

an independent bank account. As a consequence, she cashed the money orders and kept her savings in old jam tins stored at the back of the pantry.

Sissy sat at the kitchen table and watched Odette holding a wattle branch in one hand while sketching with the other.

‘You like them ones, don’t you?’ Sissy said. ‘You paint them a lot.’

Odette twirled the branch between two fingers. The yellow flowers performed a pirouette. ‘I do like them. So do the birds and insects. I’m painting this one because it comes out early in the season. There’s not much else that flowers this time of year.’

‘You could paint all these flowers and birds by memory, couldn’t you, Nan?’ Sissy asked. ‘You don’t need the branch in front of you.’

‘You’re right. I don’t need them in front of me, Sis. But, as each tree is different, so is each branch and leaf and flower. What I’m painting this afternoon can’t be painted again. They’re all different. Once this flower dies there won’t be another quite the same.’

She handed the branch to Sissy, who closely examined the serrated leaves and fine ball-shaped flowers. ‘This comes from the tree in the front yard?’

‘It does.’

‘They’re all the same, the leaves and flowers on that tree.’ Sissy sighed.

‘No, they’re not,’ Odette protested. ‘You have to look more closely.’

Sissy moved the branch closer to her face, until a leaf tickled her nose and she turned cross-eyed. 'I can't see any difference between them. It's like they're all twins.'

'That's because you're not looking with soft eyes,' Odette said.

'Soft eyes? What's that?'

Odette dropped her paintbrush into an old Vegemite jar filled with water. She picked up a second, finer brush and dipped it in the yellow paint. 'That's something you'll come to know with age and patience. It takes time to learn. You're not ready yet.'

'Will you teach me, Nanna?'

Odette delicately placed the tip of the brush against the greeting card and drew a beautiful flower with the briefest of strokes. If she heard Sissy's question, she didn't answer it.

Odette was thinking of her own childhood and the rare but valued time she spent in the bush surrounding the mission. She often shared these stories with Sissy, yet she also carried other memories of the mission that she kept to herself. These had etched themselves into the telling wrinkles on her face. When Odette looked up she noticed Sissy watching her closely and wondered what the girl was thinking.

Once the cards had dried they wrapped them in greaseproof paper and tied them together with a red ribbon. Odette tidied the kitchen table and swept the floor as rain began to beat on the iron roof. As the rain got heavier, water started dripping onto the floor. Sissy ran around the kitchen with the empty jars they kept for when the roof leaked, placing them on the floor to catch the drops. The half-filled jars soon performed a tattoo, accompanied by the erratic beat of rain on the roof.

‘I love this sound,’ Sissy said. ‘Do you love it, Nanna?’

‘Yes, I do.’

In the early evening, they sat across the table from each other, eating bowls of rabbit stew and listening to the radio. Sissy finished her meal, buried her face in the bowl and licked it. She rested the empty bowl on the table. Odette smiled across the table at Sissy, who had no idea that the tip of her nose was covered in rich gravy.

‘Will we live here for a long time, Nanna?’

‘Of course, we will. Where else would we go?’

‘Maybe to the sea.’

‘The sea! What gives you that idea? The sea must be hundreds of miles away from here. At least.’

‘I’m reading a book that I borrowed from the library. The children in it go on an adventure in a boat, across the ocean. I’d like to see the ocean one day, Nanna. Would you take me?’

It had been a busy day for Odette. Her eyelids were heavy. ‘The ocean’s a long way from here. That would be a trip we’d need to do a lot of thinking about, and I’m too tired for that now. I’ll soon be asleep here if I don’t hop up. Let’s wash your face and hands, and then put you into your pyjamas.’

‘Do you know how long I’m going to live with you?’ Sissy asked, wiping her face with a warm flannel.

‘You know, Sis, you must have asked me a hundred questions today. You’re going to wear me out.’

‘Well, this question is a hundred and one. How long will I be living here, with you?’

‘I give up, girl. You tell me. How long?’

‘Forever.’ Sissy smiled.

*Forever.*

The day her daughter, Lila, was born was the happiest in Odette's life. As a mother she'd battled to ensure Lila would stay with her *forever*, and for many years she'd succeeded in keeping her daughter close. After Lila went away, Odette was forced to confront reality – although her daughter had not been taken from her, for whatever reason, Lila had decided to leave her mother behind. Each night, before Odette fell asleep, she asked the old people for help, that she would not lose Sissy as well.