

Natalie Kon-yu

The Lucky Country

She isn't here. Alba scans the crowd, searching the faces, looking for that high fine forehead, those angular cheeks, the lips pressed thin. The face of her mother. But she cannot see her. Alba looks at her watch. There is a little over an hour before she has to herd her boys onto the wooden platform leading to the boat. A little over an hour before she has to give her mother one last kiss, to look at her one last time.

Aurelia is here already. Her face is pale, as though it has been scrubbed with bleach. Maria is standing beside her mother, holding onto her arm; Giulietta is on Aurelia's other side. Maria's steady hand at Aurelia's elbow looks like a promise. A way of letting her mother know that she will never leave as her brothers have done. Emilio is standing by his older sister. Two suitcases sit at his feet like well-trained dogs. His head is inclined towards Aurelia and he has a steady hand on Paolo's shoulder.

His voice is low, soft. Alba can hear him promising to call as soon as they get to Enzo's house in Melbourne. To visit in a few years' time after they have made some money.

Aurelia smiles at her son, and Alba sees a resigned sadness in her mother-in-law's face. Aurelia grabs Emilio's arm, her face is level with his shoulder and she kisses it. The gesture is so intimate that Alba looks away.

There are many faces Alba recognises in the crowd. The Mancinis are here; Tony and Vittoria are going to Adelaide to be with Tony's parents. Vittoria is being smothered by her mother's embrace. The two short women are squished together like balls of dough. Alba coughs

out the laugh at the back of her throat. Tony is about five years younger than Emilio. Alba remembers him as a boy, so tall and thin, in clothes that were always too short for him, as if he grew in his sleep every night. Even now, the sleeves of his Sunday jacket are not long enough to cover his bony wrists. There is a vulnerability to those bare wrists which makes Alba want to cover them. Behind Tony and Vittoria, Alba recognises Giulia Amarose. She is wedged in between her parents and her husband's parents. Her husband Natale has been living in Melbourne for three years now. Giulia's second son Silvio was born six months after Natale left. What must it be like for her, Alba wonders, on her way to live with a man she has not seen for three years? Rumours of Natale's other women have wafted around Salerno since Silvio was born, persistent as summer mosquitoes. Yet here Giulia is, in a woollen dress the colour of deep wine, a brand new navy blue coat with shoes and bag to match. Her light hair has been set in curls, her hat is perched on her head at a jaunty angle. Giulia catches Alba's eye, they smile at one another before Alba cranes her neck to look for her mother.

The pier is crowded with unfamiliar faces as well as those which Alba knows so well. People have come from all over Campania to take this boat. Alba has stood on this pier more times than she could count, but it has never felt like this. The air around her is frenzied, dense with movement. A small crowd of onlookers has formed on the streets. Fathers and their young sons gesticulate towards the boat; women in church shawls are clutching framed pictures of St Christopher to their chests and mumbling prayers. How many times has Alba watched people get on and off boats here, begin and end their voyages? Today she is finally one of those people she has envied: one of the lucky ones who boards a ship to sail off for a new life. But she never imagined that she would feel as unsteady as she does now, as though the ground beneath her is a thin plank of wood, tipping up and down beneath her feet.

Next to her Marco is trying to tug his hand out of Alba's grip.

"I want to go and have a look in the water!" he complains as Alba's hand tightens over her son's.

"A minute, Caro," she murmurs, "we have to wait here so that Nonna and Zia can find us." In her grip his hand squirms like a fish. She stands on tiptoes, sure that she has just seen Violetta's head bobbing

towards her in the crowd. Alba leads Marco towards his father. Emilio looks at Alba in surprise as she puts Marco's hand into his. "Violetta," Alba rasps to him as she moves away to meet her sister.

Violetta's cheeks are splotched pink despite the cold November morning. Her breaths come out in short, sharp bursts. Alba reaches for her sister's hands.

"She's not there," Violetta breathes. "I drove back, banged on the back door, the front door and her bedroom window. All the curtains are pulled shut."

Alba's mittened fingers are trembling in Violetta's leather-clad hands. She cannot look at her sister's face. They stand there for a moment, like much younger versions of themselves, their hands clutched tight in each other's grip. Violetta slides her hand out of Alba's grasp.

Alba bites her lip. A shaky sigh snakes its way into her chest, bringing with it the threat of tears. Violetta pulls Alba into a hug.

"She must be on her way, Alba, you know mamma. She probably decided to walk here herself. Stubborn woman. If only she would give me a spare key, I could have checked the house. Made sure she wasn't just bathing."

"Why is she so late?" Alba twists away from her sister and checks her watch. The thin gold hand is making its steady way up towards nine o'clock. "You don't think, you don't think something could have happened to her?"

"Like what?"

"I worry about her, Letta." Alba wraps her jacket around her like a cocoon. The wool of the collar scratches at her throat. "She's getting older, and . . ."

Violetta laughs out loud.

"Alba, our mother has the strength of an ox!" Violetta sucks in her stomach, lifts her shoulders. She pats her hair, three, four times. When she speaks again it is in the authoritative tone of the big sister. "You know what she's like, Alba, she must always do things her own way. She will be here. You just have to give her time."

"It's my fault, I should have gone to see her this morning."

"Oh Dio! With two little boys and two trunks full of luggage? How would you have managed that?"

"I don't know," Alba murmurs. She turns away from her sister and looks up at the mountains. From here she can see the Bastiglia and

Castello Arecchi on the highest peaks. The way the low white and grey buildings sprawl out over the mountain reminds Alba of the first flush of snow. When will she see these mountains again? Will she forget all this; the way the morning light seems to rise up from the sea, the way the mist hovers at the feet of the mountains? She is leaving before the first snow. Sailing off before winter beds down properly around Salerno. Someone has told her that there won't be snow in Australia, at least none in Melbourne, where she and Emilio will live. What then, thinks Alba, will the mountains look like in winter? She feels it suddenly, the itch of panic. What if there are no mountains in Australia? And what if she never does make it back here to see these ones again? For all Alba's life the mountains of Salerno have been here, standing sentinel beside the sea.

"Alba!" Emilio is walking towards her. He is holding his body as straight and taut as he does in church on Sundays.

"Paolo and Marco?"

"They're over there, with mamma." He blows on his hands. Emilio never wears gloves before December. He hadn't put them on this morning when Alba offered them to him, stowing them instead into his jacket pocket. His palms look so coarse that it is almost as if he has grown another layer of skin, a kind of hide. Alba stares at his hands now and cannot believe how much faith she has placed in them.

Emilio reaches past Violetta for Alba's arm. "There's about half an hour before we have to start boarding. I think we should get the boys ready."

Alba's attention snaps back to the pier. She can hear the hum of the small crowd around her. Everywhere she looks there are families huddled together. There is the furtive feeling of eavesdropping, a witnessing of private grief. Alba looks over at Emilio's mother, standing with Maria, Giulietta and the two boys. Part of her wants to board the ship now, as some people are doing, walking up the gangplank with determined steps as if every ounce of their being is intent on moving forwards. But more than anything she wants to run to her mother's house, to bang on the shutters, to break through the windows and find Serafina. From here her mother's home seems so close and yet so very far away. Emilio is following Alba's gaze.

"There isn't time, cara," he says, his voice low. "Come, she'll be on her way already," he says as he presses his palm against hers and leads her back to his family.

Alba stands as tall as she can. Her eyes scan the crowds again, but everyone is clustered into groups. There are no lone figures walking towards her. Alba turns around on the spot. She can see her boys saying goodbye to their aunts and their Nonna. Aurelia is crushing Paolo to her chest, Maria and Violetta are crouched down with Marco, who is hugging Giulietta. Alba looks at Emilio. His unmoving arms look like they have been stitched in place beside his body. Alba stares back at the mountains.

“She really isn’t coming,” she says, and her words drift into the cold air of the morning, like a handkerchief fluttering to the ground. Emilio pulls her into a hug, tucks her head under his chin. Alba holds onto the lapels of his jacket as his arms encircle her. He doesn’t say anything. There are no words he could say that wouldn’t wound her.

“I’m sorry,” she whispers into his chest, her lips brushing against the wool of his jumper. Still he doesn’t speak, she can feel his thumbs moving up and down her spine before his hands fall away.

“We really should get on board, Alba,” he murmurs into her hair. “I don’t want the boys getting any more upset than they are now.”

Alba turns around. Paolo looks sullen, his lips pressed tightly together as he stands wedged in between his aunts. Marco is red-eyed from crying. He is grasping Aurelia’s thumb in his small hand. To Marco, Aurelia is as much a part of his family as his brother and his parents. They have all lived together throughout his short life. He doesn’t understand why his nonna is staying behind. But there is something else that keeps him bound to his grandmother. Marco is more like Aurelia than anyone else is. The two of them share more than just eye colour. It is as though, for all the difference in their years, they see and feel things the same way.

Alba walks over to Maria and Giulietta, and hugs each of them in turn. “Please take care of her for us,” she whispers. Giulietta nods, and Alba moves to Aurelia. Behind her she can see Maria step into her brother’s arms. As Alba looks at Aurelia, she sees the space where her mother should be. Aurelia is smiling up at her but there is grief in her face. As Aurelia leans up to kiss Alba’s cheek, she presses a small cotton pouch into her hand.

“It was my grandmother’s,” she breathes into Alba’s ear, “I’ve been keeping it for you. No, no,” she folds her hand over Alba’s as Alba moves to open the little purse, “don’t open it here, the girls would never forgive me if they saw it.” Aurelia places her hand on Alba’s chest. “Your

mamma loves you, Alba. I think that's why she is not here. Some of us find it harder to say goodbye." Alba looks at her family, *his family*, she thinks, and she feels as if she might fall to the ground. Nothing in her life has prepared her for this moment. The large concrete pier they are standing on seems suddenly frail. It juts out from the land, at once part of Salerno and separate from it. She has an urge to run off the pier and feel, once more, the stable earth of her hometown beneath her. To be immersed, again, in the reassurance of familiar routine. She, Emilio and the boys have begun this journey without knowing where it will end. Australia is, and has only ever been an idea for her. Somewhere far away from here.

Aurelia's palm is flat against Alba's chest. Surely Aurelia can feel Alba's hastened heartbeat. A sob lurches from the bottom of her ribcage. Alba stifles the sound, but tears start to slide down her cheeks. Still Aurelia's hand does not move. Alba looks at her mother-in-law, her dark brown eyes which crinkle the same way as Emilio's when they smile, at her mouth, the bottom lip which always pouts, just a little, like Marco's. Alba realises how fragile rib-cages are. How they hold so much in, how different sensations register in them: guilt spreading out darkly, fear bouncing back and forth between the dark interior and the skin, love cushioning the heart. It is amazing to Alba that she feels all this at the same time. She breathes in deeply. Aurelia's warm gloved hand is held to Alba's heart like a poultice.

Alba covers Aurelia's hand with her own. She wants to say so many things, to express how much the hand on Alba's chest and the small pouch mean to her: her gratitude for Aurelia's kindness to Serafina and her family, how very sorry she is to leave. The words are forming in Alba's mind, a haze of black letters marching across a white background. But all she manages is another dry sob as she hugs Aurelia to her chest. The only words Alba manages to say are *thank you*, and then, after a pause, "I'm sorry. She should have been here."

A loud horn blares out. All around are the muffled desperate sounds of farewell. Alba turns her head, for an instant she thinks she has seen the long drape of Serafina's black coat, the wispy grey hair. When she cranes her neck she sees that the woman is a stranger. Someone else's mother.

"Come, Alba," Emilio says as he puts his arm around her, the two boys standing in front of him. Alba feels torn by his words. Her feet want to stay still, she feels more a part of this place than she ever has

before. Alba goes over to her sister. This will be her last goodbye before she boards the ship and sails away from Salerno. She never imagined that this final farewell would be to Violetta. When Alba had imagined this scene, it was always Serafina with whom she would share a last kiss and a long hug. Violetta smiles and moves towards Alba, taking an envelope from her bag as she does. Alba eyes it warily.

“Don’t worry, it’s just something from me,” Violetta says hastily as she thrusts the envelope into Alba’s hand. Alba peers inside. It is padded thick with banknotes.

“Violetta, no, this is too much.” Alba tries forcing the envelope back into her sister’s bag, but Violetta snaps the clasp shut and tucks the bag under her arm, her hands on the leather straps.

“Just take it Alba, you don’t know what is waiting for you over there. We,” Alba raises her eyebrows, “I mean, Federico and myself, wanted you to have this. Just in case.”

“It’s not from . . .” Alba looks left to the coastline which stretches like an arched back towards Amalfi; to the jagged cliffs on which the wealthy perch in brightly coloured houses surrounded by lemon groves.

“No. It’s from me. I am, after all, your older sister.”

Alba closes the envelope and puts it into her bag. Her shoulder aches with all the last-minute things which have been crammed inside her handbag.

“Now look, Alba,” Violetta puts her hands on her sister’s shoulders, “I don’t want you to feel guilty about going. You have been looking after mamma for a long time. Gianni and I are still here. Heaven knows I won’t be leaving Salerno, not while Federico’s business is doing so well. We will take care of mamma, you needn’t worry about that.”

Alba nods. Tears are falling silently down her face once more. She does not sob, nor does she lift her hand to wipe her face. She forces herself to keep looking into her sister’s face, to not turn around again and search the pier for her mother. Violetta places her hands on either side of Alba’s face, as if she has understood the impulse Alba has just had.

“Think of your children, Alba. Think of them every day so that you remember why it is you are leaving. Promise me that.”

“I will, I promise.”

“Good girl.” The sisters hug one last time. They hug like they have not hugged in years.

Alba stands back and sees her family waiting for her. Emilio's hand is on his mother's shoulder. Paolo is holding Marco's right hand, Marco is sucking his thumb.

"Letta, I don't . . . I mean, I thought she would be here." Violetta's hand falls away from Alba's arm. Violetta sighs and as she exhales, she looks somehow smaller, less sure of herself.

"I know, Alba, I thought so too."

The ship's horn blares out three times. Men in uniforms are now hurrying the queue of passengers onto the boat. Alba looks at her sister and again there are no words left.

Violetta sniffs, pulls in her stomach and pats Alba's arm.

"Come now, you don't want to be late."

Alba joins her husband and boys. Aurelia has let go of Emilio and is fingering the chain of rosary beads she wears around her neck. Alba picks Marco up. Paolo is standing in front of his father.

"All right then," Emilio says, and there are more desperate kisses and muffled farewells before he leads his family towards the gangplank which joins the pier of Salerno to the gently rocking ship. Alba steps into the queue leading up to the wooden planks, barely seeing the heads of the people in front of her. Why is Serafina not here? Under all her confusion and hurt there lurks a thought so sinister that Alba feels the bitter taste of bile rise in her throat. When she'd pictured this day she'd imagined so many of the things surrounding her now: the handkerchiefs damp from tears, the rosary beads clutched in women's hands, her own heavy heart at the sight of Aurelia's face. But she'd also expected something else, a kind of secret jubilation bubbling inside her and making all these scenes of farewell a little easier to bear. Instead, the adrenalin pulsing through Alba's veins is from fear over her mother's absence. She feels a sharp jab below her ribcage; she gasps at the pain. Emilio turns to look at her, but she shakes her head. They step up onto the gangplank. Emilio hands over their papers. A uniformed man with a thick moustache flicks through the documents, his eyes raking over the family before nodding and handing back the papers.

So quick, Alba thinks, so casual.

They step onto the boat and Alba hugs Marco tightly to her as they make their way through the crowd towards the viewing deck. People are lined up here, pressing against the rails, staring back at the families

on the pier. Emilio leads Alba and the boys to a less crowded part of the deck. Marco's face is pressed up against Alba's and together they locate Maria, Giulietta, Violetta and Aurelia in the crowd.

"Nonna Fina didn't come," Paolo says, his chin pressed against the smooth black bar of the ship's railing. Alba's ribs feel as though they are about to split open. Emilio ruffles Paolo's hair.

"We saw her last night," he tells his son, "we said goodbye to her last night."

Alba closes her eyes. It is then that she sees her mother, standing at her back gate, the November wind lashing the loose strands of her grey hair about her face. She was wearing her black shawl and her hand was raised in farewell. Alba remembers turning back, two or three times, as they walked down the hill. Serafina didn't move. She kept her arm in the air. Alba waved again, and her mother's arm finally dropped down by her side. Alba opens her eyes and sees Letta, Maria, Giulietta and Aurelia waving at them from the dock. She looks past them, past the building and roads to the green mountains yawning up from the earth and the place where her mother lives.

"She still could have come this morning," Paolo says as the plank is pulled up from the pier and onto the ship. Alba feels bruised by the matter-of-factness of her son's tone, the directness of his statement. Emilio looks at Alba and she looks out to the dock. The horn blasts again and she lifts her hand and waves goodbye. All around them people are shouting out to those they love. The boat creaks away from the pier and into the sea. Marco's arm tightens around Alba's shoulders. She hugs her son as the distance between the boat and the shore, between her family and the life they have known begins to lengthen, like a fine woollen string being spun from fleece.

At this moment Alba feels as though everything which connects her to her mother tautens and quivers to breaking point. Alba closes her eyes, unable to bear, for one moment more, looking at the pier from which her mother is missing.