



## Boxing Day Brunch

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**N**eutral Bay is one of several charming neighbourhoods strung along the north shore of Sydney Harbour. Miranda lived there, on Kurraba Road, in a large house with a separate apartment in the back. This was where I stayed, with my friend and travelling companion, Juanín, while we got ourselves organized after migrating to Australia in the late 1960s. Miranda and her roommates—half-a-dozen young women of singular wit and beauty—welcomed us and made us feel at home at a time when I, for one, was feeling a little adrift.

I had a brother but no sisters when I was growing up, so being around a group of girls of about my age was a new and most agreeable experience. Some of them were city girls; some had grown up in the country. They worked in various capacities, most of them at offices downtown. I observed each of them keenly, assessing this or that feature or quality, noticing which of them I instinctively liked and trying to understand why.

It was now late December. The ladies would all be away on Christmas Day but would be home the following morning and planned to gather with friends at the picnic table in the garden for a Boxing Day brunch *al fresco*. Gracious as ever, Miranda invited us to join them. She explained that someone would grill a leg of lamb and everyone else was bringing something. “Side dishes, you know, something yummy!” she said. “But we’re all a bit short of funds at this time of year, right? So, nothing fancy.”

Juanín and I decided that a potato salad might be a suitable contribution. But it was to be a rustic version of the basic idea, a tribute to the potato’s humble roots. We bought a big bag of small, round, new taters and, on Boxing Day morning, boiled them until they were just *al dente*. We then put them, still warm, in a large bowl with a generous coating of butter, some salt and, finally, a handful of chopped parsley. There were some raised eyebrows when we put them on the table,

but the bowl was empty by the end of the meal. There was nothing left of the lamb either, which was delicious and had been eaten down to the bone. Australians produce some of the best lamb in the world, and they know how to cook it.

We lingered over the remains of lunch in the mellow slowness of a summer afternoon, hunger satisfied and senses stimulated by the wine. There was a flagon of Cabernet and one of Riesling, and when they ran dry Juanín brought two more from the apartment. Conversations became a little more thoughtful and the mood was indulgent and receptive. Responding to a comment about the beautiful weather we were having I said that, for the first twenty years of my life, I too had enjoyed Christmas in the summer. I explained that Sydney and Montevideo, where I spent my formative years, are on almost exactly the same latitude. Both cities are perched on the eastern shore of a large land mass overlooking an ocean. My adolescent Christmases had always felt just as it felt in Sydney on that Boxing Day.

Then I went to London and had my first Christmas in the northern hemisphere. Seeing the city dusted with snow was exciting because I’d only ever seen snow in photos, paintings, and movies. I had never been dashing through it and certainly had never ridden in a one-horse open sleigh. I had never even thrown a snowball, that classic rite of passage for so many kids in northern countries. Most of the others around the table had also spent a Christmas or two in London and we agreed that it takes a little getting used to. Yes, it was the sort of familiar scene we had seen on a thousand Christmas cards, the template for the traditional iconography we had been exposed to every year, but it was so different from the version we had actually grown up with. Shared experiences often lay the foundations for bonds that can last a lifetime. Lounging over lunch in Miranda’s garden that afternoon I felt a flickering of kinship with these new friends and the stirring of a deep affection for this country that was to be my new home.