

Pickle to Pie

Extract from a novel in progress, *Pickle to Pie*

Glenice Whitting

Chapter One

1985: All Saints Hospital, Day One, Monday, 7am.

“Do you think Dad knows I’m here?”

“Possibly, Arthur, but he’s heavily sedated.

Rap, rap, rap, violating vibrating, my chest. Someone poking, prodding, yelling, “Open your eyes, Frank. Open your eyes,” but I am helpless in the dark. As helpless as those tightly bound new-borns in Grandmother’s dim parlour. I remember horses’ hooves clopping and thin brittle cries, wet your finger and rub it on the edge of the glass cries. There was always the sound of babies crying in the double fronted house in Footscray. Grandmother, thin hair tortured into a bun, sturdy boots tapping, ran around the house scrubbing everything white-glove clean. The tightly propped new wash struggled in the wind as her long bloomers, split at the crotch, fought with Grandfather’s singlet.

*A split in the middle for Grossy to piddle,
A crack at the back for Grossy to kak.*

Rap, rap, rap, at the front door.

“Whatfor they come my frontside when my backside always open?” my Grossmutter grumbles as she hurries up the long hall and opens the door. I hear someone cry, “Help Mrs. Schmidt, please help.”

Grossmutter runs with a bundle to the kitchen table.

She looks through thick glasses. Her hands carefully touching.

“Get bucket of water, Franki,” she calls, and I run. She grabs my slopping bucket and tips it over the baby. It cries. Water is spilling over the table, puddling on sharp lino squares. Grossmutter grumbles, “*Ach*. Temper, only temper,” and pushes past me to get to the mop.

“How long will Dad be on life support, Mr. Sutherland?”

“It depends on many factors. The important thing at the moment is to keep him immobilized.”

“How is he?”

“As well as can be expected.”

Lying here seeing nothing, saying nothing, hearing everything. As well as can be expected? What do they expect? They race me into casualty and eight hours later saw open my chest, spread my ribs, stop my heart and now this. For Christ’s sake, I’m over seventy.

Shoes squeaking, trays rattling. The smell of antiseptic. Somewhere in the hospital I hear a baby crying. Grandmother said I was squealing like a tortured mouse when she pulled me from my hastily married mother’s womb. One more squalling bundle to lie in a crib in the dusky parlour. She named me Frank Joseph Henric Michael Fritzschenburg. Over my cradle she sang of great ancestors and past riches. *Kapel Meisters* of music at the court in Munich: concert pianists and poets gathered around her piano on snowy winter nights.

After she migrated here to Australia the people who knocked on her door were desperate women begging for help from the only trained midwife for miles.

“They know nutting,” Grandmother cried when a baby was thrust into her arms by a frightened young mother.

“Those Health Center women hopeless. What de know about die *kinder*?” She cradled the baby in the crook of her arm as she sat drinking herbal tea in her green and white kitchen.

Many times a camp bed was put up in the parlour for a pregnant girl who bore the shame for what Grandmother called, “The sins of a Gott fearing man.” They stayed until the whimpering bundle was born then disappeared into the shadowy streets of Footscray.

“Why don’t you take a break, Arthur while we fix his bed?”

Go round the other side, Lisa.”

“Has God has been in yet?”

“Watch your language. Dr Harris was in earlier and said to keep talking to the patient. He thinks someone in a coma may still be aware of what’s happening.”

"No way Gwen. I'd feel stupid talking to myself."

"The patient cannot respond, Lisa. The patient is comatose. Straighten those blankets and get another pillow.

There you go, Frank. Here's your medication."

Medication, always medication. Why does morphine make me remember my childhood? Years spent with my grandparents in their neat white house. I wish Grandmother were here now. Ten, nine, eight – my Grossmutter can fix everything – seven, seven. Seven years old and chanting to myself,

*Nobody loves me everybody hates me,
Franki's sitting in the garden eating worms.*

I'm playing with my toy soldiers in my cave under the bush in the sun-drenched yard. Grossvater is working in his vegetable garden. It's divided into neat-bordered squares each with different plants. I often help him pick sweet corn, tightly curled cabbages and ripe tomatoes. Today a hot, hot wind is blowing the leaves of the fig tree he planted the day I was born. He is dressed in his white-as-white shirt and dark grey suit, the same as if he is slicing the pickled pork for our Sunday dinner. Little beads of sweat cling to the hairs of his bristly moustache.

Leaning on the handle of his spade he wipes his face with a big white handkerchief. He sees me in my hiding place, looks around, winks and then goes back to his digging. Grossmutter, waving a postcard, comes hurrying past the tomatoes. "I have news of the Weideckas," she calls. I eavesdrop on familiar guttural German words as she reads;

Magdeburg 1st December 1912.

Dear Herta and Henric,

The fine views of your new home in the strange earth are indeed fascinating. I was very glad to receive news of little Franki and pray that his father will soon be well ...

"I miss them. I miss the old country," Grossmutter says. She turns over the postcard and looks at the picture. "I would love to wander through the Museum again. And ice skate on the lake." As I listen I remember her telling me how,

back in Magdeburg, she, Grossvater, Emma and Otto would lean into the wind, their boots crunching on crisp snow as they hurried towards Adolf Mittengen Square. She always said how much she missed the mouth-watering smell of bratwurst sizzling in bacon-fat and how a bottle of schnapps helped keep out the cold. But now Grossmutter just sighs, sadly shakes her head and says, "We'd still be there but for Father. *Shitkopf*." She sees me. "Franki. What you do?"

"I'm playing soldiers." She grabs my arm and drags me out. "Playing. Always playing. I make cake, come help me in kitchen." I run inside and quickly climb onto a stool in front of the scrubbed wooden table. Grossmutter always lets me lick the wooden spoon. She puts a large mixing bowl in front of me. I groan when she hands me our family Bible. The words are scratchy and hard to know. Its thin, thin pages with shiny gold edges are tricky to turn. Inside the black cover are a lot of names. I can see mine.

Grossmutter takes her mother's cookbook down from the shelf, opens it where a postcard marks the page and says, "Today we make Scripture Cake. Two cups butter, Judges chapter five, verse twenty-five. Look it up, Franki." She waits patiently as I find the place and slowly read, "He asked water, and she gave him milk: she brought forth butter in a lordly dish."

"Very goot, Dis from Deborah's song of praise to *Gott und mit Gott's* help when friend ask you for water, like Deborah, you give him more." I wish I had a friend. She puts the butter in the bowl, "Three cups sugar, Jeremiah six, twenty."

"To what purpose cometh there to me incense from Sheba and sweet cane from a far country."

"Here people have sinned and *Gott* is very angry," Grossmutter says, shaking the wooden spoon at me. "You must always obey *Gott's* laws. One cup water, Genesis twenty four, sixteen."

"And the damsel was fair to look upon, a virgin, neither had any man known her: and she filled her pitcher with water. What is a virgin?"

"An angel. Beautiful angel. Make goot wife. *Gott* gives Issacs Rebecca. Maybe *mit Gott's* help I find you goot wife?"

"But I don't want a wife."

"Later, Franki, much later you want wife and may *Gott* bless you *mit* beautiful angel," "We take honey, Genesis forty three, eleven."

"Carry down to Joseph as a present, a little balm, and a little honey."

"Joseph lose his family for a long time. When he find them he so happy and ask them to live *wid* him." I know my father's name is Joseph so I ask, "Will my father ask me to go and live with him and Mother one day?"

"You live here *wid* us. *Dis* your home. Six eggs, Isaiah ten, thirteen."

"But -"

"Read!" I'm bored. All I want to do is to go back to my cave and play with my soldiers. "Can I go now?" She looks over the top of her reading glasses.

"Cakes not make themselves" I know better than to disobey. "Thy meat offering shalt thou season with salt." Leviticus two, thirteen

"Salt sting but is goot. Salt and water heals wounds. *Gott's* love heals souls.

"And Solomon's provisions for one day was thirty measures of fine flour." She nods her head. "Solomon wise man. He say love better than hate. Forgiveness better than ointment for soul. Now we mix. Proverbs twenty-three, fourteen. Follow Solomon's advice for making goot boys." I squirm in my seat as I read, "Thou shalt beat him with the rod and shalt deliver his soul from hell. I'll be goot, Grossmutter. I'll be very goot." She tucks a stray hair into her bun. "Always remember Franki, religion goot, but all that counts is how you live."

Chapter Six

"Have you reached a decision, Arthur?"

"I want to talk to Dr Harris first."

"I don't see any point in talking to Harris. He can't tell you anything different. He's hasn't the experience or qualifications to deal with a case like this."

"I want to see him anyway."

*Three blind mice,
See how they run,
They all run after the farmer's wife
Who cut off their tails with a carving knife
Did ever you see such a thing in your life...*

My heart is pounding, sweat soaked pajamas clinging. I can't stop shaking; my hands grip the

eiderdown as fragments of nightmare claw at me.

"Having a bad dream?" Dulcie sleepily asks.

The hall phone rings.

Everything seems the same as I walk into Mother's house. Grossmutter's gaunt figure is lying fully dressed on my old bed. I tiptoe to her side. The revolver is still in her mouth. It shouldn't be there. I want to yell that it shouldn't be there. It has no right to be there. Her blind eyes, those eyes that have been blank for years, are open as if she is trying to see one last time. I gently close the lids. Where is the blood? There isn't any blood. The bullet has simply pierced the brain and put an end to the suffering.

I slowly pull out the gun, close her mouth and prop her Bible under her chin. I kneel beside her and in my mind I scream. "Why did you do it? Why, after hating your father for so long, after cursing my father to hell? I thought you had the *Mut* to live through anything. Why did you do it?" I remember her saying, "Never spit into cup of water, Franki. One day you may have to drink it."

"No," I cry. I will never inflict this pain on my son.

Even though I see the tired old body and remember the blindness, the stumbling in the perpetual darkness, the living with my selfish mother and her constant whining I understand, but cannot forgive. She's killed herself. She's given in and taken the coward's way out, leaving me to carry the burden. She has gone. Tears fall, unheeded, unseen as I hold her cold hand long into the night and talk to her of days spent together in the kitchen, books we loved, old German songs we sang and when the dawn comes, I leave.

The mortician, dressed in black, slow marches down the street. He dips his top hat to neighbours standing at their gates, heads bowed as Grandmother passes. The black draped carriage with its plumed horses sways gently as it carries her one last time to her beloved Lutheran church. The soaring music follows the spire to heaven and I chant to myself, "All that counts is how you live."

It is her right that her four grandsons carry her inside and lay her before the altar. The coffin

is so light, as light as a feather. The cancer has done its job. The smell; the stomach churning smell. We press our faces hard against rosewood determined that she will not fall. We will not let her down, not this time.

From the pulpit I look down at the family, the fruit from her tree, and choking back tears I find I cannot condense her life or tell about her strength and wisdom in ten minutes. All I can do is recite her favourite passage from *The Song of Solomon*, the one she would say quietly to herself as on our knees in the garden we helped Grandfather with his spring planting.

*For, lo, the winter is past,
The fig tree putteth forth her green figs,
And the vines with the tender grape
Give a good smell.*

The minister's voice mechanically tolls. But I am remembering a railway cutting, a wise old woman and a young boy gathering flowers and herbs for the apotheca.

Shouldering her casket, we lurch down the winding path to grave two hundred and twenty-two in the Lutheran section of the old Footscray cemetery. To the grave snuggling under the tall oak tree. It too came from a foreign land, its roots firmly planted in Australian soil. The leaves fall and turn in the crisp autumn air and I visualise her transplanted soul winging its way to the home of its childhood. Home to Magdeburg for one last look at the old country of snow and waltzes. It soars over the mountains and butterfly flutters in the crisp meadows before finally returning to its adopted country of sun and dust.

Tears glisten on my brothers' faces as we watch her coffin sink into the dark earth. I don't cry. Crying doesn't help. She taught me that. I have a family. Life must go on. I turn and walk away leaving her to go on this last journey alone.

Mother cried for days. Cried while she told me that they hadn't found a will. Cried when she said that everything was hers and I wouldn't get a shilling. Cried as she showed me the door. I never saw Mother again.

The Author

Glenice Whitting started writing in her last

year of a BA at Monash University, Melbourne, Australia and enjoys writing both fiction and non-fiction. Her play, *Hair Today, Gone Tomorrow* was produced during the 2002 Fertile Ground New Play Festival and her regular online column "Inspiring Women" can be seen at <http://www.Suite101.com/welcome.cfm/13890>