

Chook

Mario next door won a meat tray at the club, so we're all in his back yard for a barbecue. The men, including my boyfriend Joey, are poking at sausages and chops, and ripping ring-pulls from beer cans.

Mario's wife Maria sloshes olive oil and vinegar into a bowl of tomatoes and basil. We women are watching Maria, and exchanging stories about winning; I won a chook raffle once, and someone else won fifty dollars on a scratchie. We're not big winners here.

'If you've got a good veggie garden, you don't need to win anything,' says Maria, as she stirs some marinating mushrooms. 'There's nothing else in the world that you need.'

Jing Yi arrives with an enormous pavlova.

'Except for pavlova.' We all say it at the same time.

I look across at Joey and he grins at me. I used to get a buzz when he smiled at me, but not any more.

I moved in with Joey a year ago. Sometimes I think the best thing about living with him is the vegetable supply from Maria and Mario, and I dare to think there should be more to a relationship than that. I want romance, flowers and chocolates - things that Joey never thinks to give me. Instead he brings me: *What's for dinner? Where's me socks? Grab me a beer, love. Give us a kiss.*

I want more than this. I think a lot about leaving Joey, about moving on, but I always chicken out. I'd like to travel.

My finger traces spiralling grape vines on Maria's vinegar bottle, and I think about Italy.

Maria puts bread, pesto and antipasti on the table ... Italy has come to me. Sunlight flashes on Maria's wedding band, and I have a flash of my own, a sudden understanding: I've always waited for life to come to me, taken the lazy way. But not this time. I *will* go to Italy!

Jing Yi pours champagne and I smile with her. I will travel to China too, and see the Great Wall.

I said to Joey once that we should go for a trip somewhere, maybe China, but he said he wouldn't be spending any of his money on gadding about looking at a Chinese wall when he could see plenty of walls in his own country.

'Ever think about going to China, Maria?' I ask.

'Whatever for?' she asks, her chins staying buried in her cleavage as she slices cucumbers. She reminds me of Joey and I'm irritated. I wouldn't mind chopping up a cucumber myself.

There's suspicious laughter from the men that makes us look at them; it's snickering laughter, not the beer-belly-bouncing type we usually see. Joey is smirking. Now I see him rip the ring-pull from another can, curl it up and walk towards me.

When he gets close, he grabs my left hand, pushes the ring-pull on my finger and says, 'Marry me, Syl? I'll get you a proper ring next week.'

No one can hear my answer for the yells from the men and the bridal chatter queuing in the women's heads.

Joey swaggers back to the men. 'This calls for more beer,' he says.

Maria's head is out of her cleavage now and she's hugging me.

The ring-pull is tight on my finger. I unroll it and put it into a pocket.

I'm the only woman not talking, and I'm barely listening. The others say that I'm stunned, and they begin to share their bridal visions. Yellow's nice for bridesmaids, one of them says. I picture me in feathery white, and them all dressed in yellow; a chook with a brood of fluffy chicks. I don't think so.

Sunlight bubbles in my champagne, and while the others toast love, I silently toast my travel plans.

When the night sky has buried the sun, and our stomachs are stuffed with food and booze, Joey and I walk home, carrying a basket of Maria's vegetables.

'Surprised you, didn't I?' says Joey.

'You didn't hear my answer,' I say.

'Well, are you going to marry me?'

'I suppose so.'