring because we know we won't sleep if we drink coffee at this time of night. I take my leave, wishing I had drunk more wine to get the real grit on coffee encounters and social change in the 1960s. Angela mentions that the following day her daughter is coming down from Queensland and she's demanding they go to Pellegrini's for coffee.

'It's the third generation that does that,' says Angela. 'For my whole family, three generations anyway, if we want to ground ourselves, we go to Pellegrini's. That's our...'

I was going to say Mecca or mocha.

'I don't mean we do it all together. We sometimes do, but quite often ... that place ... like my parents took me there, and then I took my kids there and now they go

there. And that's how you feel everything's all right. I think that I'd have a nervous breakdown if that place changed. I think a lot of Melbourne would too. It's not a ritual that we do on particular occasions or at a particular time but sometimes it's just really nice to go there. To know that it's there. To know that you are going to get exactly the same. It's a McDonalds thing in one way, except the food's a lot better.'

I'm trying to get a picture of all the stories from the 1950s. The story of Betty heading into the city with her children to have lunch and shop, of Norma nursing at the Royal Women's and going out to Italian cafés as something new, having spent the day with patients who are from another country and not being able to speak English, of Angela, an art student serving cups of tea and pinwheel sandwiches at the Hopetoun Tea Rooms, to women who had come to the city with their daughters to try on their wedding outfits, then Angela later waitressing at the Legend café where she would wear a bright orange dress, and see the Italian men come in and order a coffee and stand at the counter, drink it fairly quickly and walk away, where noise rang across the space of clanking cutlery being washed in front of the customers, and voices yelling orders for customers, of then this café life arising ... at a time when marriage started to be questioned, when even spending time with your parents and their generation was questioned, when the way you were supposed to be dressed was questioned, and then this new thing happening in the city which everyone questioned – conservative people in a fearful way, the bohemians or the university students, the youth in a 'what happens here, this looks great' way. And the council questioned it in a fearful way. The sounds of change was coming, and like the period before the French revolution, when the voices were to be heard in the cafés,

Melbourne was beginning to hear itself in the cafés, to resonate a different life style, a resonance across the space of cutlery clinking, and cups clanking and spurious steam emanating from a shiny silver machine, and coffee spurting, and milk frothing, and a new and different language emanating from people's lips, ciao belle, I love you, I love eating and drinking and thinking and smelling and tasting the dark olives, and the green pasta of pesto and the runniness of olive oil, and the dark smell of coffee, and the tangy taste of gelatos, at any time of day, not when there is a formal gathering, but when you decide, with whom and how. How innovative to be out there and watching and you didn't have to be anyone. No white gloves and hats and suspender belts and high heels, just fingers and hands and smiles and tongues to taste and hair anyway you wanted and dress anyway you wanted. The café, a meeting place for Italian men, or 'migrants', a place similar to home. But for the Anglo Australians there was a need and desire, and curiosity for such an informal urban space. There seemed to be a collision of both cultures, a café was a space that both cultures identified with, those in transition, either in rejection of the dominant culture or as migrants replicating the experiences they left behind. The café serviced both cultures. What was it that happened at the same time? Dislocated migrants, home sick, lonely and isolated. And what? Dislocated Anglo Australians, restless, isolated, and lonely, wanting something new, wanting to move away from what they called a restricting life style that wasn't emotionally, and intellectually satisfying.

At the Ian Potter gallery at Federation Square I see a small coffee table made by the sculptor Clem Meadmore, 1958-5, in iron and glass. The sign reads, 'This coffee table

presents an impeccable geometric structure of triangles and pyramids welded within a cubic space' (JP). A square of glass rests on top to form the table. From a distance only the metal structure is seen. It is a part of a small retrospective of 1950s furniture in 2003. Alongside the table is other 1950s lounge furniture, including a lounge sofa, pitched at the level for watching television, a 'contour settee' by Grant Featherston (1953). 'Contour comfort'. I glance out of the window and facing me is a similar triangular metal structure of Clem Meadmore's coffee table. It's the external façade of the gallery, of triangular panels with metal borders, of 'geometric structure of triangles and pyramids welded within a cubic space', some panels are glass, like Meadmore's coffee table of 1958-59. At the base of these triangular structures, of Melbourne's newest art complex of fine art to 'moving image' of 2003 are scattered cafés of various cultural influence, mostly licensed and mostly displaying their brand of coffee.

Chapter six

A café of two cities

The researcher learns that people are never only (nor even a close approximation to) any particular set of isolated theoretical notions, categories, or terms. They are people in all their complexity. They are people living storied lives on storied landscapes.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000: 145)

I am interested in the meaning people attach to coffee. For me coffee and going to cafés is endowed with many meanings, related to being with people, or to sitting alone, in public. There is also a feeling of celebration and remembrance, and it also tastes good. Drinking coffee and going to cafés was not an Australian custom and I look towards Europe to understand more of the custom. I had heard many times about how migrants coming to Melbourne in the 1950s found Melbourne so desolate and could not find cafés and meeting places as they did in Europe. This is why I go to see Erika. Erika comes from Budapest, where she loved to go out for coffee. Budapest has a long history of coffee houses and coffee drinking. I want to talk to Erika about how she drank coffee in Hungary, and what it was like coming to Australia in the 1950s.

Erika is 75 years old. She invites me to her flat in Caulfield for dinner with her daughter Judith and granddaughter Laura. We have chicken broth with vegetables and very small pasta pieces. It is very tasty and soothing, no wonder this soup is known for

its healing properties. I eat it with oodles of fresh rye bread spread thickly with enough butter to make me feel ill. Erika lives quite modestly, on the second floor of a block of flats in Caulfield, and Judith lives nearby. Erika's favourite leisure activity is playing bridge, which she is very good at it. She often cooks for Judith and looks after her granddaughter Laura. Erika is quite elderly, but very feisty and very independent.

Tonight we sit alongside each other in Erika's big armchairs, our tummies full, Judith and Laura leave us to talk. We then have coffee. We both have a small white coffee with sugar. I only have an hour to ask questions before Erika's favourite television program comes on. But she's happy to answer questions about her past. Erika has also been interviewed by the Holocaust Museum, which would have been more confronting than asking about her love of coffee and going to cafés. Her thick white hair offsets her olive complexion, and she speaks in a strong low voice. Her native Hungarian and Yiddish give a different syntax and pronunciation to her Australian speech. Because I know her well I hardly recognise it, and it is only when transcribing the tapes I notice the differing speech patterns. I choose not to record her exact syntax and pronunciation, as it would make her appear awkward and unknowing, and I would like to think that when someone reads her words they see a person who has gained confidence through her life choices.

Erika is born in Hungary in 1927. She is raised in Budapest, in the old part of the city called Pest, which is also the heart of the city, and every second shop is a café. During the Second World War she is 12 to 18 years old, an age to need constant protection, but she is placed in a concentration camp with her mother. After the war Erika trains to be a nurse for about a year and a half, but for some reason does not continue. She then marries and has a daughter. This in itself is a story to find out about. Erika goes to coffee shops in Budapest a lot. When her daughter Judith is little, Erika

goes for coffee every morning. Judith now talks about the almost palatial coffee houses in Hungary and I discover Hungarians really took to coffee in a big way.

‘You know in Budapest nearly every second building is a coffee shop,’ says Erika. ‘We used to live near Nepszabadsag Utca. They called it People’s Liberation Street after the Communists arrived, and then they renamed it Andrassy. It was named after a hero a hundred years before. I used to take my daughter there every morning. I used to meet my friends at ten o’clock in this coffee lounge, and we’d have a cup of coffee and a cake. I was skinny at that time and I could afford to eat anything.’ Erika emphasises the fact that they went every single morning. ‘Because I didn’t work when my daughter was little,’ she says. Later she tells me how this all changed when she arrived in Australia.

‘In Hungary we also drank coffee at home,’ says Erika. ‘At breakfast we used to have a hot chocolate or a coffee but in a very big cup. We usually drank coffee two to three times every day. If we weren’t going out, or if someone came to the house we always had coffee. We had a big espresso maker and a smaller one. It depended on how many people, but we only drank it in a little cup. The espresso machine was a type of pot where you put the water in one chamber, and put the coffee in another, and you placed it on the stove. They sold it with little cups you put under the spout. It smelt so good.

‘I think coffee in Hungary came from Brazil. And it was very expensive. It was a luxury,’ says Erika, ‘especially at that time because after the war Hungary was really in a bad way. But I think everybody, if nothing else, would drink coffee. They would rather starve than go without their coffee. I drank my coffee very, very strong. Black coffee with no milk. I used to have just a little bit of sugar in the small black coffee, but sometimes I didn’t even put sugar in it. I never drank coffee with milk in Budapest but I

got used to the milk here in Australia. Hungarians drank coffee without milk and very strong. I don't like strong black coffee any more. The last time I went back to Budapest they had cappuccino, but the first time I went back to Budapest they only served black coffee ... and very strong in a little cup. By that time I got used to drinking it with milk, and I asked them to put more water and a bit of milk in my coffee, they looked at me like I was crazy.

'Everyone used to go to cafés,' says Erika. 'It didn't matter whether you were rich or poor. Even those who were interested in drinking alcohol, because they put a bit of rum in their coffee and every little café sold any kind of alcohol. Not like here. When we came here you could only get coffee, and even now you still need a licence to sell alcohol. No one drank tea and they still don't.'

We translate the Hungarian word for 'café'.

'In English it is "coffee house",' says Erika. 'The large places in Pest were also called coffee houses and they served food as well. The little ones also served food too. Some served only sandwiches and cake or other things like a hot lunch or dinner.'

Sitting in Erika's living room in Caulfield on a Friday evening I reflect upon what she is telling me. I have been given a book by two social scientists that questions how we as researchers interpret 'lived experience', that is, 'lives and how they are lived' (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000: xxii). The authors' claim is that 'people are never only (nor even a close approximation to) any particular set of isolated theoretical notions, categories, or terms. They are people in all their complexity. They are people living storied lives on storied landscapes' (145). The authors state that both we as researchers and the people we interview 'live and tell many stories' (147) and that we are all characters with 'multiple plotlines'. We need to acknowledge what is said and unsaid both by ourselves as researchers and by the people we are interviewing (147).

I think of Erika with multiple stories and multiple plotlines. I know Erika has spent time in a concentration camp, and has experienced the turbulent post-war times in Hungary, including the October Uprising of 1956, when she is 29 and her daughter six. My only personal reference to such major upheaval from history that has had any direct effect on my life growing up in Australia is my father's experience of being involved in the Second World War, and telling me his war-time stories – and, if you know him well, his living with the trauma of that experience. I don't ask Erika about these turbulent times unless she brings them up. I don't pressure her about other political issues about Hungary nor about her terrible experiences during the Second World War. I choose to ask questions about the history that is her experience of coffee, knowing the other histories are a part of this in some way. I also don't want to upset Erika, and I don't know what to do with what she will say or whether it may be disturbing to her. Her stories are tied in with the major history of her country as well as her personal experience of that history. Erika also loves drinking coffee and going to cafés. I too like drinking coffee and going to cafés. I too have drunk coffee in Hungary.

Hungary itself is multi-storied, has multi-histories, and at this moment I want to focus on Hungary's history of coffee that must have informed Erika's experience. The Hungarian historian John Lukacs (1988) writes about the history of coffee houses in Budapest. Although Lukacs' main historical focus is the 1900s, his research gives me a good background to coffee-drinking customs in this city. Lukacs emphasises that the history of coffee houses in Budapest was different to other major European cities. He states that 'the Turkish habit of coffee-drinking came suddenly to Vienna and Paris at

the end of the seventeenth century, [but] in Hungary it had come more than a century before' (148). Even if coffee arrived earlier than in other major European capitals, there must have been other reasons for Budapest to have maintained its staunch interest over those following five hundred years. England's initial interest in coffee and coffee houses in the 1650s, for example, receded after less than one century, but Budapest remained true to the coffee-house culture and to coffee for more than five hundred years.

According to Lukacs, European coffee-house culture peaked in the early 1900s. And it appears Budapest's coffee-house culture was no exception: the city's coffee houses grew to 600 at this time. It is the flavour of the coffee culture in Budapest that Lukacs emphasises. In the early 1900s coffee houses became synonymous with the rise in literacy and reading newspapers, and also a focus for literary and artistic pursuits. Lukacs describes how Budapest was 'a very class-conscious society' at the turn of the nineteenth century and 'intellectual achievement of all kinds' (146) became highly regarded; not only was intellectual achievement encouraged at schools and at home but Lukacs states that it also 'came from the very atmosphere of the city' (147). I like this statement – it says so much about the culture of the society and its urban lifestyle. The atmosphere of Budapest was fed by an avid interest in reading and writing, and the 'creativity of gifted amateurs' (148). It seems that not only university education was important, but also that coffee houses were an adjunct to one's education, and places which became the focus of intellectual life (148). Lukacs connects literary aspiration with coffee house culture, and he compares the Hungarian and Italian experience. In Italy, for example, an important eighteenth century literary journal was called *Il Café* (149). I think Lukacs also makes this literary connection as the 1900s in Budapest was a

time when there was increased literacy and interest in reading newspapers, especially in coffee houses.

Coffee houses were outgrowing restaurants and taverns, spreading throughout new places and new districts of the city. According to Lukacs ‘[what] they offered (or equally important, represented) had become attractive and available to people whose social lives had previously concentrated in other kinds of public places, taverns, and pubs’ (149). Coffee houses catered for a variety of tastes, from respectable places for families which were relatively inexpensive, to ‘a neighbourhood meeting place for relaxation and conviviality’ (149), often opening 24 hours a day all year, to a place that served ‘a great variety of dishes, every hour of the day’ (150). Some were famous as late night or early dawn venues, but ‘there was no dancing in the coffee houses of Budapest’ (149-50).

On the other hand one could have just a cup of coffee and a glass of water and have access to lots of reading material, just like in today’s cafés. The customs of ‘sending and receiving messages and letters’ (150), as well as providing ‘free pen, paper and ink’ again reminds me of similar customs in English coffee houses of the late 1600s. Lukacs sees the Hungarian coffee house as a club rather than a pub (150). The coffee house became a place for relaxation and intellectual discourse, and also where journalists could write, which was much encouraged by head waiters issuing long sheets of paper (151). Around the 1900s the nature of the coffee house changed to ‘more spacious establishments whose furniture and décor, including large gilt mirrors and giant chandeliers, were luxurious’ (151). These are the cafés where I was taken by Judith in the late 1980s, when I visited her in Budapest. I recall the sense of space, the chandeliers, the long counters with a vast variety of cakes and pastries. This style though was not common. Lukacs states that this more recent golden era of the coffee

house from the 1900s only lasted until about 1940 (148). I think the other, more tortuous history that occurred in these streets from that time may have disrupted this urban lifestyle. This is where the notion of a place and people having ‘multi-stories’ becomes relevant.

Lukacs even mentions the street where Erika would take her daughter to coffee in the 1950s:

Half a mile from the [Café] New-York there were at least five famous coffee houses along a four-block stretch of Andrassy Avenue alone, frequented by writers and artists: the Japan (mostly architects, sculptors, painters), the Hall of Arts (painters), the Opera, the Dreschler and the Abbazia, whose clientele was a steady mix of bourgeois and journalists (151).

These are but a few in the list cited by Lukacs. Erika herself now cannot remember the names.

Erika has been a part of this history of coffee houses in Hungary and she brings this story with her when she comes to Australia as a lived history. Erika may not know the history of coffee houses in Budapest, nor have seen journalists thrashing out their stories on large pieces of white paper in the early 1920s or '30s, but she has been part of the lived history that was accessible for the price of a coffee and perhaps a small meal. Unknowingly, she has other more pressing concerns to do with post-war trauma, family, work and migration that stop her placing any importance in these experiences. I think of the everyday rituals, rituals that are from somewhere else that Erika carries with her. Erika explains a coffee substitute her mother would serve her when she was very young.

‘It was not coffee, something like chicory,’ says Erika. ‘It was in the shape of a log. I remember it was long and round about 5 cm thick and about 20 cm long. It was dry but not very hard, and you would slice a piece off, and my mother would boil it up in a pot, and that’s what we had for breakfast, or hot chocolate, or milk. But we never drank coffee or tea. At school we always got milk.

‘I remember a very bad experience with my mother and the morning coffee. I was already in high school and my mother was so angry because she found out that when she wasn’t looking I always threw the coffee in the sink. And she brought the coffee to school. I was so embarrassed. She said I didn’t have breakfast because she saw the coffee in the sink, so she made me drink it in front of the other kids. I’ll never forget that,’ says Erika.

I recall Erika telling me it was very important straight after the war that you made sure you had coffee in your cupboard for visitors. Even if there was nothing else, you could offer anyone who called to your home a coffee. I am intrigued at the status of coffee when I think how expensive it must have been compared to more accessible and necessary foodstuffs. But then considering what coffee had come to mean in Budapest, its relationship literary and artistic pursuits, to pursuits of the mind, to reading newspapers as the main form of literacy, and to a lifestyle of meeting people and dialogue, offering coffee to a visitor would have been loaded with significance.

Erika came out to Australia from Budapest in 1958. She arrives at Station Pier and remembers the date – and the day – vividly.

‘It was cold,’ she says. ‘I can recall someone telling me it was suggested to the migrants they could discard their thick fur coats as they wouldn’t need them in Australia. Some even threw them overboard, but that day of April 18 in Melbourne, it

was very cold.' Erika is 31 years old, her daughter Judith is eight. Station Pier is such an austere place, especially when the cold winds blow off the sea.

'I brought to Australia a very small espresso machine to make coffee,' says Erika, 'and it was enough for three people. It was so strong you only needed a small cup. I used to have a set of little cups I also brought to Australia that we drank the coffee with, but I don't know what happened to them. But when we came to Melbourne in 1958 there was hardly any coffee here.' I don't know if Erika is saying no one she knew drank coffee, or if she couldn't buy coffee, or if there weren't any cafés to have a coffee, or if no-one was interested in drinking coffee. Maybe all of these.

'I can't tell you anything about drinking coffee because I didn't have the time and the money to go to places like that when we came to Australia,' says Erika. Her sisters Marta and Judy also came to Australia. Marta came two years before in 1956, and Judy in 1957. 'They were very poor and didn't have time to have a coffee.' I naively say that she must have been annoyed that there were no coffee shops.

'And not only that, it was hard,' says Erika, sitting higher up in her lounge chair and quickly gesticulating with her hands, 'It was a hard life. I couldn't speak English. My husband was able to speak it because he lived in America for twenty years, so he was able to get a job straight away as a printer. I couldn't get a job for a year and a half because I didn't have any trade and I couldn't speak English. It was a hard time. I never even thought about going for a coffee much. I was so disappointed when we came to Melbourne. First we lived in Brunswick. We used to rent a little bungalow. It was winter. It was so cold and we only had a little kerosene heater. It was a hard time.'

Erika repeats how difficult it was when she arrived, and in answer to my questions she reiterates the hardships she experienced. When I later speak to her daughter to ask whether my questions are too superficial considering Erika's difficult

experiences, Judith tells me it is good for her mother to be asked about things other than the hardships, which she says is all she passed on to her, not the other incidental stories about her mother's life, such as what she had for breakfast, and how Erika's mother had embarrassed her by bringing her coffee to school when she had noticed Erika hadn't drunk hers for breakfast. Judith longs to know more of her mother's simple daily experience.

'Then we came to Caulfield where we rented a little self-contained one bedroom flat,' says Erika, more excited now. 'That was our first reasonable home. What you can call 'home' because the bungalow was only a room and a little kitchen and we had to use the owner's bathroom. It was so hard I thought I would never get through it.'

'Were there any places to go for coffee?' I ask. I imagine Erika must have missed the more urban lifestyle of Budapest and meeting her friends to talk about the experiences she was going through. Surely that is what helped her in Budapest when the post war-city was devastated. In Australia, though, Erika stayed at home to drink coffee.

'I used to make coffee at home,' says Erika, 'and I started getting used to instant coffee. I had never seen it before, and I didn't know how people could drink such a thing,' she says. 'I think that in Acland Street there was a Hungarian restaurant, and a place in Fitzroy Street. I never went there. There were the Italians you see, in Brunswick and Carlton. That was an Italian place. I'm sure you could have got a coffee there because the Italians drank coffee.' But Erika never goes there. Is it because she has to deal with another language and another culture when she still cannot find her feet in English-speaking Australia? I wonder what Erika thought when she saw only men occupying cafés, if she would then recall spending time with her friends in Budapest. Her daughter later tells me Erika she hated going anywhere if she didn't understand the language.

It hasn't crossed my mind before that being from another culture doesn't make it easier to mix with other cultures. I know what it is like to pass a café when they are grinding coffee and the aroma is so wildly appealing it is hard to walk by without even a glance, let alone without stopping. In the early 1990s I once walked into a men's only café in Footscray simply because of the smell and my need for a coffee and there was nowhere else to go. Of course, I was not a migrant myself who had already endured discrimination, and I was willing to risk refusal. I ask Erika what Acland Street was like in the 1950s and '60s.

'Acland Street was not like it is now. Actually we used to go there just to walk and because we'd meet Hungarian people there. We tried to meet other Hungarians because of the language problem. When we came to Australia, I couldn't believe it. I thought I had come to a little village. I'm not joking. I said to my husband that I don't know what I'm going to do. I cried more than eat at that time. It was hard for all the Europeans. Even the people who were poor in Europe were used to a different way ... especially the houses... I never had seen a weatherboard house because of the weather in Europe... And when I saw all these houses nearly falling apart, I said I couldn't believe we have to live like that. I didn't know how we were going to survive.'

I have been lent a book by Arnold Zable, a Melbourne writer and documenter of the political causes of refugees. The book is *Café Scheherazade* (2001), named after the café-restaurant in Acland Street in St Kilda, an inner-city seaside suburb. Zable's tale concerns the café patrons, who have been on many journeys. The narrator is the journalist Martin who listens to the patrons' journeys and those of the owners of the

café. Some journeys are simply retold, others are conflated and ‘fictionalised’. This is true lived history using multi-storied characters. The people interviewed by Martin arrived in Australia as migrants in the 1950s, as did the real-life owners. Initially I dip into the novel, racing through to see if there is anything I can draw on for my coffee research. The novel does not seem helpful. I don’t see any references to the coffee industry, to what it’s like setting up a café, only to strange characters and journeys from distant lands.

When I return to read the novel properly I cannot put it down, I am so moved. A world opens up to me that I cannot believe I missed. I get caught up in the vivid lives of people from Eastern Europe before the Second World War, and in the epic stories they still carry with them. I am so taken by the stories I get out my atlas but I can’t find the exact names of the towns, like Vilna, and I wonder if it is the translation of the names or the shifting borders that blur the country depicted in the tale, or if the names are fictitious. The characters are constantly on the move, my atlas slips from beneath me, I am so engrossed I assume all the characters are real and Zable has not taken any poetic license at all. From a café in Acland Street, Zable takes me to the freezing mines of Siberia, puts me on a train across Siberia to China, and shows me an old Chinese man doing Tai Chi after resting his bird under a tree.

I am engrossed in Zable’s story. Masha and Avram Zeleznikow, the owners and long-time managers of Café Scheherazade, migrate to Australia after the Second World War, after having initially escaped to Paris separately. Masha and Avram both come from Poland, but there are many journeys in between their arrival in Paris. Masha wanted to be a doctor and has already studied for four years in her own country; Avram wanted to teach. Instead after arriving in Melbourne they work in labour jobs from clothing factories, ‘a laundry, and an abattoir, to late-night piece work and assembly

lines' (Zable, 2001: 171). They then gather enough money to buy a milk bar at number 99 Acland Street in 1958, where they set up Café Scheherazade. The café is named after a nightclub in Paris for Russian émigrés, which Avram has read about, and where he and Masha arranged to meet in Paris. They cannot believe their find, and drink champagne using all the money in their pockets, and dance 'to the music of a Gypsy orchestra' (206) among 'painted scenes of St Petersburg palaces, and cathedrals and onion-shaped domes' (206).

Zable's narrator Martin tells of the metamorphosis of Café Scheherazade in Acland Street.

The milk bar became a coffee shop, the coffee shop a restaurant, the restaurant a meeting place, a refuge from the cold. In Scheherazade survivors were regrouping, old worlds were being recreated, and festering wounds were being healed. Yet it would take the proprietors years to see the poetry of their venture (171).

Avram tells Martin about single men who had lived through the 'Annihilation' and had lost their 'entire families'.

[Some] of [them] had never remarried. ... Men who lived in one-bedroom flats, boarding houses, single rooms. And we responded to their tastes... Their longings determined Masha's cuisine. ... The word spread. The men gathered. Scheherazade answered their needs. Their numbers grew like a sprouting of seeds. They came in search of a Yiddish word, a familiar smile. This is what the survivors craved: a mother's touch, a friend's embrace (170).

Martin interprets the journeys of the people he writes about as ‘a tale of many cities: each one consumed by the momentum of history. Each one recalled at a table in a café called Scheherazade, in a seaside suburb that sprawls upon the very ends of the earth, within a city that contains the traces of many cities’ (7).

I wonder about the phrase ‘in a café … within a city that contains the traces of many cities’, and I see such multiplicity: people sitting in cafés, all ordering from the same menu, all replacing each other on the same chairs, pouring from the same sugar container, drinking from the same cups, and knowing little of the stories carried with them. But a café is one place where stories are heard and often shared.

““Each café begets another, [writes Martin] and for every coffee shop on Acland Street I imagine a precursor, a café of the mind”” (36). I am affected by the statement ‘café of the mind’. I think of an overseas café as my precursor, one I haven’t been to or seen but imagine; one someone tells me about, or I read about, or see in a photo. I think of cafés I have known in Melbourne that have also been constructed from other’s experiences from overseas. This is my history of cafés, the cafés established in the 1950s and ’60s. I wonder what people much younger than me think about cafés, people in their twenties and thirties, or even younger; cafés have always been there for them. Maybe there is no sense of history for them, they may just think of taste and coffee and the décor, and the immediate pleasantness of their surrounds and knowing their friends will be there or somewhere nearby. Most will not have experienced the ‘epic journey’ of Zable’s characters that make the experience of a café so significant.

I have asked Erika so few questions, I have not encouraged her to talk of the epic journey which her life has been, and I hear the words of her daughter Judith that it’s good for Erika to talk about simple daily experience. Zable writes about what

happens in that informal space of cafés, about migrant characters with another history, and it is the café that unites their stories, through their past experiences and present retelling to Martin in the Café Scheherazade. ‘I want to know more about the streets that once flowed with caffeine and cake’ (37) states Martin. As do I.

Erika checks her watch. There is a TV show on at 8 pm and she doesn’t want to miss it, so I must quickly cover the time in the 1950s and ’60s when she has just arrived in Melbourne.

‘I think the Scheherazade coffee lounge started when the Hungarians came here around the fifties,’ Erika says. ‘After 1956 Acland Street and Fitzroy Street really started. There were a lot of restaurants in Fitzroy Street, more than anywhere else.’ Erika doesn’t recall many people drinking coffee throughout the 1960s and ’70s, and she is adamant that she does not like tea, only when she’s really sick.

By the mid-1960s, seven years after Erika arrives from Hungary, she starts up her first business venture, a small sandwich bar in the city. She buys The Little Tuck Shop in the Mitchell Building, on the corner of Lonsdale Street and Elizabeth Street when she is 38 years old in 1966, and has it until 1971. When she sells the tuck shop she buys a sandwich shop in Flinders Street in the Mutual Arcade, and has that till 1976.

‘The Little Tuck Shop is still there,’ says Erika. ‘I was surprised. We sold it because somebody said they were going to pull the building down. In the sandwich bar you started at seven in the morning and usually worked till 4.30 pm, while the offices were open, and we worked longer after that as we had to clean up, for five days a week. It was a long day.’ I wonder how Erika coped with the business side of buying and

selling and the daily accounting with her still limited English skills, and I also wonder about her lack of understanding of how business worked.

‘It didn’t matter, you buy the goodwill, so it’s nothing to do with your English,’ she says, shaking her head. ‘No, no, no. It’s your bad luck if you run the business down. Most of my shops were run down when I bought them. The second one was so dirty it was full of cockroaches. I had to have it fumigated. We paid \$5,000 for the goodwill around 1971. I built them up so well.

‘The shop in the Mutual Arcade was a little sandwich bar. We made coffee.’ But Erika isn’t talking about espresso coffee. She tells of the curious way she made coffee at that time in the early 1970s. ‘We had one of the best coffees. We sold so many. I didn’t have an espresso machine but we made a cappuccino with instant coffee. We put milk with the instant coffee under a machine, I don’t know how to describe it, and it frothed up. It was very nice actually. We didn’t shake anything, like chocolate or cinnamon on top. Nobody around us made coffee like we did. They knew it was from instant coffee. At that time there weren’t many places with espresso, not in a sandwich shop like that. Most of the people who came to my shop had coffee and most of the customers were Australian customers because the shops and offices were Australian.

‘It was only a small shop where we had only a bench and two high chairs. It was nice. There was the Adult Education and a little bottle shop there in the arcade. A Hungarian friend who had the coffee bean shop in the Port Phillip arcade, the next arcade along Flinders Street, got us coffee in a big large bag, and they brought it in every week. They later moved to a coffee lounge in Carlyle Street.’

Erika keeps checking her watch for the TV program, although she is happy to keep talking.

‘I had two employees, one full-time and one part-time. You have to work very fast because the business was only in the morning, lunchtime and afternoon. It is within a few hours you have to make the profit. At the first shop I met my lawyer. There was an office upstairs and he was just starting out, and he used to come every day for a coffee and sandwich. My English was worse then, and he said to me, “You know, Erika, I love your accent.” He was a young man, and he was good-looking. I sat next to him and I said, “You know what? You make my day.” And when I divorced and bought a house, he did everything. He was fantastic.’

Although Erika describes working in a sandwich bar as very hard work, which it must have been, I feel that compared to her initial hardships, she was enjoying meeting people and being able to sell them a coffee. She talks freely about this time in a matter-of-fact way.

‘I loved my two shops because my customers were so nice,’ says Erika. ‘Everybody loved the people who were working in the shop with me, and they loved me because I couldn’t speak English very well. And I tried so hard to please them.

‘I loved being in the city at that time,’ she says. ‘After I sold the shop my sisters, Marta and Judy, and I used to go at least once or twice a week to the city for a cup of coffee. Sometimes we went to Myers. All over. This is from the 1970s. Not everywhere they gave you espresso then. I don’t go any more. The city died, you see.’ Erika attributes the lack of people going into the city to the growth of shopping centres in the suburbs.

I think about Erika coming to Australia in 1958 with an eight-year-old daughter, not speaking English. She eventually becomes the main ‘bread earner’, ends up buying and selling two sandwich bars in the city, then becomes a shop assistant until she retires, now owning an apartment and a house. It is some feat and shows great business acuity

and determination, especially for a woman at that time. Nowadays Erika meets her sisters and sometimes her daughter and granddaughter at Malvern Central.

‘We go out a lot,’ says Erika, ‘and sometimes I go to Glenhuntly Road to a coffee lounge, where there is a beautiful cake shop. It used to be owned by Israeli people and they make such a beautiful coffee. We don’t go to each other’s homes; we meet in the coffee shops, unless there is a special occasion, because it is an outing. Not only with my sister but all my friends, we meet in a coffee shop. Usually at 10.30 in the morning, because I am an early person.’

I think of a quote from Martin in *Café Scheherazade*: ‘This is a tale of many cities ... within a city that contains the traces of many cities’ (Zable, 2001: 7). My city expands.

‘It’s nice the way we live,’ says Erika.

But when Erika says this I no longer hear what has been offered to her by the culture in Australia, but how she is able to carry on her own social customs, the ones that have also enhanced our lives that she has given us, the ones that have revitalised our city. It is because of Erika that she herself can say ‘It’s nice the way we live’, but right now it’s getting late and her television program is about to start and I must leave. I take a quick glance at some little coffee cups in the glass cabinet by the television. The cups have now become artefacts of a time past.

I make my way down the hard white terrazzo staircase leading from her apartment and think of what I haven’t asked Erika, or what she hasn’t told me. I think of the stories she must have carried to Australia, and has carried with her ever since. Her memories with a coffee pot and little cups. One needed to be prepared for visitors and no matter what one couldn’t afford, there should always be coffee in the cupboard. I want to know what Erika discusses with her girlfriends when she goes out to coffee in

Hungary with her daughter. It's the early to mid-1950s in Budapest. Reconstruction after the Second World War was much slower than the other war torn cities, according to Lukacs (1988: 221), and Hungary was politically unstable with many factions (221) – and then the Uprising of 1956 occurs. What were the names of her girlfriends? Was their conversation about food shortages, about a child teething, about their husbands, about love, about how to make cake, about the growing political unrest? Maybe the conversation was also gossip, or maybe about being wary of gossip, or maybe about learning where to get a job. But I don't want to return to question Erika further. It's a mild night and I reach into my bag to find my car keys, and head home to watch my favorite Friday TV show.

Chapter seven

The café manager's daughter

Groups perceived as homogeneous can be seen in terms of a mutual and shared understanding of what is private and what is public ... and what are appropriate behaviours in each and the unwritten rules that go with them.

Rapoport (1977: 297)

In July 2003 I attend a performance of *The Ishmael Club* at the Trades Hall on the corner of Elgin and Victoria Streets. The play has been written by local playwrights Bill and Sue Garner, and I come because I hear it is about bohemian culture in Melbourne in the early twentieth century. I walk through the massive entrance foyer of Trades Hall, and the presence of history is palpable in the display of mural-plaques on the walls. The plaques commemorate the appointment of life governors by the 8 hour anniversary committee to various hospital boards across Melbourne, throughout the late 1800s and early 1900s. The trade of each governor is also listed: tanner, saddler, litho printer, tailoress, and so on. On the wall opposite hangs a large canvas banner, about four by three meters, which reads:

8 hours labour

8 hours recreation

8 hours rest

My research on coffee oscillates between the eight hours recreation and the eight hours rest. On the stair wall is a large mural plaque listing the names of founding members of the eight hour day committee, from the late 1800s to the early 1900s. It is their struggle that allows me to spend time at this play and to relax in a café. I stride up the chipped and hollowed bluestone stairs, to enter a grand hallway. The show is fully booked and I wait in a queue for leftover tickets.

I come to this performance to find out about an early Australian bohemia, but also because I haven't been able to get the phrase 'Call me Ishmael' out of my head since seeing the advertisement for the play.

'Call me Ishmael' is the first line in Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851), uttered by the novel's sailor narrator, but it is also the title of an essay about Melville's writing by the American poet Charles Olson. Olson explores the mythology of Ahab, the obsessive hunter of the great white whale. Olson himself belonged to a more recent bohemia, a poetry movement of the 1950s in America; his innovative style of writing poetry, termed 'projective verse', redefined the role of breath and the heart in poetry. Olson considered poetry to be a 'composition of field', where breath determined a line and the manipulation of syllables determined the rhythms in a line (1966: 271-75); this was an unconventional approach to working with rhyme or meter. The phrase 'Call me Ishmael' still resonates in American culture; I hear it quoted at the 2004 Academy Awards by the compère Billy Crystal. Extricating himself from a snide remark, Crystal responds, 'Call me ... call me... Call me Ishmael', and when he says this, I hear the projected voice of breath and syllables that define an American mythology.

I go to *The Ishmael Club* carrying my own mythology of Ishmael informed by Melville's hunter of the great white whale, and by the poet Charles Olson. Now, at the play at the Trades Hall the meaning of Ishmael will go through another transformation.

The Ishmael Club is performed in a rather small room occasionally used for theatre performances. The show is booked out but the ushers and audience do their utmost to make space for more people. As I enter an actor is serenading the audience with a popular song of the 1890s while playing the piano accordion. The seats are long curved pews, arranged in tiered rows. The pews make me think of attending mass as a child, and lend a tone of reverence and piety to the room; this is hardly an evocation of bohemia, yet I realise that this feeling of reverence inspired my own bohemian rebellion against the established mores of Catholicism. I am seated at the back by the lighting console, and while I wait for the play to begin I am drawn to the stale creamy paint flaking from the very high walls and think how appropriately antiquated a venue this is. The stage is set as a humble restaurant, with a small round table, two rickety wooden chairs, and a piano front stage left. The play begins.

It is just after the First World War in Melbourne and two artists, Will (Bill) Dyson and Norman Lindsay, meet up after many years. A schism has occurred, artistic and personal, between Dyson and Lindsay. Dyson married Ruby Lind, Lindsay's sister, also a painter. All three went to England together, but Dyson's personal and artistic allegiance shifted to Ruby from Lindsay, who experienced rejection and returned to Australia. Dyson and Ruby both led strong artistic lives in England, where Ruby's work flourished and she became involved in the suffragette movement. But it was hard, trying to survive as an artist; Ruby's health suffered and she died after the First World War. Dyson returns to Australia to meet up with his old artistic comrade. Lindsay reckons Dyson created the schism between them by marrying Ruby and not supporting him in

his art, and has remained bitter towards Dyson ever since. Dyson tries to mend their friendship and they recall their early days together as bohemian artists. Their artistic life is far more complex than this brief account suggests.

Suddenly, as the story unfolds, I recognise the restaurant replicated on stage as the famous – and infamous – Fasoli’s, the first restaurant in Melbourne to exhibit elements of ‘café culture’. My research on this restaurant has been archival, dusty old papers and texts on food history. I now feel like a virtual wanderer, meandering through the space on stage, imagining the bygone lifestyle and the streets of Melbourne in the early 1900s. I look around the audience and wonder what has brought them to see the play; I know a friend comes because she used to work at the Pram Factory with Bill Garner, and the play has had good reviews. There must be many other reasons. My attention is drawn back to the stage and I enter Melbourne’s early café culture.

Fasoli’s was set up by a Swiss-Italian, who took over the cosmopolitan Pension Suisse at 108 Lonsdale Street. The Pension Suisse had long been popular, but from 1898, according to the program, under Vincent Fasoli ‘it had become Melbourne’s pre-eminent bohemian haunt’. Around 1911 Fasoli’s moved to 140 King Street, and continued to flourish under the management of the proprietor’s daughter, Mrs Kate Maggio (who is the proprietor in the play). Fasoli’s was frequented by artists, poets, actors, journalists, musicians, émigrés and politicians. Patrons included Katherine Mansfield, Trixie Tracy, CJ Dennis, Fred McCubbin and Hal Gye, Maurice Brodsky and Louis Esson. The ‘tribe’ of Lindsays, including Ruby, and the Dyson brothers, Bill and Ted, also congregated there.

The play takes us through the antics some of the self-defined bohemians. A club is formed, with rules, a prayer, and a heathen idol called the Joss, and is a mockery of official clubs set up by the then Establishment. This is the Ishmael Club. On stage a

table ornament is attached to an upside-down mop and roped to a column as the mock idol. I recall the ornament being a carved coconut husk that looked like a monkey's head, the kind a lighted candle is placed inside – but perhaps I am constructing my own joss. The program states that 'Bill and Ted Dyson, Norman, Lionel and Percy Lindsay and their immediate friends made up a good proportion of the Ishmael membership'. They used to meet upstairs at Fasoli's. This was one of many mock clubs that were formed by Australia's bohemian sub-culture of the time.

In the Historical Society in the Old Mint Building at the top end of William Street in the city I come across a newspaper article in the archives of old papers, the only thing I can find on early café culture. Maybe I am using the wrong words to research, I find so little. The article in the *Herald* of December 1938 is written by E. J. Brady and entitled 'Yes, this was bohemia'. The writer mourns the loss of the bohemia of both Sydney and Melbourne. There are early photos of Henry Lawson, 'a natural-born bohemian', and of Victor Daley, of whom Brady writes, 'Sydney's bohemia died when he died' (38). Brady also writes that Melbourne's bohemia died with the closing of Fasoli's. This article is published the year after Fasoli's closes. Brady notes:

Fasoli's was a pleasant rendezvous for Melbourne intellectuals. Its atmosphere was truly bohemian. There one met, on the level, all sorts of charming people, from knife grinders to university professors. Rich folks were not debarred if they subscribed to the rules. Anyone who broke the rules was pelted with bread-crusts and driven forth in scorn (1938: 38).

Fasoli's was a place of ideas, its patrons a mixture of artists, writers, poets, musicians, with – according to Brady – a 'sprinkling of theatricals and vocalists... The code was

simple enough. If the visitor had anything to say he might say it loudly; he could shout it at the top of his voice. But it must be worth hearing. If not, there were ways of convincing the intruder that he was unwelcome' (1938: 38). Brady mentions a solicitor who wears an ancient straw hat over a black wig, who sits at the head of a long table and can whistle a whole opera and is able to speak about anything from the 'Impressionists to tragedies of Euripides'. I hate to think what was in between. A person's occupation did not seem to matter. 'You enjoyed a cheap Italian meal accompanied by passable red wine, tobacco and talk. Between celebrities and nonentities no lines of demarcation were drawn' (1938: 38), writes Brady.

Brady compares the Australian and English experiences of bohemia. He tells of Australian artists going to England for inspiration, and their dismay at encountering the English bohemians living in expensive houses and belonging to expensive clubs. It seemed for the Fasoli's clientele bohemianism implied abdication from vanities and conventions. But somehow to me being pelted with bread for not being interesting, and belonging to mock clubs, implies some kind of rigidity, even if it is anti-Establishment rigidity. Admittedly, Fasoli's was a place for artists who were more outside the establishment at that time. Brady laments the passing of an era, of a place where artists congregated and where they could rail against the established codes and Establishment meeting places and clubs, and meet over a European-style meal at long tables where conversation ran freer than the wine, and was more important. This is 1938, a year before the Second World War. The original article is not completely legible, even when it is enlarged, some of the letters still run into each other, but the final words I can read contain a strong sentiment: 'They will be remembered – by their work ... Fasoli's ... is a thing of the past' (1938: 38). Vale to bohemia.

*

Thirty years after Brady's article, Allan Wynn writes in 1968 about the influence of Fasoli's on his father Samuel Wynn, a Swiss-Italian wine-maker and entrepreneur, and the original owner of Florentino Restaurant in Bourke Street. Allan Wynn writes of the 1920s as a time when there weren't many good restaurants and dining out wasn't 'a popular pastime, as most people entertained in their homes' (1968: 58). According to Wynn:

[Visitors] to the city in the 1920s comprised mainly prosperous farmers and, of course, commercial travellers. The former usually dined at Scott's Hotel or the Windsor, the latter ate mainly in the Greek cafés where meals were cheap and generous. Steak and eggs was the staple food... The Establishment dined in its Clubs. The few who preferred life to pomp, dined mainly at Fasoli's restaurant ... it was a refuge for those who sought a haven from the materialistic climate of the times (1968: 58-9).

In the 1920s, the middle-class was not used to informality. They were quite reserved customers, and formal seating at separate square tables for only four to six people was the norm in most restaurants. But at Fasoli's, the patrons were seated at long benches alongside strangers, and wine brought the strangers together as friends (1968: 61). Wynn writes that the 'simplicity, informality and generosity' of Fasoli's so appealed to his father Samuel, that he incorporated them into his own ventures; these same qualities dominated café life until the early 1930s.

Fifty years after Brady's article Michael Symons in 1982 writes about Fasoli's in his book on the history of food in Australia. Symons focuses on Fasoli's bohemia, and includes drawings of Fasoli types: a man wearing a moustache too big for his face; a young woman wearing a spritely hat; a group of middle-aged men deep in thought, most flaunting bushy beards, drinking coffee in a darkened foyer, one resting his elbow on the table to hold his head in his hand (120). These are all unexceptional images these days and no longer signify bohemia. Symons takes us on a journey to Fasoli's of the early 1900s, in Lonsdale Street, a 'low, straggling building' in 'a wide and undesirable street' and 'sided by monumental masons and a fancy goods and underclothing shop' (121). Symons writes, 'Over the door is a faded attempt at blazonry, "Pension Suisse." ... The projecting lamp gives the name of the owner since 1898 and by which the place is now familiarly known, "Fasoli"' (1982: 121). Symons includes colourful descriptions of characters and their eccentricities by writers who fraternised the restaurant at that time. The Fasoli family lived in the two private rooms at the front of the building. Between these 'a narrow passage leads to a large room with one long table running down the centre' (1982: 121). There's a bench in the courtyard under a large willow tree where vermouth is sipped on hot evenings. Wine from Italy is free of charge. Fasoli's cuisine was based on the Italian style called *Casa Linga*, on stews cooked in heavy copper pots, like *osso buco*, and wine being served with meals. Soup, homemade pasta, salads with parmesan cheese, a stew, then fruit and cheeses are served for dinner. Black coffee follows.

It is the ambience and the conversation in humble surroundings that makes this place, and the eccentrics, intellectuals and the artists who seek it out. After dinner the tables are cleared and the coffee is served, and Melbourne bohemia weaves its way through European philosophy from Maeterlink to George Bernard Shaw, and ideas are

exchanged in a back room and a courtyard in Lonsdale Street, between a monumental mason's and an undergarment shop.

Historically, Australia's gastronomy has not had a good reputation. Symons states that, unlike in other western countries where country pubs and country cooking sustained gastronomy, 'in Australia due to its industrialisation it is the fare of the city and cheap ethnic spots of the city centre' (1982: 120) that defined it. Symons describes the prevalence of the sixpenny meal 'restaurants' of the 1850s that lasted to the early 1900s, which Symons considers very poor eating places. The sixpenny restaurants mainly served meat – beef, mutton, chicken – either roasted or boiled, with any leftovers crudely curried, and with over-boiled 'spuds' and vegies. Beer was also served for a sixpence. The sixpenny restaurants provided for the common person. The Establishment had their prestigious Clubs, and there were also the prestigious hotels where people gathered over dinner. Other writers have also written about the abysmal gastronomy of early Australia. Richard Beckett (1984) writes of the meagre cooking experience of those who arrived as convicts. They were often so poor in London they either scrounged for food or ate from the barrows in the streets, and so many had no experience of cooking whatsoever. As convicts in Australia they had to rely on rations of flour, sugar, mutton, tea and sometimes coffee; the tea ration was removed if there was need for punishment, and so too the coffee ration. Anne Gollan (1978) writes about the kind of cooking in the outback in the mid-to-late 1800s, when the people existed mainly on a diet of tea, damper and salt meat (32). Generally, there were neither healthy ingredients nor cooking know-how.

The menu at Fasoli's is no longer unusual, nor is it unusual to drink wine with meals, or on its own. It is no longer unusual to drink coffee, or to sit alongside strangers, or to eat at any time of day or night, or to use the term 'informal' to describe a way of relating to eating and drinking. I think of the concept of informality in Melbourne at the beginning of the twentieth century as revolutionary, just as people coming together informally around a coffee in the Levant in the sixteenth century was also revolutionary (Ukers, 1922: 17). Fasoli's seems to have broken through conventions of formality, and influenced a style of eating and seating where conversation could break through the formal, aided by wine and coffee. When I think of Fasoli's in Melbourne in the early 1900s I am also reminded of the early coffee houses in England in the 1650s. People sat on benches at long tables. As long as you paid the required penny to enter and drink coffee, and you were male, you could be there. Hence the term 'penny universities'. It was said that poets mixed with workers and, since patrons drank coffee with their beer or spirits, there was a lot of conversation. Rational conversation was also revolutionary, as most people were drunk from morning to night. The coffee researcher and importer Bersten states:

The only hot drinks in Europe until the arrival of coffee, tea and cocoa were soups and potions. Ale, mead and wine were the usual drinks and there is a good case for saying that Europe was in an alcoholic daze for decades ... (1993: 42).

Conversing with the different classes along the same table occurred, all taking part in the newly discovered discourse as coffee kept their minds alert (Bramagh, 1972:47-48; Ellis, 1956; Lillywhite, 1963). In its bohemian way, Fasoli's sounds similar: strangers

sitting at long benches, drinking wine and coffee, engaging in animated conversation crossing class and culture.

I twist and turn in my small space of unrelenting hardness, like a pew at the Sunday mass of my youth. But I still remain focused on the representation of Fasoli's and the bohemian antics of the Ishmael Club, not knowing where my personal space starts or ends along the pew. I want to stretch without imposing on the person sitting next to me and I hope it's nearly interval so I can move more freely. Maybe this feeling of not wishing to impose upon other people's space is what happened at Fasoli's to strangers sitting next to each other on benches at the long tables, but perhaps wine and conversation and bohemia made personal space more blurred, and possibly less important. In contrast, formality delineates the use of space more clearly. If I recall mass on Sundays, it was the inspiration of a good sermon, and the singing, that made the pew feel less hard, or perhaps it was my trance-like dreaming, as the mass was in Latin and I couldn't understand a word, that ruptured my sense of formal personal space. I was too young for wine or coffee and wisdom.

I wonder what happened to a space for bohemia in Melbourne from the 1940s after the closure of Fasoli's. Symons states that the collapse of Victoria's vineyards collapse around the same time that the 'Pension Suisse' closes, that is Fasoli's, and that

Australians then turned to an ‘unparalleled period of Puritanism, [of] milk and orange juice’ (Symons, 1982: 123). But surely that never stopped a bohemian?

In 1916 during the First World War six o’clock closing was introduced in Victoria, including the introduction of stricter liquor licensing laws advocated by the long-standing temperance movement. Wine could not be served in restaurants, or cafés. Pubs closed at 6 pm, there was nowhere else to go, and cafés were a while coming. But there was the jazz scene that took over the occasional inner city café as a venue for long jazz sessions in the 1950s, and also venues that came out of the folk music scene in the 1960s. The world of dark black groovy places that served Nescafé in large chipped mugs while listening to folk music is another book yet to be written.

Another coffee culture existed in Melbourne between the World Wars, within the growing Italian community. The Italians set up restaurants around the lifestyle they were used to in their own country, mixing their interests in the culinary and in socialising, including the drinking of coffee. The restaurants became a signature of Melbourne’s cultural life. Until recently there has been little published of that pre-Second World War Italian restaurant culture. This culture had a strong connection to the arts, artists, opera, and theatre, and also to artisans, architects and politicians and other worldly Melburnians. The community of Italian restaurateurs also set a high standard of restaurant dining and gastronomy.

In an archive on restaurants at the National Trust in East Melbourne, I unearth an A4 sheet where someone has scribbled a time frame for Melbourne restaurants from the 1900s to the 1950s. On the sheet a map is drawn, like a treasure map, of the streets

from Bourke to Lonsdale, between Spring and Exhibition. Street numbers are listed for the Italian restaurants, and the name and dates of their predecessors on the same spot. At the bottom of the sheet is scrawled ‘Italian/Bohemian establishments 1900-1960’, with the initials ‘RS’, and the date ‘Jan 98’. The timeframe and map read like a family tree. Café d’Atalie, 55 Lonsdale Street (1919-1926) begets Molina’s (1926-1962) begets the Latin (1962 -). (When I do finally get to see the Latin in 2003 I discover it’s ‘closed for renovation’. I take a photo of the gutted insides and mourn that I have only memories of other people’s experiences.) In Bourke Street, just down from Pellegrini’s (‘Pell’s’ on the sheet) is Wynn’s wine (1918-1928), which begets Florentino’s (1928 -). Further towards Spring Street, the Societa (1932-1940) at 29-39 Bourke Street, begets the Society (1940 -). The Melbourne Club Hotel on the corner of Little Bourke and Exhibition Streets begets Mario’s (1932-c. 1955). Meanwhile, the Italian Waiter’s Club is set up circa 1950 and Pellegrini’s in 1954. These are only a few of the restaurants referred to and the information on this A4 sheet begins my search of this period of coffee culture in Melbourne.

At the National Trust I also find a photocopied article published in the *Trust News* in 1989. It is entitled ‘Café Society: The Italian Influence’, and is written by Celestina Sagazio, who documents Melbourne Italian restaurants from the 1920s and thirties, the ones I first come across on the A4 sheet, and which come under the umbrella of the ‘spaghetti mafia’ families. Sagazio states that there was a ‘close relationship between Italian restaurants and the intellectual and bohemian life of Melbourne’ (14). They were considered ‘bohemian haunts ... where a new lifestyle developed’ (14). The Italian restaurants were ‘located in the eastern part of Exhibition, Bourke and Lonsdale Streets: the Florentino, the Latin, the Society, Molina’s and Mario’s’ (14), and they were run by families such as the Massonis, Triacas, Virgonas,

Virganos, Molinas and Codognottos. The most significant statement is that ‘many ... had a close working relationship with each other’ (14). The Latin was considered the true inheritor of the Fasoli tradition. Sagazio traces the family history of these restaurants – who bought them, and when they moved on to other restaurants. Later in the 1950s, after the mass immigration program of the post-Second World War period, there was a ‘resurgence of Italian cafés’ (18). Sagazio mentions Pellegrini’s in Bourke Street, University Café and Caffe Sport in Lygon Street as representative of the newer cafés.

In the Maribyrnong Library I find a copy of *Victoria's Italians 1900-1945* (1986), published by the Italian Historical Society, an A4 paper size booklet held together with staples. Here history is told through the captions to photographs gathered from private collections. It is through deciphering these photos and captions, written both in Italian and English that this documentation of city and restaurant life is given meaning for me. Chef Bettoni stands with his kitchen staff in the laneway behind Mario’s Hotel in 1932, Rinaldo Massoni with his chef Salvatore and other staff have their photo taken at Florentino’s. The short history in each chapter skims the surface of the lives represented in the photos. Under the heading ‘Restaurants’ it is stated that ‘[most] of the Italian restaurants started as clubs or cafés catering for the hundreds of Italian men who had migrated to Australia without families’ (66).

It is Mietta O’Donnell who fills in the gaps for me, who explains how the Italian restaurant families with their children, lived and grew up in the city. The social history of Mietta O’Donnell and her grandparents, and of other Italian families who were

influential in Melbourne's Italian restaurant history, are but a preface in *Mietta's Italian family recipes* (2000), before the chapters on 'Antipasto', 'Brodo and Minestrone' and 'Pasta the Prima Donna'. But all chapters in fact represent Mietta's family history, written like a discussion around a table, or in the kitchen as one of Mietta's extended family teaches her to cook. No longer do I have just a photocopied page of scribbled notes from the National Trust, and one article, to understand the history of the Italian families who established a café society in Melbourne. I now learn about the connections between the families and their restaurants, beginning with the early family history of Mietta's grandparents, the Viganos arriving in 1928 from Milan and establishing 'the legendary' Mario's restaurant. I learn about the other Italian families who arrived here before the Second World War and who opened cafés, wine bars and restaurants, about what it was like to arrive in Australia before the war when there was no real Italian community to help with learning a new language or getting a job. In writing a book about recipes and serving good food, Mietta also tells her family story, which then becomes public history.

The Italian restaurant families, says Mietta, were from 'sophisticated cities' and came to a 'land of suburbs where respectable families were eating "tea" at 6pm while the city emptied after the 6 o'clock swill; where people drank beer and tea, not wine, with dinner, and real coffee was unknown ... [The restaurant families] coped by recreating culture and identity at the table, through food, wine, conversation, art and music' (6). Mietta herself became fascinated with food and entertaining. Although she did much experimentation herself as a restaurateur, her initial inspiration was the hospitality and restaurants of her grandparents and Italian restaurants, which she calls 'clichéd':

Waiters bustled in with a flapping of long, white aprons, an interruption of flurrying activity like an unexpected gust of wind billowing ... platters of cannelloni and ravioli ... and bread rolls in a wicker basket, and two more flagons of Chianti and crumbs and white napkins, and the candles seemed to be almost jumping out of the wax dribbled vat 69 bottles ... and the singing waiter wafting through the tables followed by someone playing the piano accordion and a guitar (8-10).

Although these images represent an oversimplification of Italian culture, they were considered exotic by many who were not of Italian descent in Melbourne. I am one of those people who recalls the candles burning in wine bottles, bread crumbs from wicker baskets spread across a white table cloth, steaming bowls of pasta, and coffee hissing from an espresso machine.

I am interested in these Italian families as 'an early generation of city-livers' (6). Mietta writes of 'the city as playground' (6), and the children of the restaurant families still speak of it nostalgically today. She also writes of the city as 'empty at night and completely deserted on Sundays' (6). I recall wandering around Bourke and Spring Streets in the early 1970s and noting their quietness and stillness on weekends. I also recall the woman in the long black coat strolling confidently, jay-walking across the top of Bourke Street on a week day, as if the street was an extension of her lounge room.

It's a different sense of being in a city.

Mietta writes that after the Second World War the Italian restaurants were taken over by the next generation. They had grown up together, gone to school and played together, and so talked business together. They were also supportive of each other, as they always felt like outsiders to the Melbourne Establishment, even by the fourth

generation. But, writes Mietta, they used their outsider status to their advantage since ‘outside sensibilities are, of course, of immense value in an industry where you work while the rest of the world plays’ (6).

The history of the Italian restaurant families is integral to the story of coffee in Melbourne. The restaurants created the ambience for coffee drinking. The white tablecloths over small square tables, the small bottles of oil and vinegar, the bread crumbs and white candle wax on the table cloths, the efficient Italian waiters, were all as important as the crema on the coffee, as the thick white coffee cups and saucers. For someone like me who felt like an outsider from the urban mentality, the noise of waiters calling out in Italian accents, and the hissing noise of the espresso machine, made my world feel larger than tea and toasted cheese that never seemed to leave any crumbs.

Inside the front cover of *Mietta’s Italian family recipes*, printed over the end of a large photo of chefs and owners out the back of one of the restaurants, Peter Robb writes of the Italian restaurant families as the ‘subtle Europeans’ who showed us how to enjoy food. I can’t stop thinking about the restaurant families, about how they lived in the heart of the city, about their private space being a public urban place, about Sundays in the empty city, and about growing up among the workings of a restaurant.

When I first began to think about my early experiences of coffee, I thought about my experience with my parents’ friends and relations, and about familial encounters with coffee. When I thought about my initial experience of an Italian café and espresso machine, I recalled going to Tamani’s in Lygon Street after I had left the family home in Geelong in 1972. I now realise that, although I have included my personal

experiences of coffee in this account, and although it seems that the archival literature and the interviews have guided my journey and the way I have constructed the narrative, something else has been happening. I discover the narrative is being constructed more by my intuition, and not by my research and knowledge of the literary non-fiction genre. When I realize this I have nothing to hold onto and I panic. I can no longer justify my notion of the narrative as primarily objective in its construction. It hits me I am writing a work far more subjective than I realize. Around this time I also begin to make life choices about how I relate to cafés, based on the work of Oldenburg (1989), and how he perceives the informal space of a café. It is neither home nor the office, and people are on an equal social footing. When I go to visit friends, I do not wish to be immersed in their family lives, I make sure I meet at cafés. This decision seems so trivial in the larger scheme of things. Nevertheless, when I visit my mother in Geelong, I now take her out to a café, instead of sitting amongst her domestic life and locked into a way of relating from too long ago. In the café, we sit and read and talk, and I discover new things about her life, just as she does about mine. Now when I phone my mother she has found another café where she can take me. And now an image appears I have totally forgotten about, a café from my teens in Geelong. I am surprised this one has not surfaced earlier.

I spend my early years living on a farm, but we come to live in Geelong the year I become a teenager. It takes me a long time to get used to the lack of silence and space, and to get into the groove of teenage suburban life. It seems I have no social skills. Catching tadpoles, rolling bales of hay for pocket money, hosing down the house in time of bushfires, watching a sheep being gutted and taken by wheelbarrow to the kitchen table to be chopped up, stored away and eaten over the following months – these are not the stuff of teenage girly conversation while standing on a suburban street

corner waiting for the Friday fish and chips, or lazing around a girlfriends' lounge in mock yoga positions. But city life also brings the delights of the cinema and *South Pacific* in glorious technicolour. Amidst all this newness of cinema colour and suburban street corners, usually straddling a push bike and carrying a school satchel, there is one small groovy café, or 'espresso bar', as they are called then. It has an espresso machine and is run by an Italian family, whose daughters go to the local Catholic girls' school. I go to another one. The café is in a little street in the centre of Geelong, and is the grooviest place to be seen if you are a student. It is a private school thing, students hang around having cappuccinos there after school. It's also a place to be seen on weekend evenings, especially if you have a boyfriend. I am lucky enough to be taken there once or twice; I don't realise I can just go there at any time with a girlfriend. So my first experience of an authentic espresso bar is the night of my very first date to the pictures. The film is *Doctor Zhivago*, and I have just fallen in love with technicolour and am entranced with the café scene. The night is pure romance.

The espresso bar is called Antoine's. 'Going out' is either going to Antoine's, getting into a pub underage, going to the cinema, or hanging around outside a fish and chip shop or Chinese takeaway. Antoine's is in a narrow street around the corner from the cinema. Every Friday and Saturday night there is a non-stop stream of boys in their cars literally 'doing the block'. I sit in Antoine's on my first date ever, and glance out into the noisy street to see car after car, bumper to bumper, all full of young boys, playing 'the Fonz'. Every ten minutes the same car passes by. We go to see *Doctor Zhivago*, and some of the same cars are still doing the block when we come back. The rowdiness of horns, exhausts, and wolf-whistles creates a metropolis, which extends to a whole three metres of street in front of an espresso bar, and the espresso bar itself is the focus of all the ruckus. Most of the boys from the cars do not venture into the café. And

normally I feel I don't have the credentials to enter this espresso bar on my own and confront the danger of cappuccinos, milk shakes, hot chocolate, and flavoured lemonade spiders.

I phone an old school friend, my only contact with this time of my life. She answers her mobile from the back seat of a car. She's on holidays in Queensland and is returning from a lazy day at the beach. I apologise for interrupting her holiday and ask if she remembers the café back in Geelong.

'Antoine's,' she says immediately. 'In a little street ... a pick-up place,' she continues. 'And all those cars circling.'

It's a fuzzy line on a mobile phone but I can fill in the gaps.

'Yes, it was a pick-up place,' I say, 'but for the private school kids. The boys in the cars were mostly from technical schools or out working, or a mixture.'

'We used to walk past with our white lipstick,' says Annemarie.

I don't really want to hear about this fashion statement.

'So why didn't we go in?' I ask. 'What stopped us?'

'Money,' Annemarie says.

'It was only coffee or hot chocolate.'

'We didn't have any ethnic friends,' says Annemarie.

I think she's clutching at straws.

'What did that have to do with it?' I ask. 'It was ethnic people who ran the café and their daughters' friends, who weren't ethnic, were the ones who went to the café. I

wasn't afraid of the people who ran the café. I was afraid of the people who went to the café. Other girls our age.'

'We weren't with the "in crowd",' says Annemarie.

That is more like it.

'But who was the "in-crowd"?' I ask.

Silence.

'You know,' says Annemarie.

Other students like us. Our peers.

Annemarie arrives at her holiday apartment and is at the mercy of her friends and her sandy bathers, and I have to stop the conversation short.

We were just as crazy as the boys in their cars circling the block, but we were à pied, on foot, also circling the block. We did not go in out of fear. The café space haunted us, the café culture daunted us. We did not know the rules of the café, we weren't used to ordering coffees, or drinking coffee in public, and 'the others' seemed to treat the café like their own lounge room, they were able to move around and order and behave at ease. And now I realise that I have been interviewing women in their seventies, my mother's age, and older, to explore their first encounters with cafés. I have listened to their curiosity or lack of it, their fear, their inexperience of the rules, and yet not until now have I recognised my own initial experiences of fear and trepidation.

After my date to *Doctor Zhivago*, I go into Antoine's one day after school with Annemarie. I watch the manager's teenage daughter wander into the café wearing her school uniform with her satchel slung over her shoulder, and head for the back room, the family lounge. She tosses her school satchel onto the floor and comes back out into the café and talks to her father who is cleaning the espresso machine. He asks about her

day at school and if she has any homework. She nods and she has done it, and then wanders over to one of the tables and slumps down beside her friends. She moves so casually, as if she is in her own lounge room. It is the casualness that I envy. I come from a family where you behave differently when you are out in public, in a more reserved and respectable way, and this person is crossing barriers that I don't even understand yet. I discover that it is my insecurity in the informal space of a café that has provoked this whole thesis, my understanding of the transition between the personal in the private home space, and the personal in the public space.

In the newly redesigned National Gallery of Australia I stand in front of an exhibition by the Los Angeles artist Doug Aitken, an environmental multi-screen video projection entitled 'Interiors' (2004). There are three screens, one in front and one either side of me. All have a video running of a different narrative in a different landscape. A young Japanese woman cradles her baby in a sling and a man speaks playfully to the baby. They are at a factory site in front of a mountain of shiny large metal scraps. A black man is cloistered in a small factory room sanding by hand the fibreglass body of a helicopter, his body totally covered by protective clothing; sometimes he is seen tap dancing. A young girl goes to a sports centre to play handball. It's night and there is no one else there. She is alone and bounces her ball off a brick wall. The narratives change, they show how individual creativities and intimacies exist within an inhumane environment. I feel this thesis has a similar play of juxtapositions, of linked images and experiences that form a narrative. There is no plot, but there is a narrative of both the personal and of a much larger cultural context. In Doug Aitkin's installation the isolated

and exaggerated sounds of the actions accentuate the juxtaposed images. The sandpaper grates over the fibreglass, the ball resonates emptily when it hits the wall. But then the energetic rhythm of the factory worker's tap dance breaks through the alienation of his work, the man cooing to the baby makes a mockery of the shiny scrap metal.

Chapter eight

Another sense of city

Walter Benjamin claimed that fashion memorialised itself by forgetting its own relation to the past; modern fashion became the temporal means through which the here and now could triumph over, colonise and annihilate the past. For Benjamin it was the phantasmagorical surface effects of the fashion commodity that produced this erasure of the relations between past and present.

Hillcote (1998)

Someone tells me a trendy place to go for coffee for people in their twenties is Atomica in Brunswick Street, Fitzroy, an inner-city suburb. It is not quite a block from the Black Cat café of the 1980s, now a bar. I want to interview a young person who frequents Atomica. Until now my research has been about my own experiences of cafés and coffee, and about the experiences of people who are older than me. I am curious about what younger people think about cafés now. I imagine that for younger generations, cafés and the lifestyle surrounding them have always existed, and that these generations may therefore not question the existence of cafés or their historical meaning. I set out to find Atomica.

I wander down Brunswick Street past the specialty shops – clothes boutiques, florists, grocers. There is even a Venetian paper shop that sells very beautiful old-world and contemporary design wrapping paper; it is so expensive I buy a sheet as a gift in

itself. I pass a babyware shop that sells bibs with a tag ‘Dry clean only’, and buy one for my young sister’s new baby – she seems to have everything else. What strikes me most about Brunswick Street is its ambience. I have the impression a lot of people I pass live locally and use the street as an extension of their personal home space, in the way they move, and bump into people they know, and loiter. The street isn’t just a thoroughfare.

A young woman sits outside the old Black Cat café, now a bar with subdued lighting and couches. It’s mid-afternoon, around three. She wears a dark brown sheepskin coat with a ruffled black furry collar; I wore a similar coat in the 1970s, but now they are made of fake sheepskin. The young woman is sitting at a small table on the footpath outside the bar. Her arms are folded across her chest, her legs are crossed, her feet suspended over another chair. She stares straight out across the street, as if staring through it or beyond it. Her demeanour makes her appear as if she is sitting in her lounge room, and oblivious to any distraction – yet she also commands the street to be her lounge room. Her relaxed manner strikes a pose of ownership over the street, like an alley cat quietly resting on a high fencepost. I don’t know why, but this young woman intimidates me. That relaxed pose shows more command of the streets than the menace of a roaming police car on night duty. I wander into Atomica.

The café is busy. Even so, I feel like I have walked into some kind of den – but maybe it’s something to do with the subdued lighting. I am nervous about interviewing someone from a younger generation – forgetting my own early rebellious nature. I mutter something to the young man behind the espresso machine about researching cafés and wanting to interview someone in their early twenties, and ask if I can put up an advertisement. The barista tells me to come back on Wednesday to see big Matt, ‘very tall with a beard’. Matt already intimidates me. I order a coffee to give me reason

to linger. I don't even take out my advert: *Wanted to interview, a person in their twenties or early thirties about their experience of going to cafés.*

Atomica feels quite impersonal and I can't find a cosy niche to sit in. The café has its own coffee roaster, which is quite large and situated in the middle of the floor space towards the back. The roaster starts to spill out hot beans into the large drying tray. The noise is overpowering and the process a bit daunting if you sit close by, because the beans are roasted at high temperatures and under pressure – but the fresh roast smell is intoxicating. A young man wearing long, pale blue, thick corduroy shorts oversees the roasting process. He's too young, and dressed too casually to be so specialist I think, recalling my visit to Grinders in Lygon Street to watch Giancarlo Giusti, an Italian roaster whose trade has been roasting coffee beans all his life and knows so much about his craft. I do not take this young coffee roaster in long pale blue shorts seriously.

There are many doors opening into the main café space – doors either side at the rear, a door halfway down through a brick passageway to one side, and the front door itself. Small tables are placed between all the doors and the roaster. It is as though I am in the centre of secret passageways and the things of real interest are happening clandestinely elsewhere. Why do I have these weird imaginings when I'm drinking coffee in a café on a main street?

The corrugated awning outside hangs quite low, which stops a lot of light coming into the café and casts a low canopy of darkness inside, creating a slightly claustrophobic feeling. I feel separated from the street. I look for a noticeboard but I can't see one and think this is unusual for a young trendy place. I feel like I'm a character in the science-fiction film *Blade runner* (1982), a film about androids and the

collapse of world order, where people half my age are running things, and at least some part of everyone's body must be prominently pierced or tattooed. I'm an intruder here.

My coffee arrives and it tastes exquisite. It must be made from a more expensive bean – Arabica perhaps; it is so mellow, with a strong, rich aftertaste. This is such a sophisticated brew, I think. There is an intricate artwork pattern in the milk froth of my latte, like an intricate mandala. I think that it would make a good tattoo, and I imagine it placed somewhere over my left shoulder blade.

Sitting here I recall the *Life Matters* program I heard on Radio National this morning. It was about changing one's life through cognitive counselling – an alternative to Freudian therapy. Cognitive counselling involves freeing ourselves from fearful experiences in our past by learning how to think about them without the fear, so that we can move on in our present lives. I recall my teenage experience in the early 1970s, of walking past Antoine's café in Geelong with one of my girlfriends. Both of us wearing white lipstick. I think of how intimidated we felt about going into the café, and I reflect upon how that past experience might affect my slight unease sitting here in Atomica. I drink my coffee slowly, and think of the cat-like woman seated like a sentry by the old Black Cat café. I love the streets being used in such a relaxed fashion, and the fact that merely sitting, watching, observing, thinking, and pondering confers a sense of ownership of the streets.

I return to Atomica on Wednesday. Big Matt is serving behind the espresso machine, he is tall with rich black hair and a short beard, a strong presence. Matt is very pleasant and welcoming, also busy, but eventually comes over to my table. I tell him about my

interest in coffee and he begins to talk enthusiastically about the changes he has seen in the café scene, and I realize I need to interview him. I do this the afternoon of the following day, after Matt finishes work at six. I assume the café will be peaceful without the customers and loud music, so I can tape the interview, but I discover they are roasting coffee. The tape picks up the loud shwooshing noise of the roaster, and I dread losing this interview, even while I am enveloped in the fantastic coffee aroma.

We sit at a little wooden table towards the front of the café. I face the front; Matt is framed against the light coming from under the low veranda awning. He's wearing a dark T-shirt, and thick silver jewellery around his neck; he has a tongue stud which I keep looking at while he talks. He has other rings clipped over his lips. I try to work out what large round dark stones are set in the silver of his ear-rings – until I realize the silver is a sizable hollow tube, which is passed through his ear lobe, and the dark stones are in fact the empty spaces in each silver tube, through which I can see the darkness of the café. Matt fills in the written details of my form, and is very particular about facts. The loud shwooshing of the coffee machine continues, and the fresh coffee aroma persists.

Matt tells me the café is only open to six every day.

'So you don't get the evening crowd?' I am disappointed. I have heard this is where the young arty avant-garde crowd gathers before they go on to nightclubs, and I want to know more about their café lifestyle.

I read aloud the questionnaire Matt has filled out about his background, and he interjects with 'Yep's' and 'Okay's', showing a willingness to please, which I imagine his job as manager and barista of a café demands in abundance. I assume Matt is in his mid-thirties, and I am surprised to find he is only twenty-four.

‘I worked at a garden centre in Auckland,’ he says. ‘That was my first job, a place called Café Botanics. There were a lot of mothers, grandmothers and kids – lots of babycinos. Basically they weren’t after espresso coffee. They were after just a big milky coffee. It was pretty bland. Shortly afterwards I got a part-time job at a friend’s café in the city, which was a funky happening kind of place, so the work days at this garden centre and the drive to this other place was a strange experience.’

Matt uses the term ‘boutique cafés’ to describe where he likes to work.

‘I can’t really work at big chain places,’ he says, ‘where the emphasis goes off the coffee and onto money, onto “We’re just interested in turning people over” as opposed to “We’re interested in making really good coffee”. I’m just interested in the coffee. When I came to Melbourne, someone on the plane said that “You gotta go to this place, you’ll really like it”, because there’s a chain of cafés in New Zealand called Atomic. But Atomica in Brunswick Street was very different – different ideas, different product, good, tasty, strong coffee, and good music. It hasn’t got that chain-type vibe.’

Matt calls boutique cafés that sell good coffee ‘underground cafés’, in contrast to ‘commercialised coffee’ sold at coffee chains, like Starbucks and Hudsons. That word ‘underground’ makes me think of *Blade runner* again.

‘People generally use the café as a meeting point,’ says Matt, ‘as either an organised meeting point or an improvised meeting point. They come here because they know they’ll either bump into someone they know or quite possibly meet someone. I’ve seen so many relationships develop in this café over the past four years. One day two single people will notice each other and the next day they will notice each other and talk to each other or maybe slowly start moving closer together, then you won’t see them for a couple of weeks and then they’ll come back as a couple.’

Matt watches this from behind the espresso machine.

‘I want to yell out, “I saw that coming!”’ says Matt.

It’s not the age but the mindset, says Matt, that defines how people use cafés.

‘I have a lot of middle-aged customers who have almost the same habits as what you’d say students have. They’ve got their job but they’ve also got lots of time to relax so they enjoy coming in here. They just enjoy the community vibe because most people do know each other. If you don’t, there are not many people around here who won’t say, “Hi. How you doin’?” – which is nice. But there’s always that generation gap you get with some older people who will come in and just go “Hmmm. I’m not so sure about this place”. Some people call it “attitude”… I’m not sure if it makes them feel uncomfortable – like they’re walking in and thinking, “Oh ho. I’m suddenly feeling out of place because I’m older and there are a lot of younger people around”.’

Matt says the real change is the café-goers.

‘I’m not sure if it is the increased number of students going to university,’ he says, ‘or whether the dynamics of younger people are changing, but for some reason, café-goers seem to be getting younger and younger. Coffee was always seen to be an older person’s drink. Now all of a sudden fifteen-year-olds are coming in for café lattes, and it’s got a whole scene around it. Largely it’s not just the coffee. Fifteen-year-olds are coming here in groups, meeting their mates, obviously seeing older kids just hang out at cafés and go, “That’s cool, we could do that”. Maybe it’s because they can’t get into bars yet. It’s generally younger European, Greek or Italian kids that come in, particularly younger girls.

‘It’s just the younger trend has created different dynamics in cafés, created by people who are not so old school in their thinking. Some places still exist around Melbourne, which are still the old style purist Italian cafés that kids would never dream of walking into, like the original Italian style cafés like Pellegrini’s,’ says Matt.

‘People who come here every day aren’t actually hooked on the coffee. They really enjoy it but it’s the whole experience that they actually come for and that’s one thing I love about my job.’

Hot roasted beans fall onto a large metal pan to cool evenly. The sound of the beans in the tray switches to a higher cadence.

‘I think it’s about association,’ says Matt. ‘I think they may not acknowledge it, or they may not be aware that that’s why they are here. We wholesale to about twenty places around the city and we get people coming who have had our coffee somewhere else, but they come here to get it made.’ Matt thinks of this as the ‘comfort factor’.

I ask about the space itself.

‘Some people haven’t seen a coffee roaster before and they are quite scared of it,’ says Matt. Probably for the same reason as I am — heat under pressure. ‘Others say “Wow, big coffee grinder”.’

‘Are you a living room space or a public space?’ I ask.

‘I think about that quite a bit,’ says Matt, ‘because for me it’s a nice middle ground of being out and being in my living-room at the same time. I have contact with all my friends in an environment that I am totally comfortable in. I’m at work and I am being paid to be there, and I am more than happy to look after everyone. Once I finish work I’m more than happy to go home and not say anything to anyone because I’ve spent my entire day seeing all my friends and socialising. I find myself thinking “I don’t need to talk to anyone anymore”. I feel quite undone.

‘For a lot of other people I’m sure it depends upon how often you frequent the place,’ says Matt. ‘A lot of people treat it as their living-room. They almost get over-comfortable. “Ah, this is my place, how you goin’? I’ll just have my usual. I come here

every day’.’ Matt shouts and throws his hands in the air and sprawls back in his chair.

“‘You didn’t hear that! I’ll have my usual’.’

The shwooshing of the roasted beans is slower, less dense.

‘At the same time people use the café as an office,’ says Matt. ‘People use it for meetings, particularly with the widespread use of laptops now — at least three or four every day, and people on their mobile phones actually working from their table.’

I think back to the 1600s in England and how the first coffee houses became places where people found work and where some businesses like shipping insurance agencies began. I also think of Lukac’s writings about the cafés in Hungary in the late 1800s and early 1900s, when writers and journalists wrote stories at their tables. For migrants in 1950s Melbourne, espresso bars were a place to find work and seek assistance for filling in forms.

‘So are cafés important?’ I ask.

‘I think they have become important,’ says Matt, leaning back in his chair reflectively. ‘I don’t think they are in any way vital. I think if we didn’t have cafés we would have some other form of meeting place. In such a comfortable western society it’s hard to say that cafés are important. It’s like saying television is important. I don’t think it is.’

Matt talks about the limitations of cafés as a community focus, and the hype around coffee, but I mention what it was like when cafés didn’t exist, when there wasn’t such an informal meeting place, and there was nowhere else to go. I also mention spreading suburbs, where there still aren’t cafés or any other informal meeting places and the austerity and alienation of that lifestyle, like before the 1950s and ’60s. So now I am endowing cafés with an awful lot of meaning.

‘What are people ordering these days for coffee?’ I ask.

‘People are incredibly habitual,’ says Matt. ‘Occasionally you’ll find the odd person who likes to deliberately change coffee all the time, but I can honestly say that from the first time I see someone’s face I know what coffee they’ll drink. People freak out about it every single time. I’ll go, “Flat white?” and they’ll freak out.’

‘Do you think there is any kind of ritual around drinking coffee?’ I ask.

‘I think a lot of people don’t realize why they are having coffee,’ says Matt. ‘But I think the ritual is still there, it’s just got a different face now.’

The shwooshing of the coffee beans tossing around the cooling tin tray, like thousands of tiny stones, is now slowing to a halt. The aroma is fading too.

‘What expectations do you have of people who come to the café?’ I ask.

‘I expect basically for people to react as if they are coming into my lounge,’ says Matt. ‘I want them to feel that comfortable but also with a degree of respect that you wouldn’t just come into someone else’s lounge and rearrange the furniture, or ask them to turn the music down, or to do something differently because it’s your lounge, and you’re choosing to walk into it. If you are going to enter somewhere willingly then you accept what you are entering. I’m still amazed how many people can walk into a café and treat the waiters like servants. I think it’s a culture thing, because it’s quite often older men who have that attitude. I’m not sure whether it’s because they’ve been used to being treated like that or they are used to going to places that people are more than happy to do that, but I don’t think it should be the norm. Etiquette is quite a big one for me.’

The low shwooshing continues. It doesn’t sound as if there are many beans left in the cooling tray.

‘Would you use the term ‘exotic’ for coffee?’ I ask.

‘That’s a marketing angle on coffee,’ says Matt. ‘Some people want to feel that they are doing something naughty. It’s far from naughty.’ Matt laughs. ‘It’s far from exotic when you think about who is picking it and how badly paid they are. Marketing-wise it’s about being indulgent.

‘Coffee’s a legal drug,’ says Matt. ‘There is almost a collective subconscious reliance where if people are a coffee drinker, they will wake up in the morning and go “I need a coffee”, and everything else is put on hold until you get that coffee. I can easily not drink coffee. I just love it. I don’t think many people are aware just how much coffee is affecting them. They think they just want to go and hang out at a café.’

We laugh about coffee being banned one day – it has happened in other times and cultures.

‘My father didn’t want me to work in a café,’ says Matt. ““You’re going to be earning ten dollars an hour for the rest of your life,” he told me, and I yelled back “No, no, I like making coffee, and work is my lifestyle, and I’d rather be a happy person than an accountant.” But he’s very different now, seeing what I can actually do.’

‘What do you think about people who have arguments in cafés?’ I ask.

‘If it’s a really loud one everything will go quiet,’ says Matt. ‘Then the people will either stop arguing or leave. Standing behind the counter you get to see everybody’s reactions. You see some people sniggering and having a bit of a laugh, some people going “Oh no” — they are actually upset. Some people get offended and go, “I can’t believe they’re doing that here! Take it home.” I’m beginning to accept that everyone’s completely different.’

‘But it’s real socialising. We still have to learn how to argue in public,’ I say.
‘Have you ever had to throw someone out?’ I ask.

‘Yes. But not very often,’ says Matt. ‘There are quite a few mentally disabled people who come around. There’s a kind of halfway house up the road, and they’ll come in and just start touching people, eating their food or whatever, and I find it one of the most challenging situations. They are not interested in having a coffee. This space is not even relevant to them. They are not even worrying about the social environment. I find it a conflict to actually have to say, “No, you can’t do that here.”’

‘Do you ever tire of the smell of coffee?’ I ask.

‘I don’t notice it,’ says Matt. ‘It’s got to that point I don’t notice it at all. The air just smells thick.’

I think about the day I was walking along St Kilda Road in the affluent business area near Commercial Road, where cafés are dotted among the large corporate buildings. In the road, standing on the tramline, all I could smell was freshly roasted coffee, yet all I could see were cars and dust from the tram tracks; the cafés were situated well back from the footpath, it was as if the strong coffee aroma had been pumped into the street, and I thought of early nineteenth-century Melbourne without proper sewerage and the different kinds of city stench. Yet in twentieth-century corporate Melbourne it felt as though coffee fuelled the hubbub of business transaction, that the street literally survived on it. I did not need to stop for a coffee break, I had had my hit walking along the footpath.

‘Do you go out to cafés yourself?’ I ask Matt.

‘I generally don’t because I have trouble relaxing in them,’ he says. ‘Chances are I’ll sit there and I’ll be watching someone doing something slowly and I start to get frustrated. It’s too close to home, unfortunately. On my days off, definitely I’ll go and relax in a café but generally I’ll just have a coffee and leave.’

I thank Matt and he says it's been a good opportunity to talk about how interesting it is to watch the dynamics and the relationships in the café. I walk out into the cold evening. People are bumping into friends and stopping and talking, or lingering on the footpath. Others are sitting in cafés, others in lounge rooms. I walk across the road to Jaspers, a very boutique coffee retailer, initially set up to support Australian coffee growers. I buy a quarter of a kilo of a coffee that costs 48 dollars a kilo. The aroma of freshly-roasted coffee now permeates my lounge room.

I think about Matt's impression of cafés, of the 'underground café' producing boutique coffee by acquiring and roasting its own beans and providing its own style of space. Matt has taken coffee custom and expertise and run with it, with no care for any historical tradition, and I am caught somewhere between the present and the past, wanting to say that the initial espressos of the 1950s were so important for his being here. I also think that the way the streets are now used creates an urban lifestyle, and that it took so long, from the 1850s to the 1940s, for the Melbourne City Council to prevent people loitering in the streets. I think back to the words of Jean, one of the elderly women I interviewed in Canterbury about going out in the 1950s, who said of the migrants of the period that '[they] were all drinking coffee in the streets. That was the common denominator'. She was implying it was unacceptable.

A few years ago while trying to find some research on the local coffee experience, I came across a 1976 Masters thesis by Di Sgro, entitled *The Italian Espresso Bar: A Case Study* [unpublished]. The thesis was submitted the same year I left Australia for Europe. Sgro's thesis is an A4-size tatty, dusty manuscript held

together by only two staples, yet it is my first, and almost only, big find on local research on cafés – a study completed twenty-five years before its time, before the ‘middle-class city’ that tried to eradicate diversity (Brown-May, 1998: 140) embraced the café.

Sgro considers the function of an espresso bar in Brunswick in the 1970s for first-generation Italian migrants. She works as an assistant at an espresso bar she calls ‘Franco’s’ so she can observe the men who go there and what they do, and the kinds of relationships they develop – espresso bars for Italian migrants in the 1970s and earlier were only meant for men, as they were in the piazzas in Italy. Sgro paints a fascinating picture of the intricacies of relationships Franco’s espresso bar provides, that may not have been present elsewhere in its patrons’ lives.

Sgro notes the scarce literature providing ‘insight into the life of Italians in Melbourne’ (1976: 2) and into the life of espresso bars. For me, by the late 1990s, I still feel this is the case. The reason I am so interested in Sgro’s work is because it focuses on the way patrons use the espresso bar, and not just on the industry. Sgro mentions that the espresso bar has always played ‘a central role in the community life of an Italian town, especially a Southern Italian agricultural town, which is precisely the area from which Australia has received most of her Italian migrants’ (1976: 8). But in Australia, states Sgro, the espresso bar:

[plays] additional roles which it did not play in Italy. For example, it acts as an information service for new arrivals who are unable to speak English. In this capacity it may act as anything from an employment and housing agency to a marriage counselling bureau. ... [For some] it provides a chance to meet people who may be experiencing a similar period of difficulty (26).

Sgro's description of Franco's draws me back to a very local experience that was both not available but also intriguing to me in the 1970s. The front windows of Franco's display 'dusty signs advertising "Crodino" and "Bisleri"' (10). The building is old and large with extremely high ceilings, which Sgro says creates an 'empty barrenness' (11); this effect is exacerbated by 'the faded grey cement walls and grey cement floors ... which are always covered with layers of dust' (11). At the counter you can buy 'an espresso coffee or a non-alcoholic drink or, if you are extremely hungry, there is a limited selection of usually hard, stale biscuits and cakes' (11). But what is more important is that you can also get cards, pencils, paper and change for the 'various indoor sports' (11). Next to a jukebox is a phone 'for people to contact their friends at the espresso [bar]' (11). There are billiard tables in another room and 'backroom' for more serious card games and 'business' discussions (12).

Sgro identifies different groups who fraternise in the espresso bar. At Franco's these include the pensioners, who hung around most of the day as they were accustomed to do in Italy and played card games or draughts, or just sat without talking (15). There were the men in their mid-thirties to fifties who came after five and who played more serious card games out the back. Then there were about three groupings of younger men in their twenties, each arranged around a person considered a prestigious leader, and called 'Sammy's group', or 'Angelo's group', and so on. These younger groups engaged in conversation, and in playing cards or billiards (17). Sammy had attended university in Italy, and although he had not passed, he became the person to assist with official papers like licence renewals and housing loan requests. There were also the loners who didn't attach to any group and spent most of their time watching the others.

Sgro found the function of the espresso bar varied according to the needs of the specific groups identified. The old men could 'relatively pleasantly while-away the day'

(25); the middle-aged men could ‘relax and occupy [their] time between leaving for shift work and dinner time’ (25); and for the younger men, Franco’s was a place to organise group activities or for some to escape from school. For the loners, it was a place ‘where one, at least physically, was not alone’ (25). Although Sgro states that fraternising espresso bars in Melbourne was a continuation of a custom in Italy, she also considers that it that came to have a more undesirable meaning:

[It] is a custom which is no longer seen as desirable but as “deviant” and “harmful”, not only by the “receiving society”, but also by some “assimilated” members of the migrant community (25).

Sgro does not go into the reasons why. Sgro thesis was challenging prejudiced views of espresso bars. One negative view was that going to an espresso was a ‘habit of “men living in overcrowded conditions in the depressed inner suburbs of Sydney and Melbourne, working as unskilled factory workers … sometimes becoming delinquents, criminals and psychotics”’ (27). Sgro knew that such negative views did ‘not consider the possible constructive and helpful features an espresso bar may provide’ (27). The middle-class Australian attitude was that men should be encouraged to belong to more organised clubs rather than sit around in a café – but this wasn’t necessarily a custom Italian migrant men preferred.

Sgro considers the espresso bar fills different roles for its patrons. For some ‘the espresso [bar] is an area where one is not required to constantly give deference to and to subordinate one’s ideas to older people … especially when the parental values are no longer seen as being relevant models of behaviour, due to the different social environment’ (27-28). Others sought company between shifts when they knew no-one

was at home, others were just lonely, and some may have been ‘deviant’. For many patrons, espresso bars ‘are no more than a place to drink coffee, talk and generally pass the time away’ (30). The espresso bar provides ‘a community that satisfies a diversity of needs: companionship, acceptance, recreation, a convenient “pick-up” … but finally and most importantly, the patronage of [espresso bars] … is merely the continuation of a custom practised in Italy’ (30).

But going to an espresso bar is more than just a custom. The espresso bar usually occupies a central place in a piazza ‘at the very heart of the village, where all the village’s political, economical, and social life takes place’ (Maraspini in Sgro, 1976: 6), and where ‘people can meet without committing themselves’ (Sgro, 1976:7), which means, in effect, the espresso bar plays a very important role within the community.

Sgro describes the three rooms in Franco’s – the main room with two sections, one with the counter, chairs and tables, a juke box and a telephone, the other with pinball and soccer machines, and a billiard table; the second room with three billiard tables; and the back room with smaller tables and chairs for serious card games and business discussions (12). Sgro also describes another ‘room’.

This ‘room’ consisted of the doorway and the footpath directly in front of the espresso [bar], which is used to watch the passing scene, especially from 5 pm to 6 pm of the afternoon. As one becomes familiar with the espresso [bar] and the lives of the inhabitants one comes increasingly to appreciate the importance of

such a room. It is in this room that the patrons feel they have a chance, however unlikely, to meet a girl without the presence of the respective families (12).

It was this ‘room’ that embodied the clash between Australian middle-class attitudes and those of the Italian migrants. It was confronting for middle-class Australians to see people from other cultures loitering in the streets, especially when they had spent so much time ‘cleaning them up’. It was a conflict of interest between how the Australian middle-class and European migrants perceived urban space. It was the use of the space between the café and the street that was considered most unacceptable by the Australian middle-class. Sgro tells of its origins:

[It] may be said that the practice of standing in front of the espresso was a reflection of the piazza or village square in Italy. It was here that families promenaded, young met and old people reminisced. Many respondents referred to the piazza and its importance in the life of an Italian... The desire to implement the piazza and its accompanying promenade is strong among some Italians and several espresso proprietors expressed the desire to set up tables and chairs on the footpath ‘so people could sit and enjoy the scene’ but so far their efforts to place such an institution on more than an informal basis have met with official disapproval (13).

Sgro writes that ‘[espressos] have generally been regarded in a rather unfavourable light in Melbourne, especially by some local councils and indeed some have actively discouraged their operation’ (1). I return to the work of historian Andrew Brown-May who writes about how the middle-class set about making the city of Melbourne a

'respectable public space' (1998: 140), about 1920s middle-class values meaning the eradication of social diversity, like the coffee barrow keeper, 'the cripple or the blind man, the war veteran or the immigrant' (140). Brown-May intimates that '[a] middle-class demand for privacy ... deliberately neutralised the street as the fundamental democratic forum' (207).

Nevertheless, according to Sgro, by the 1970s the espresso bars of the 1950s had continued 'to operate relatively ignored by the wider community' (Sgro, 1976: 1).

I walk back to my car from Atomica in Brunswick Street, hoping I haven't got a parking ticket. Most of the retailers have closed except for the florist, and the lights have come on in the cafés and restaurants dotted along the street. It seems there are more people on the street at this time of evening than there are during the day. The cafés are now licensed, and there is more to eat than stale cakes sold over the counter – as in the early espresso bars.

Our local café culture has a long history, and it has taken not only the cafés of the 1950s but also the people who fraternised the cafés at that time who had also come from overseas, to show us how to use the streets. In the early 1980s, a few years after Sgro explores an espresso café fraternised by migrant Italians, Kristin Williamson writes an article about an espresso café set up by Anglo-Australians in the Victorian seaside town of Lorne. Williamson describes Lorne in the 1950s as a 'sedate seaside resort full of guest houses where western district graziers and their families spent their annual holidays playing tennis' and being served three course meals which included roast beef and Queen pudding (1981: 38).

The Arab is set up in 1956, the same year The Legend espresso bar is set up in Bourke Street, and two years after Pellegrini's, which was further along Bourke Street. The Arab, situated on the esplanade in Lorne, is set up by the three Smith brothers: Alistair, a carpenter, Graham, a classical dancer, and Robin, who worked in a bank. The inspiration for the café came mainly from Graham's encounters with café life in Europe when travelling with the Russian ballet company, and from the long letters back to his brothers in Lorne about these encounters. When I interview Alistair he tells me the Arab was one of the first cafés to acquire an espresso machine in the mid-1950s, and says they acquired it through the Italian swimming team out here for the 1956 Olympics, who were training at by Lorne.

At the Arab there was a long open passage in the middle of the restaurant, as the Smith brothers wanted the customers 'to see everything that was happening' (38). There was also a 'decadent' section known as 'the snakepit', at the back, an area covered by a striped blue and white canvas, under which large cushions were strewn between very low cane tables, and where Williamson tells us 'sophisticated first-year university students [discussed] Plato's Republic' (38). Pasta and toasted sandwiches and sundaes were served, as well as coffee made from the espresso machine, and Vienna coffees of coffee and whipped cream were a specialty. For the six-week summer season the Arab was never closed. The waitresses originally only wore bikinis, until the Health Department stated it was unhygienic; they then wore butcher's aprons over the bikinis, and the aprons became a trend in other cafés and restaurants. Williamson writes that the Arab offered 'a smattering of styles ... Italian café society mixed with the American beat scene as well as a novel bit of Australiana perving on near naked and unattainable beach girls' (38).

‘The Arab was unabashedly sexist,’ she states, ‘but in those days no one knew what sexism was so it didn’t matter. … [The Arab had] become a “trendy” place before the word had even been invented.’ The clientele included magazine people, models, sportsmen, and foreign journalists. ‘It wasn’t the bronzed surfies who fraternised this place, but ‘pimply-white folksingers in duffel coats’ (38), writes Williamson. This was the bohemian period of the beat poets. Musicians also played at the Arab – ‘[hairy] folk singers like Paul Marks and Brian Mooney. Jazz players like Frank Traynor’ (38) – and even the American cast of *West Side Story*.

Like Fasoli’s, the bohemian café set up in the late 1890s in Melbourne, the Arab became the bohemian seaside café of the 1950s to 1970s. The antics by the Arab bohemians were just as sexist as the clubs set up in Fasoli’s, and the headiness just as reckless. As the headline of Williamson’s article states, the Arab created its own mythology. This makes me recall Arnold Zable’s phrase in *Café Scheherazade*, of the café experience we conjure ourselves, as a ‘café of the mind’. The Arab was a café of the mind for the Smith brothers that resonated with many in need of change. My sentiments resonate with Williamson when she says: ‘To a schoolgirl like me, whose life experience was not much more than tunics, porridge, hymns and horse riding … [the] Arab was a fantasy world’ (38).

I am a bit younger than Williamson, and I never found my way to the Arab in its heyday. I visit the Arab in 2000, on a journey along the Great Ocean Road. By then the café is less eccentric. The back area had been closed in many years before, the open kitchen appears like any other open restaurant kitchen; in fact, the Arab is like any other trendy café along the café-studded esplanade of Lorne – except for its history. On one of the walls hangs a framed collage of 1950s and ’60s photographs of the Arab’s past. Famous names are scrawled in big black Texta, black arrows point to now unknown

faces – unless you know the history. There are the three Smith brothers, alongside a photo of Frank Traynor, the Spinning Wheels, Bob Barnard, and many others. Photos from the 1960s jazz era sit alongside photos from 1922 of bathing boxes and of the dangerous untarred cliff road.

It wasn't just the influence of people from overseas showing ways of living in the streets that changed how we live now. The 1960s created a counter-culture who railed against the social constraints of their parents, and part of this was generated by music, poetry, Elvis, leaving religion, 'sex drugs and rock-n-roll' – and coffee.

Later in the week I phone Angela to ask her to take me into the city on a journey to the cafés where she worked or went for coffee. It's a big ask, but I want to find out what other aspects of navigating the city were different in the 1960s. I am interested in the moments when change occurs, and how they are talked about. It is a grey day and there is no sun. I meet Angela at the Hopetoun Tea Rooms in the Block Arcade off Collins Street. The décor is similar to the original décor. The walls are high and wallpapered in a green canthus leaf pattern, striped green and white rolls of material are suspended from the high ceiling in flounces. And the floor is carpeted. The menu still contains some of the original offerings. Angela says I must have a pinwheel sandwich, a savoury club sandwich shaped like a wheel, and we follow it up with scones and cream and wash it down with pots of English Breakfast tea. We chat and there is a constant murmur of patrons in the background. No-one raises their voice, in either jest or objection. Neither do we. Waitresses speak quietly, they seem to have an emotional distance when taking orders. They do not call out orders across the room.

I'm unsure what I want from Angela. I don't want to know any more about the décor or the menu. Instead we talk about the documentary on television the previous night about Elvis Presley, of his gyrating hips and rock music being televised across the world and how this was a life-changing event in the 1950s. Angela talks about the 1950s as a time of fear of anything different, of buying white goods, of saving money, of the dissembling behind the gloves and hats, and of affairs behind the good marriage, and then came cafés, and rebellion against family values and the family lifestyle. It was all happening at once. It was as though coffee and cafés were signifiers of these changes, and not their instigators. Nevertheless, the introduction of coffee and social change were often synonymous in the 1950s and '60s in Melbourne. We could still sit at the Hopetoun Tea Rooms in 2000 and eat pinwheel sandwiches and drink English Breakfast tea, but a transition of informality and social change had occurred.

Angela and I go round the corner to Hub Arcade to see Quists Danish Coffee Shop, which was established in 1938. Quists was almost the only shop selling coffee beans in the 1940s and '50s. The Hub Arcade is a very short arcade with low ceilings. Quists itself is quite a large space, but sparsely furnished with Formica tables alongside a long Formica bench. No food is served except biscuits with coffee; the shop still sells coffee beans. Nothing appears to have changed for many years, from the framed Hessian bags hanging on the wall at one end, to the old signs for the different types of coffee hanging on the wall at the other end. The shop has just changed hands from the original owners. The new owner talks about renovating and selling salads and focaccias, like most other cafés. Angela and I look at each other and wordlessly bemoan the fact that another landmark will lose its original façade and meaning. We are about to visit Pellegrini's, but Angela has to leave. So I head to Bourke Street to take a photo of where The Legend used to be. Not even the terrazzo floor or the tiled column out the

front has survived, and now Priceline, a budget cosmetics shop and a large corridor occupy the space of the former café. Leonard French's Sinbad paintings are now kept at La Trobe University.

Drinking coffee no longer represents revolution. The 'political' in coffee these days, as it was in the colonial period, is the poor working conditions of the coffee plantation workers in what are now third world countries, and the problems cash crops create in these countries (Pendergrast, 1999). Loitering in the streets is no longer offensive but an urban preoccupation, and has been institutionalised by cafés being permitted to have tables on footpaths. Although initially allowed in 1933 for the Oriental Hotel in Collins Street, in 1960 'Health Inspectors deemed outdoor furniture an interference to pedestrian and other traffic' (Brown-May 2001: 71) and the 'Police Traffic Branch issued instructions to clear the footpath' (Brown-May 2001:7). Chairs and tables on the street were not seen again till 1961 but it wasn't til the 1980s that it became commonplace. Nowadays, one can drink green tea and still smell the coffee, and while cakes can be served on doilies, they don't represent the claustrophobia of the 1950s. Desires now are more immediate – having a coffee for the caffeine hit, going to a particular café just around the corner, having coffee at home using a domestic espresso unit, searching for a different flavour of coffee, an 'underground coffee', as Matt says. My lounge room has expanded onto the streets. I now take my mother or my sisters and brothers to a café, I meet my friends and lovers at a café, I socialise in public, I read in public, I take my personal concerns onto the streets, not far from where I live. I think of myself as the café owner's daughter walking between her lounge room and the café in the same relaxed manner.

I have left the tape of Matt's transcription running after he has finished talking and I listen to the shwooshing of the coffee roaster. The sound is constant. It sounds like

waves, either ebbing or receding, or someone raking stones but without the pause of the rake, or heavy rain on a tin roof. But the sound is more mechanical, it fills the foreground of the tape, except for male voices too distant to decipher, and the clatter of saucers.

When I hear that shwooshing noise I see the large roasting machine in my mind, and then the smell comes, and then I see the beans up close, and then I feel the heat of the machine and the beans under pressure. The loud background shwooshing of the roaster continues.

Conclusion

Take joy in your digressions. Because that is where the unexpected arises. That is the experimental aspect. If you know where you will end up when you begin, nothing has happened in the meantime. You have to be willing to surprise yourself writing things you didn't think you thought... You have to let yourself get so caught up in the flow of your writing that it ceases at moments to be recognisable to you as your own.

Massumi (2002: 18)

In this thesis I have explored the cultural history of coffee in Melbourne and its environs, and focussed particularly on the 1950s and '60s. Initially, I was interested in this period because I considered that there was a strong historical relationship between the present preoccupation with cafés and coffee and how we make it and drink it, and the influx of southern European migrants and their cultural customs into Australia after the Second World War. As my research progressed, I began to view the café itself as a significant informal meeting place (Oldenburg, 1989), and realised that such informal meeting places were lacking in the Australian culture of the period.

However, this insight did not occur until after I had conducted extensive archival and scholarly research into coffee and food history, and had interviewed a number of people who had experienced the transition from tea to coffee-drinking in the 1950s, and who had some experience of cafés in the period. After conducting these interviews, I realised that I was constructing an oral history of an aspect of the post-War period, which as far as I could ascertain had not been documented previously. After transcribing

the interviews, I could identify threads linking my archival and scholarly research, and the experience of my interviewees. I decided to frame each thesis chapter around an individual or group interview, and for my research to provide a wider historical and cultural context for the interview material. Later I decided to include my personal experience in each chapter, as both memoir and as a facet of immersion in my own research.

When I view my final thesis I realise I have employed different theoretical ‘windows’ or contextual fields to scrutinise memoir, oral history, archival and scholarly research related to the coffee experience. For example, chapter six focuses on Erika, an elderly Hungarian woman who migrated to Australia in the 1950s. I view Erika’s experience through the windows of Hungarian history (Lukacs, 1988), of the qualitative theory of narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) that recognises the multi-layers of stories in oral history, and of the writings of the novelist Arnold Zable (2001). Hence, I weave Erika’s words with my own commentary, as follows:

‘We don’t go to each other’s homes; we meet in the coffee shops, unless there is a special occasion, because it is an outing. Not only with my sister but all my friends, we meet in a coffee shop. Usually at 10.30 in the morning, because I am an early person.’

I think of a quote from Martin in *Café Scheherazade*: ‘This is a tale of many cities ... within a city that contains the traces of many cities’ (Zable, 2001:7). My city expands (Cook, 2005: 152).

This contextual layering could be seen as the exegetical component of this thesis – if the thesis maintained the boundaries between the creative and critical components. The

excerpt above also illustrates a more journalistic approach to introducing references. In a critical academic thesis one can juxtapose and interrelate many references to discuss an idea, whereas in creative non-fiction such references need to be incorporated in the overall structure of the scenes and the narrative.

I have been surprised at the varied lateral relationships I have been able to introduce in this thesis. The methodology of creative non-fiction, which I adopted in the research and writing of the thesis, has given me the tools to make lateral leaps and to forge lateral relationships. Initially, I was concerned that I would not be able to incorporate the concept of ‘immersion’ because my research focussed mainly on the 1950s and ’60s; Gutkind’s notion of ‘immersion’ is strongly grounded in the present. However, I developed my own, alternative concept of immersion as the thesis began to take shape. I began to use my experiences in the present to give shape to the writing of the archival and interview research. For example, a play about Melbourne bohemians in the 1920s is performed at the Trades Hall. I discover the play is set in the first known bohemian café in Melbourne called Fasoli’s. So in chapter seven, which focuses on early café culture in Melbourne, I begin by first writing about my experience of going to the play, and I even make a reference to the 8 hour day banner in the Trades Hall foyer that celebrates an equal division between work and leisure, and state ‘[my] research on coffee oscillates between the eight hours recreation and the eight hours rest’ (Cook, 2005: 154). In this project immersion crept further and further into my personal life, so that every experience had the potential to be part of the thesis narrative.

In the writing of this thesis, I employed fictional techniques to develop scenes and whole chapters. In places I used internal monologue to deal with imagined experience, such as Jean’s imagined trip to Italy (Cook, 2005: 58-59), and elsewhere I called upon fictional texts or art to describe and interpret cultural history.

As a subjective interpreter of history and culture, and a narrator of my own story, my point of view may be defined as that of a single inner-city woman immersed in coffee culture observing other's experiences, an historian and an observer, a white middle-class person who has ancestors from Europe thrice removed, a traveller who has lived overseas, a rebellious ex-Catholic schoolgirl, a naïve country girl moving to a big city, and a participant in the pub and coffee cultures. This thesis contains autobiographical material, both historical and present, but I do not consider I have written an autobiography or a memoir, nor did I set out to. The narrative contains autobiographical experience for several reasons. First, it personalises the telling of history, and makes it more subjective and relevant to the personal experience of the reader, as advocated by Inga Clendinnen (1996). Second, it moves the narrative along (Funder, 2003), and, third, it provides narrative context (Robb, 2004).

Clandinin and Connelly write that 'memory is selective, shaped, and retold in the continuum of one's experiences' (2000: 142). This statement applies to the role of my own memory in the researching and writing of this thesis. I have found that researching the thesis topic has allowed me to place my past experiences within a historical and cultural context, and has enabled me to recast and enlarge the way I view my personal past. I suspect that this process – of placing the personal past in context – occurred too for my interviewees as they were being interviewed. Clandinin and Connelly also write that 'the narrative inquirer's ... task is not so much to say that people, places, and things are this way or that way, but that they have a narrative history and are moving forward' (145). In the interviewing for, and writing of this thesis, I have been concerned to reveal my interviewees as subjects-in-process by showing their reevaluation of their own personal pasts as they are being interviewed. Massumi's statement that '[if] you know where you will end up when you begin, nothing has

happened in the meantime' (2002: 18) applies to my role as the writer of this thesis. In the writing of the thesis, I have allowed the research and the interviews to tell me something new and to place my own personal experience in flux.

Initially I conceived of this project as primarily 'objective' cultural history: I did not recognise its personal significance, and even when I decided to include my own experience as memoir, it was supported by archival research and other people's stories. Shortly after realising that I was part of the cultural history of coffee in Melbourne, I remembered an early experience of a café from my teenage years in Geelong:

I watch the manager's teenage daughter wander into the café, wearing her school uniform with her satchel slung over her shoulder, and head for the back room, the family lounge. She tosses her school satchel onto the floor and comes back out into the café and talks to her father who is cleaning the espresso machine. He asks about her day at school and if she has any homework. She nods and says she has done it, and then wanders over to one of the tables and slumps down beside her friends. She moves so casually, as if she is in her own lounge room. It is the casualness that I envy. I come from a family where you behave differently when you are out in public, in a more reserved and respectable way, and this person is crossing barriers that I don't even understand yet (Cook, 2005: 174).

Writing this thesis as creative non-fiction has been a process of discovery for me – of recognising how I came to understand and cross cultural barriers, and of integrating archival, scholarly and qualitative research with my own and imagined experience to tell my story and the story of others as cultural history.

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