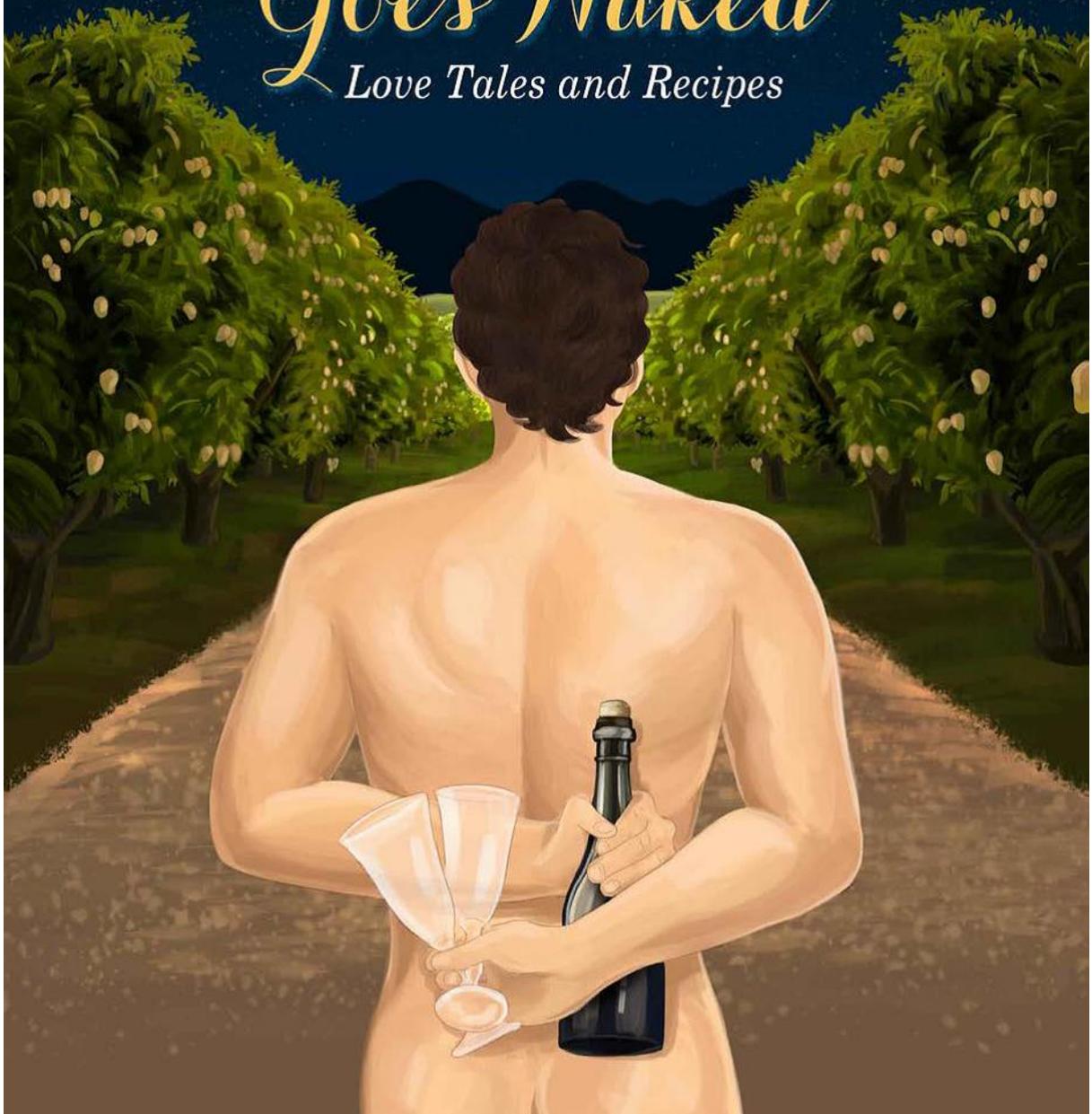


MELODY R. GREEN

A Topsy Man Goes Naked

Love Tales and Recipes



The Walnut

“**W**hen I see an Alfa Romeo go by, I tip my hat!”

Henry Ford talking with Ugo Gobbato (Head Designer, Alfa Romeo) in 1939

I knew as I put down the phone that I was in trouble.

I could feel the secret codes of tone and intonation setting my ‘love tracks’ alight. It had always been this way for me although this moment would be the one to confirm it for me.

A man’s voice was the key to opening my heart, body and soul. If he possessed a certain bass baritone throatiness - an inflected foreign accent as he spoke to me in English - my insides would suddenly dissolve into molten heat that would spread quickly throughout my body. And this could be all before I’d even met him.

I’d just made an appointment to meet Sandro. From Piedmont, Italy he was a man in his early sixties and a long way from his country of birth. He had lived in Australia for more than forty years, climbing his way from being a newly arrived immigrant to a successful chairperson of a community organisation. My reason for calling him was to arrange an interview for our organisation’s magazine. Over the years he’d been interviewed many times and it was quite a coup to get an interview at such short notice.

I looked at the thick file of information on him as yet unread, because it had only been placed on my desk by Amanda that very afternoon! She had been snowed under with some crisis needing her immediate attention and so I was asked to fill the breach. Usually her favours tended to be more mundane than an interview so I was looking forward to this assignment. She’d left her sparse, impressionistic notes on the front of the folder:

Italian (Piedmont)

Early 60’s

Intelligent

Cultured

Proud of his heritage

In Australia for 40+ years

I heard the tooting horns of a car as arranged, and looked out the window to see a man in a 2003 Alfa Romeo Spider Coupe with the top down in the late summer sunshine and couldn’t help the broad grin that split my face. As sexy as, I thought. After all, what else would an Italian drive, unless it was something even more Italian like a Ferrari, Maserati or Lamborghini?

I switched on the security code and locked the office door and thought of the young innocent I was in my 20’s when I had indeed been a

passenger in a Lamborghini with another amazing Italian man. I shook my head. It wasn't time for reminiscing.

Men are often surprised by my knowledge of cars, but I was a grease monkey's daughter and conversations with my father were based on history, cars, or sports; and as I had absolutely no interest in sports, cars and history had to suffice.

I smiled at Sandro as he greeted me with "Ciao Bella! I'm pleased to meet you, Lisa." His sensuous voice again wrapped me in honeyed tones as I sank deep into the leather seat and buckled myself in so as not to ooze all over the car floor. The engine beneath his careful hands growled as we moved into the traffic.

As we chatted about nothing more than the state of the snarling peak-hour traffic across Sydney and the summer weather, I surreptitiously snuck a look at my companion sitting at the steering wheel. He was wearing a cap with the distinctive car logo on his head and sunglasses. He was of medium height and typical Italian colouring and features. He was not a particularly handsome man, although there was a certain attractiveness about him. His clothes were pristine, well fitted, and good quality yet not so especially luxurious or the latest fashion. His style was classic. I could see how Amanda had come to make her notes about him.

Some minutes later, we stopped at an inner city address that looked in keeping with the rest of the houses in the street. It was not a pretentious house from the outside, just well maintained and slightly hidden from view with its stucco wall and dark green wooden arched door. The wall abundantly festooned with peach coloured bougainvillea; and the terrace house with its brick and lace wrought iron veranda peeping out from above.

I followed him up the path and through the front door into the living room. With one sweep, I took in the gracious room with a baby grand piano, leather studded chesterfields in deeply burnt mahogany, terracotta walls and open brick work, and a Rococo-style gilded mirror over the fireplace. I then stopped to stare at the portraits either side - one of a man and the other of a woman.

"Ah! You are admiring my great grandparents, si?"

"Yes, I am. Even though they are rather stern by our standards, I mean we commonly like to see smiles on people's faces, there is something about them. They are arresting in their solemnness, but I like them. Did you know them as a child?"

"Alas, no! They were dead before I was born but I have lived with them all my life, as they used to live in my parents' dining room in Italy."

"Come let's make some coffee. You can talk to me while I'm in the kitchen", he smiled and urged me forward.

Briefly I was aware of a formal dining room in wood and dark red tapestries and then surprisingly a very modern kitchen with French doors that opened onto a patio, high tech white with citrus touches, and a round wooden breakfast table in the corner with wooden chairs painted lime, turquoise and royal blue.

Sandro made the coffee, mostly with his back to me and speaking over his shoulder. We chatted about all and sundry, including the black

and ginger cat that suddenly appeared looking for food, whom he had named Puccini (after his favourite opera composer). Then, the coffee was ready and he brought it to the table where we sat. On the tray were small brightly coloured coffee cups, a coffee pot, sugar and milk (for me) and a large bowl of walnuts and a small knife.

As we talked, he poured coffee, drank a sip, and then took up the knife to open the walnut. I had only ever seen walnuts opened with a nutcracker so I was interested to see how he would do this.

He was very relaxed, holding the walnut in the ball of his palm and placing the tip of the knife to the rim - a quick, clean, simple pressure, and the walnut broke evenly in two. Each half he levered deftly and completely, out of its safety shell, without breaking the nut and placed it in my saucer - a perfect half walnut at a time. I picked up one of the empty shells and took it to my nose to breathe in the aroma - woody and smelling of dried rain, it made my nose twitch. I lifted the shelled walnut half and breathed in deeply, a distinct sweetness that I would call "green milk" because it smelled like milk steeped with herbs. And then I popped the nut to my mouth, and its fresh texture turned creamy as I chewed, a sign that it was fresh and oh so flavorsome.

We dropped into companionable silence: he comfortably shelling walnuts and me, watching those adept, gracious fingers as he plied the knife. It was a timeless moment and I could have imagined his family sat around the table, with his father doing the same for his wife and children. I became mesmerised by the movements, the shape of his fingers, the working of the muscles, sinews and tendons of his hands, and the sparse dusting of black hairs across the knuckles. The intimacy of it suddenly shifted my thoughts and I felt the blush of awareness - sensual and erotic - filter to the surface and so I quickly broke my fascination by sipping the coffee, which after the nuts I'd eaten, decided to go down the wrong way and bring on a coughing fit.

Once I had calmed down, we formalised the meeting and I interviewed him as we had arranged. The afternoon passed with intelligent conversation, a sharing of ideas, and a glimpse into a man of complex richness like a good wine. And then I could delay no longer, it was time to leave. He took me back to the train station so I could go home and the unexpected afternoon of Italian music, memories, coffee and walnuts was over.

And you know, I can never crack open a walnut without thinking of him.

Pear and Walnut Slice

90g butter, chopped

1/2 cup caster sugar

1 egg

1/3 cup self-rising flour, sifted

2/3 cup plain flour, sifted

400g can pears in natural juice, drained, roughly chopped

3/4 cup walnuts, chopped

300g carton sour cream

1 teaspoon cinnamon sugar

Preheat oven to 180C. Lightly grease the base and sides of a slab pan (approx. 17cm x 28cm), making sure you pay attention to the short ends.

Cut out a sheet of baking paper and allow a 2cm overhang to help lift the slice from the pan when cooked.

Place butter, sugar, eggs and flour in a food processor. Process until a dough forms.

Press into the pan. (it will look like a cake batter).

Bake for 12-15 minutes or until light golden in colour.

Cool for 10 mins in the pan.

Combine pears, walnuts and sour cream in a bowl. Spread mixture over the warm base.

Sprinkle with cinnamon sugar.

Bake for 15 mins until the topping is set.

Cool completely in the pan.

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Cut into slices and serve.

For a slightly more adult taste add ¼ teaspoon of ground ginger to the cinnamon sugar.

This is just as delicious when you substitute pears and walnuts with peaches and pecans.

Author's Note:

What I love about this slice is it can be for afternoon tea or dessert and I've even served it for breakfast! It's so easy to make and it's never gone wrong, no matter what kind of day I'm having. It's always good to have at least one fail-safe recipe for those stressful days.

An excerpt from A Topsy Man Goes Naked – Love Tales and Recipes

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