

## Growing Clementine

Her name was Clementine, named after the tangor that blossomed on their orchard. As children, the orchard was our playground. Games of hide and seek, not closed by sunsets but by sore feet and tired eyes. The first night I slept at the orchard, Clementine whispered *bellissima* as she brushed my hair. She was an only child; I was one of eight. When we played at her house we would run through aisles of fruit. When she came to mine, we would hide under the bed and agree to live there forever.

In the 1950s, Italy was still suffering for its role in The War, but an economic explosion in the North saw migration out of a poverty-stricken South. Clementine's family left fruit to rot. We made promises to write and visit. We waved goodbye, and as the car left the orchard, I ran for it. Though the car disappeared below the horizon, only sore feet would send me home.



His name was Carlo. The first time I saw him it was the village festa of St Joseph. He was drunk. He was always around my father's shop, but I never took notice of him. That night, as the village flooded red, danced, and sang, he introduced himself as the love of my life. He was a bit arrogant, but in an almost charming kind of way. I was 16, he was 19 and we were learning how to love. We drank limoncello and went to *il cinema*. We never watched the movies though. Instead, we discovered each other's bodies, voyaging hands, curious lips.

When my uncle and his mistress caught us at the cinema, my uncle wasted no time approaching my father to share how *un-Catholic* his daughter was behaving. My father, preserving family honour, struck Carlo, breaking his nose. Carlo, blood colouring his hand the shade of St Joseph, asked my father for my hand in marriage.

I told this story in a letter bound for Clementine. We had been writing each other every couple of months or so. Unfortunately, mail took so long to arrive, that by the time letters were read, jobs had changed, disputes ended, lovers found. I detailed in the letter the life Carlo planned for us. A new life, a better one, upon the shores of a place called *Australia*. He would go there and get us set up with a job and a place to live, then I would join him. Clementine wrote me back saying that she would come to Sicily and see me before I left. And true to her word, only days following the arrival of her letter, she stood on my doorstep.



It happened slowly, then all at once. Clementine's return wound back the clock, we were children again, running in orchards. Only this time, we weren't hiding from each other, but the world that could never understand. She would brush my face with the back of her fingers, running them down my cheek, curved the shape of my chin. My stomach heavy, my knees weak. *Carlo never kissed me the way Clementine did.*

Despite the sweetest summer fruit, we parted ways as the days cooled and the leaves turned yellow. I packed a small suitcase for Australia - *wondering what one brings to new beginnings.*

Carlo picked me up from the airport. His beguiling smile was almost as wide as his arms. He stood outstretched on a bench above the crowds, waving for my attention *mia bella!* He called *mia bella!* We drove in our brand-new second-hand Ford Fairlane straight to the Italian embassy where we signed marriage papers. Clementines sat decorative in a bowl beside the window. Carlo had rented us a small bungalow in the backyard of another Italian couple. Prickly pear grew by the window. The oven only worked sometimes, and the roof leaked. Carlo would say *è temporaneo*. When the water came out brown, *è temporaneo*. When Melbourne's winter chill cut through cracks in doors, *è temporaneo*.

I got a job at the Kinnears Ropeworks. I was so proud to work, to help Carlo and me build a life in this new place. I made so many friends. But not everybody was friendly. One day a woman walking behind me snarled *wog* under her breath. I turned with all the dignity of prized horse and said, *well at least I'm not a convict*.



We were blessed with a daughter just before the decades close. We named her Rita, after Saint Rita, and Carlo's mother. She was born just as America was colonising The Moon, and I wondered what the world would be like for her and hoped it would be kind. Little over a month before Rita joined us terrible riots erupted in The States between the police and gay rights activists. I was thankful to be oceans away.

I was surprised to receive her letter; I had never reached out to share an address. Clementine wrote that she had asked my sister for my details. She had moved to America and *if I had* tried to reach her in Italy, Clementine would be none the wiser. She detailed all the friends she had made and that they were *just like us*. She said she had never felt so free.

I felt a burning in my belly. I looked at Rita, using the couch to stable her stance. I was angry at Clementine. *Just like us?* Why would she write such dangerous... dishonest words. I folded her letter back into its envelop and tucked it away in the dark corners of my wardrobe. Though I felt like I was hiding something incriminating, nervous every time someone went near. At the same time, destroying the letter felt just as wrong. So, I let the letter haunt me, as to not lose her forever.



There were three more letters and two more children before I sat down to write to Clementine. Carlo was working three jobs since I had the babies, sometimes he would be so tired I would find him asleep at the wheel in the driveway.

The night I began my letter, Carlo had fallen asleep beside Rita. Christopher and Robert on his chest.

*Dear Clementine,*

*I hope this letter finds you well, I'm sorry it took so long to write. I have kept all your letters and I think of you often. Though far are we from the young women who ran in orchards. I have three wonderful children, I will enclose some polaroids. Carlo is a loving husband and father. He works hard, goes to church, calls his mother. I love him, that I am sure. But I am also sure that you are as part of my marriage as he is. When my eyes are closed, these hands resurrect images of you.*

*I wish you could be here in Australia; I wish that we could have shared the life of freedom you write about in your letters. But we were born at the wrong time. These young men*

*and women are fighting and fierce, they do not fear the way  
that I fear.*

*I am writing for all the times I wanted to but didn't have the  
words. I am writing to tell you that I cannot write you. That  
I have a good life, with a good husband, and I owe him for all  
he has given me.*

*I wish that I could see you, love you, taste you. But it  
cannot be.*

*Forever,*

*Me.*



It was about two months after I posted my letter that a small  
envelop made of rag paper and tied up with string, landed in  
my letter box. It contained a piece of paper with the word  
*forever* written in familiar cursive letters. There was also a  
small pouch that that contained seeds for a clementine tree.