

2002

1.

HE STILL HAD time to make changes. Not to his nickname, which he could never shake, and not to his appearance, and there was little prospect of changing the flaws in his character, since the time had passed for great internal transformations, but Vasilis ‘Lucky’ Mallios supposed he could fix his own story—to be specific, how it ended.

Lucky sat tucked at his kitchen table, newspaper spread across the surface, stripping rigani from the stalks. The herbs had hung inside a cupboard for a week—not long enough to properly dry—but he couldn’t wait; this old ritual was necessary. It offered a moment’s accord with the past. He placed the stalks to one side and picked through the heap of flower-heads, plucking out grey twigs, as the smell drifted up like the spirit of someone dead. The apartment now otherworldly, dense with human life. He told

himself we all have missing people: our dead parents, or the spouse who left too soon, or the lover who betrayed us, the sibling who deserted the family, the friend we never found, the friend who walked away, the child we didn't have, the person we couldn't become—the life we should have led. Or the missing person might yet arrive: the child we still could have, the family we were about to find, the lover or destroyer coming to the door. Lucky could briefly accept that his world was incomplete, and he waited for this moment to end before he switched on his television.

That afternoon he had rushed home from the bank appointment and straightaway cut down the rigani from the cupboard near the kitchen window. The expansive new apartment complex opposite looked like a tower with its pockets turned out. Lucky's own building reminded him of a motor inn.

The Suncorp Bank loan officer had been kind when rejecting his application. The officer cited Lucky's lack of income in the past twenty-four months, without stating that he was too old anyway to take on substantial debt. He possessed no assets; there was no loan guarantor. The officer said she liked the idea of a person starting over. She couldn't be more sympathetic. Her parents, on special occasions, used to take the family to Lucky's former restaurant in Stanmore. She remembered the jukebox, the fat chips, the decor like the set of a TV show. And she acknowledged Lucky's later history, referring to 'the tragedy in your life'. If only Suncorp loaned on those grounds. At the end of their interview, Lucky admitted to the loan officer that her

LUCKY'S

bank was the last in a list of lenders he'd approached. 'What does that tell me?' he said as he thanked her for the appointment, feigning concession, not wanting to come across sore, but what the final stop on his unsuccessful circuit of loan applications told him was this: the banks in Sydney were too conservative.

The light from his muted television faded and flared in the lounge room. An advertisement for a sports betting company ended and the middle segment of *Wheel of Fortune* began. They'd finished with the pointless speed rounds. The three contestants today all looked startled. They appeared miscast, thrown together behind the scoreboard. Lucky solved two puzzles before one of them even touched the wheel. Food: *Bacon bits*. Phrase: *To go in pursuit*.

Lucky Mallios scooped the rigani into a spiral jar and balled up the newspapers, sending green dust into the air. He got up when the phone rang, his eyes not moving from the television screen. Five beeps and a delay: an international call. 'Lucky's!' he sang down the line.