

SUZANNAH WINDSOR

NATIVITY

I HAVE NEVER HAD CHERRIES on Christmas Day before. My arms are wrapped around Mrs. Hammond's Tupperware bowl, which is full of the only fresh, colourful thing in the room, as there is no tree, garland, holly, or even nativity scene. It's just a living room overlooking a snowless South Australian street that looks the same as it does on any other day of the year. It is oppressively hot, but the ceiling fan is on and the dining room sheers are drawn and softly breathing. More than anything the house smells of the dogs outside, their scent wafting through the open windows. On the back patio the budgies rattle their cages and the cockatiel squawks—a sound sharp enough to hurt your ears. A decent spread of food lines the counter, but nothing else would indicate a special occasion. I can tell by the look on Kevin's face, as he sips a glass of room-temperature rainwater, that he is pleased with this quasi-asceticism. It suits him just fine, my minister-husband.

In the kitchen Mrs. Hammond frets over a trail of ants marching across the countertop, where a platter of shrimp and a bowl of potato salad sit covered with funereal lace doilies. She sprays the ants with some clear liquid in a squeeze bottle and swipes at them with a rag. "You have to be sure you don't leave any behind," she says, to no one in particular. "Otherwise they come back for their dead." Ants are something I already know about. No matter how clean I keep the kitchen, I wake every morning to find an army of them carrying off the missed toast crumbs in the corner or gorging themselves on a rogue honey drop.

There are twelve of us, and we are all church members except Darlene, who sits in the corner by herself next to the unlit electric fireplace. Her skin is deeply tanned, her forearms muscled, and her shoulder-length hair lies flat with the tops of her ears poking through. After the service last Sunday Mrs. Hammond told me there was a lady, whom she sometimes visited with a basket of food, living alone in one of the Trust homes down the street from

the church. Mrs. Hammond asked if I thought it would be the Christian thing to ask Darlene to come for Christmas dinner, since she would be all by herself, and I said it was a lovely idea.

I hold out napkins and the bowl of cherries in turn for Mr. Hammond, Tom and Janet Carson and their four children, old Mrs. Burns, and Kevin. The children are grateful for the cool crunch and spray of the fruit, holding the napkins under their chins to catch the juice and dropping the stones and stems into a communal dish I placed on the coffee table. But when I hold the cherries out to Darlene, she doesn't say thank you. She says, "Where's that accent from?"

I explain that I'm from Canada, and Koolikari is not the Australia I expected. Instead of surf and sand there is only the hot backyard cement on the soles of my feet and the brief thrill of a gecko tiptoeing past. A corrugated grey metal fence divides our manse from the neighbour's house, and a low shed keeps the chickens from roasting in the sun. Sometimes I wake up in the morning and don't know where I am.

I also tell her about the loquat tree against the back fence. The yellow fruit is edible but tart like an underripe peach, and one day I plucked a bucketful of the fruit and gutted them on my kitchen counter the way Mr. Hammond guts garfish and tommy ruffs, pushing the offal aside. I had never made jam before, but I felt like pretending to be the type of woman—the type of *wife*—who could make jam. I worked all day while Kevin was away, thinking I would surprise him when he got home, but in the end the jam was no more than a sugar-sticky soup, and I threw it all away—the soup, the peels, the seeds, the bruised and ruined bits—so Kevin would never know. He's nicknamed our backyard Eden. He would be so disappointed at the waste.

I'm supposed to be passing the cherries around, but Darlene wants to know every little thing about me. She's never met a Canadian before. I point to Kevin, who is sitting on the couch talking with Mr. Hammond about the church's electrical bill. Kevin is concerned that installing an air conditioner will cost too much. And anyway, he feels there's something to be said for enduring the heat.

"That's your man?" she asks, as though Kevin is some muscle-necked hunk and not the short, red-haired, infant-faced boy he is.

"Yes, that's my husband."

"A *priest*," she says, nodding slowly, reverently. "I used to go to Sunday

school as a kid, you know, and I never forgot it. *The loaves and the fishes*—that was my favourite story.”

I wonder if I should correct her on the term “priest.” We’re not Catholic, and Kevin is only a lay pastor with a certificate from a Bible college. Besides, he despises Catholics, referring to them as “papists” or “Mary worshippers.” I often think about what it would’ve been like to be pregnant with Jesus, waiting for him to be born, and whether Mary ever felt lonely or small compared to the story in which she found herself.

“Want to know why the loaves and the fishes were my favourite?” she asks. “My dad didn’t make much, so sometimes my brother and I’d raid the neighbour’s garden just so we could eat. My brother’d say the Bible tells us to love our neighbours like we love ourselves, so the neighbours should love us enough to share their potatoes and carrots. Lord! I used to lie in bed at night and think about those loaves and fishes, imagining how nice it’d be to have Jesus there in our kitchen just multiplying and multiplying whatever was left in the fridge.”

I smile and say, “I’m sure your neighbours understood.”

She snorts. “They thought they were good Christians, but they called the cops on us.”

Darlene wants to know what brought us to Koolikari, and I explain that Kevin needed a place to preach and this is where they needed a preacher—divine providence and all that. I tell her the whole story is so long and complicated that if I start telling it I might never stop.

Darlene says she knows all about those types of stories. She’s got stories she could tell that would turn my pretty hair white.

The ceiling fan swoops above my head, but the air in the room feels slow-motion still. I close my eyes. Balanced on my lap is the plate Kevin has brought me: shrimp, cheese cubes, three carrots with their tips sitting in a puddle of ranch dressing, a handful of cashews, and a buttered slice of Janet’s homemade sourdough bread. I’ve never known sourdough bread to smell like vomit, but it does. When he handed me the food, Kevin told me to save room for dessert—Mrs. Hammond has made a pudding and custard—though he doesn’t imagine I’ll have room for it. I eat so little these days, he says. I’m wasting away.

I don’t imagine he’ll eat the pudding either. Lately he’s been concerned about the addictive effects of sugar on the brain. Haven’t I heard about the

studies they've done in which rats prefer sugar to cocaine?

Things I tell Darlene I have learned: Water comes from the sky instead of the ground. Rats build their nests in the heart of the pineapple palms. A chicken carcass is a second meal. One of the E flats in the church piano's bass clef is missing a hammer, and transposing to another key is helpful in avoiding it. Small spiders can be just as dangerous as big ones. *Nursing a baby* means holding it, not feeding it. The Salvation Army is the best place to find clothes this side of Whyalla. Sometimes you just go along with things because you're not sure how not to go along with them. Sometimes you're too far gone to take that step back. It's kinder to keep pain to yourself than to put it on someone else's plate.

Things Darlene tells me she has learned: You can get used to anything—even tailing a lamb—if you do it enough times. It's more painful to keep photographs of people you love than to throw them away and pretend you never had the person or the photograph in the first place. When you're hungry but have no money, there's a man sitting at the counter of every pub, and he's even hungrier than you are—just hungry in a different way. Club soda is best at getting blood out of your clothes, and blood stains are a good reminder of things you ought to be more careful about. Sometimes the only thing you've got going for you is a last-ditch deal with Jesus that you'll do anything he asks as long as he comes down to save you from all this shit.

Hazy through the dining room sheers I can see the three older Carson children playing in the garden, trying to catch the dog's tail with their dirty hands, searching for lizards under the limestone rocks, and attempting to climb the gum tree near the fence. Joshie Carson jabs his sister in the back with a fallen branch held like a bazooka, and she screams. Their mother sits across from the room from Darlene and me under the ineffectual fan with her eyes closed, her youngest child chewing on a ball at her feet. Though her face is placid and pleasant, I suspect that she would fall to pieces if she were made to go outside and police her children's behaviour.

How many children will Kevin and I have? And what's worse: too many or none at all? I have only heard of one couple connected to the church who did not have children, though not by choice. They live in Papua New Guinea on meagre church donations and will do so until they have grown grey and gnarled enough to earn a stuffy retirement flat funded by a meagre govern-

ment pension. They will shuffle their arthritic selves down to the town jetty every day, smell the sea, think of the darkened souls they guided to the light, and be satisfied.

Janet is pregnant with her fifth baby, and everyone in the church knows. She's trying to hide the latest bump with a floral empire-waist blouse, but it's no use. I've heard as soon as she has a six-month-old in her arms, everyone's on the lookout for the next one. She need only look puffy, and the pregnancy is confirmed. I try to picture myself with a gaggle of homeschooled children pulling at my legs, teaching advanced fractions to one and the alphabet to another at my kitchen table, dinner boiling away on the stove. It would be humble food, like a pot of water filled with bones, a few sprouted potatoes, limp carrots from the bottom of the bag, and half a head of boiled cabbage, and Kevin would say, "What more could one want? Food fit for any king."

"You don't look so good," Darlene says.

I bring my napkin to my mouth. "I don't feel so good," I reply. I take the plate of food off my lap and put it on the end table between us.

When I look up, Darlene's eyes are fixed on mine, intently searching. Finally, her squint relaxes as she reaches her conclusion. She tucks her limp hair behind her ears and says quietly—remarkably tenderly—because somehow she can sense it's a secret from everyone in the room but the two of us: "They say girls make you sick. I was *always* sick because I had six of 'em—one right after the other. I reckon they must have kids of their own by now—daughters, that is. Well, I can't imagine they'd be anything else."

What do I say to this? Why haven't you seen your grandchildren? Why have all six of your daughters turned you away? What have you done? I can't bring myself to ask, though I think she'd like me to. Instead, I whisper through my napkin, "Babies are always a blessing." That's what my mother used to say and what I try to tell myself now—babies are always a blessing despite our circumstances or trials. I think of how happy Kevin will be when I tell him, the plans he will make, and how I will find him kneeling beside our bed before the sun has even risen, whispering praises to God. *Children are an heritage of the Lord. Happy is the man that hath his quiver full of them.* I consider the naked prawns curled on my plate, untouched. I've been waiting for three weeks for just the right time to tell him because I want it to be special, but the time just never feels quite right.

Janet lifts her little one to squirm in her lap—hot, uncomfortable, biting his thumb—covering the swell of the baby who'll soon take his place.

Darlene sits back in her chair, folds her arms, and declares, “This is the nicest Christmas I’ve ever had.”

Mrs. Hammond gives Darlene an empty basket and tells her to pick whatever she wants from the fruit trees. “Take as much as you can eat, and come back and get more whenever that basket’s empty.”

Darlene takes the basket and says with a deep, satisfied shake of her head, “The loaves and the fishes—I told you that was my favourite!”

I follow outside for a breath of air. Kevin doesn’t notice, as he is engaged in a deep theological discussion with Tom about the evils of syncope.

Outside, the cockatiel shakes the bells in his cage, his claws wrapped around his little perch. The Carson children run past us, and one of them steps on my foot. They tease the bird with the tips of their fingers. They squawk at him, trying to elicit imitation. Darlene and I walk over to the garden. I pull a short, fat carrot out of the soil, dust off the dirt with my fingers, and lay it in her basket.

She places her hand on my still-flat stomach and rubs. “Don’t you worry about this little one. You’ll be home soon with your Ma. You’ll see. Just keep praying. Jesus listens to good folks like you.”

It’s not true, I want to say. We’re not good folks, just better liars. Instead, I say, “I don’t know that we can afford to visit now. Maybe not ever.” I have been trying not to think about having this baby in a foreign country where the hospital is no bigger than a country school.

“Everything happens for a reason,” she says. “Jesus has got this one covered, young lady. You just hand those cares on over. If you had faith as small as a mustard seed, you’d see the things Jesus could do for you.”

She says that she sometimes lights a cigarette, and every time she blows out a puff of smoke she imagines she’s blowing all her cares up to heaven.

“Have you been saved?” she asks, her eyes still and open.

I fumble for words.

“Have you been saved?” she repeats. “That’s what the Sunday School teacher asked me when I was seven. I didn’t know what she was talking about because I didn’t think I needed saving from anything except my need for a sandwich. So, I says to her, ‘Not that I recall,’ and she says to me, ‘Wouldn’t you like to have Jesus living in your heart?’ and I says, ‘I don’t know that he’d fit in there, but okay.’”

“That’s wonderful,” I say. There are other things I’m supposed to say in

such situations. Is she still walking the path of the Lord? Won't she come along to church on Sunday? But I don't feel right about it. I find myself simply smiling weakly, watching the Carson children pull lemons off Mrs. Hammond's tree and throw them at each other's heads.

Darlene is still looking at me, her eyes searching mine. "You're holding back, ain't you? You've been fighting with Jesus. I can see it all over your pretty face—like a deer in headlights. I reckon that's exactly how I felt before I gave myself up. *You must be born again.*"

Since finding out about the baby, I have stopped allowing myself to dream about leaving. I think about Paul's thorn and the mortification of the flesh. It's not as if I could *actually* sneak away in the middle of the night, leaving only a letter explaining that I will die if I have to spend even one more day in this place—that I can't bear one more moment of looking into my own darkened heart and having it splayed open before me, sorting through the offal.

Then Darlene starts praying over me, her right hand on the top of my head: "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name." I drop to my knees in front of Mrs. Hammond's terracotta birdbath, tenting my fingers over the gravel to keep myself from tipping over. We are next to the chook run at the side of the house, away from the windows. Claws rustle softly through the straw. Something is growing inside of me that can't be held back much longer. Darlene gets down beside me on her knees and says, "You'll be 'right. You'll be 'right. Just stop fighting it . . . Thy kingdom come . . . Thy will be done . . ."

The sun is on my head, and it feels like it is filtering through her hand, entering the strands of my hair, and dripping down my back and over my shoulders. There are only a few drops of rainwater left in the birdbath. Darlene dips her fingers and draws a cross over my forehead. "Lead us not into temptation," she says, "but deliver us from evil . . ."

I grab the sides of the birdbath and heave into the clay.