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"How many are coming?" I ask.

'Just the family,' Libby said. 'There's the two aunties Beth, Janet with fiancée Mike and his son Scott, Sandra and the three boys, Jennie and her two girls, Helen and Xisca, Judith and your mother. Mark and John and their families can't make it this year. So counting you, there's 17. Think you can manage?'

Christmas lunch for the family; the sisters, parents, the cousins, the ancient Aunties, both called Beth, was my turn this year. Each year, we have gathered for Christmas lunch, each providing 'a plate' and one of the three staple beverages: beer, soda water and sparkling wine. Although there is an unstated rule that no presents are to be given, every year, gifts cascade from bags and boxes creating mounds of brightly coloured flurries of excitement.

This year it was agreed that my place would be the venue. It would also be my first. The larger gatherings have always been hosted by Bethie, a name she was baptised early on to differentiate between the two Aunties Beth. She had six children and the houses that they moved into as the family enlarged, also grew to accommodate the yearly Christmas lunches. No one ever questioned that Bethie should host the lunch and she always made it appear effortless.

Photographs and super 8 film footage recorded the various ages, the faces and fashions over the decades of gatherings. Children arrived and were seen as toddlers, older children elongated and grew wings, flew away and returned with mates and broods. Older members left and never returned. Houses altered, acting like economic barometers but we all made the effort to be at the Christmas lunch to catch up with cousins and all the family gossip. The noise of singing, laughing and talking often frightened guests that ventured into these tribal ceremonies.

During this year's lunch a DVD compilation of old film footage taken over the years is shown. Norma, my mother is seen prancing like a dancing gazelle, one of her party pieces. My father, always keen to assist her in these performances, forms himself into a shrub over which she gaily leaps. Running, laughing children are identified, hair in various stages of growth and colour. The odd blow-in child and friends who hadn't a Christmas party to go to appear and disappear as the footage jerks through faded years. Changes are noted as are the absences.

The Christmas of 1986 has two of us missing; cousin Jennie and me. I had gone to Sydney with my family for a job and a change. My Christmas was spent in the Sydney

Botanic Gardens, no vast family gathering to make food for, no presents to buy and wrap and a sort of freedom that settled over the day quietly. I had met Jennie during that year. She too had come to Sydney. I had happened upon her, busking at Circular Quay, guitar and singing her ballad with mesmerising conviction. I waited, we talked, we walked, we ate, she sang. She had left Perth to find her voice, had wanted to be discovered but in the meantime needed to survive and was doing so singing on the streets. She had perfect pitch, could change emotions in an instant, bringing forth a Bedouin tent or a Louisiana backwater. She looked lovely, drifting down George Street in her floral folds, hair shining in the sun. Things were good, she had love around her and she loved her life.

I returned to Perth and the catch-up gatherings. But we lost track of Jennie. Over the next few years no one spoke very much about her singing, whispered more about her not coping, her wandering nature, her various boyfriends, her pregnancies and her pills. We picked up shadows of her through what was not said. She appeared in one of the Christmas films in the mid 1990s, standing in the corner of the gathering, holding one of her two children: the other was playing with spoons. Her face was sallow and dark, she looked ten years older than her life recorded, she was flying loose, flapping in the breeze, buffeted by the bad breath of howling beasts.

Jennie descended into chaos. Her children became Bethie's new brood while Jennie slashed at her own silk threads, wallowing and shrieking at Caspers, creating pin-point reflections on corroded mirrors, fraying at her borders in recurring nightmares of wrist-slashing proportion.

It was not until 2003 that I saw her again: placid and calm, hair brought under control by braids. She dressed in flowers and brought her guitar to a Christmas lunch. Her voice was deep, creased but warm. Things were going well, the girls were growing and they were all living in a small but solid house, not too expensive to rent, not too far from the shops, a garden, something manageable while she was undergoing treatment. She teetered on tip toes but she stayed upright.

I brought my camera out for this year's Christmas photo and Jennie, sipping her soda and lemon stood right in the middle, her two girls supporting her like Mycenaean stone lions. I looked into her pin-prick eyes and asked her how 2007 was shaping up for her. She flashed a too quick smile: 'I've got a feeling it's going to turn all bad again.'

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Patsy Vizents.*