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TEXT prose

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Fiona and the fish

Madeleine had arranged to meet her cousin at the beach. When a pink-haired woman waved at her across the sand, Madeleine was startled. Fiona? She had put on weight and that hair! Wasn't she a bit past that? It did nothing for her. She wasn't fifteen anymore. More like double that!

Madeleine set up the umbrella and Fiona went for a swim. Fiona was covered in goose bumps after her dip and she smelt of patchouli oil. She knelt on her faded sarong and then lay down on her stomach. She brushed the sand from her thighs then blew her nose. Madeleine noticed that Fiona's legs were covered in sand fly bites. Madeleine couldn't help thinking that while she was only a few years older than Fiona, her cousin had the maturity of a ten-year-old.

That morning, Madeleine had made sure she kept to her writing schedule. She always started her day with yoga and meditation. And of course, she dressed. She wouldn't wander around her uncle's house all day in her silk pyjamas. That was what her mentor, Dolores Moore, one of the queens of light romantic fiction, had impressed on her. 'You must look your best, so you feel your best and, hence, you write your best.' Dear Dolores, she smiled. Old school. She remembered when she'd visit Dolores at her home, she always wore makeup and was neatly dressed even when digging in the garden. A workhorse by nature, she'd made a mint from her writing while more so-called literary

writers disapproved of her work and supplemented their income with teaching grotty undergrads.

All morning, Madeleine had sat in front of the computer in her makeup and turquoise kaftan. She was stuck. She needed to find a suitable crisis for her heroine, Lady Sarah, but nothing came to mind. She leaned back in her chair and sighed. She needed some inspiration. Dolores would say that at this point one had to venture into the real world to find it.

A lizard scampered into the room from the inner courtyard. It probably lived near the pond edged with ornamental grasses. It was a water dragon. Grey-green and banded. Harmless. Not some hideous snake. Madeleine clapped her hands together and it sped outside. Then she decided to text Fiona and arrange to meet her at the beach around one thirty. Going on her past work record, Madeleine guessed she'd be free.

Her uncle had asked Madeleine to water the garden and feed his tropical fish while he was holidaying in Italy. 'Fiona would probably kill my little darlings,' he'd said of his daughter. 'And do keep an eye on her while you're at it,' he added. The things one has to do for family, she thought. There were no free lunches, that's for sure. And she would probably have to pay for Fiona's as she hardly ever had any money. A bit of bar work here, a bit of waitressing there. The bit of this and a bit of that ended up in being a whole lot of nothing much. She was constantly starting and not finishing a course. Anything from pottery to gardening for beginners to basic computer skills. How did her uncle cope with his flaky daughter? she thought. The man was a saint.

Madeleine looked at the collection of fish swimming in the aquarium. Her gaze shifted to an ornament at the back of the tank. A jade Chinese dragon. She figured that as well as checking up on Fiona, she could use her to fire up her imagination. Ideas would flash around her brain like the iridescent fish she was babysitting. Fiona wasn't heroine material but perhaps a minor character in an inn or even a brothel.

At the beach, a breeze brushed Madeleine's fringe off her face. Fiona looked up as she was doodling in the sand. 'Maddie, I'm getting hungry. How about you come to my place and I'll make lunch?'

This was a surprise. 'Why, yes. If it's not too much trouble,' she replied.

'I'm doing a course in vegetarian cooking.'

Madeleine smiled. Fiona might even have a talent for cooking and get herself a proper job at the tender age of thirty, she thought. If lunch was awful, she could pick up something at the delicatessen afterwards.

Fiona shook the sand from her sarong then wrapped it around her. It stuck to her skin and so did some of the wet sand. Madeleine realised her clean car would be soiled. 'I've got a couple of towels you can use, so the seat and floor mat don't get dirty,' she said.

'Okay.'

Madeleine noticed Fiona had got a dolphin tattoo on the inside of her forearm. Fiona caught her looking. 'Do you like it?' she asked.

Madeleine hated tattoos. 'Dolphins are such amazing creatures,' she replied.

Madeleine parked her BMW under the huge eucalypt outside Fiona's wooden cottage. She rented it very cheaply.

Fiona led the way up the three rickety steps to the front door where they were met by the dog and cat. Rex, a grey mongrel, and Spooky, a black cat, had been adopted from the animal shelter. Madeleine bent over to pat the cat, but it moved away quickly. Rex rubbed himself against her leg, so she patted him instead.

They walked down the hall. The house smelt of dog and incense. The worn sofa in the living room was covered with an old Indian bedspread and there were bamboo blinds on the windows. Madeleine followed Fiona into the old kitchen and peeked outside the kitchen door. A barbecue stood in the corner of a paved area covered by a pergola weighed down by a choko vine. Under the pergola there were a couple of chairs and an old table with a candle and a mosquito coil on it. Apparently the latter hadn't worked, judging by the state of Fiona's legs, Madeleine thought.

She went outside and pulled out one of the chairs from under the table. She wiped it with a tissue then sat down. The pets congregated near her and were looking at the barbecue. 'Do you need any help, Fiona?'

'No. But I'll use the barbecue to cook the vegetables and haloumi.'

‘Perhaps I could set the table,’ Madeleine said, after she’d run her finger along the wood and found it was filthy.

‘If you want to.’

Madeleine went to the kitchen, the animals followed, and she got a sponge and soapy water to get the table to an acceptable standard. The animals seemed interested in what she was doing as they stayed close. Perhaps they’d never seen anyone clean before? she thought.

When Madeleine passed Fiona in the kitchen, she was slowly chopping the vegetables on the bench. Madeleine went into the bathroom to wash her hands. There were old, stained towels and crumpled newspaper in the bathtub, and clothes on the floor, and the hand basin was streaked in bright pink gel.

‘Oh, forgot to tell you, Maddie,’ Fiona called. ‘There’s food dye in the basin. I did my hair this morning and didn’t have time to clean up.’

Madeleine walked out of the bathroom. ‘Food dye?’

‘Yes. I looked it up on wikiHow. It was so much fun to do.’

That explained the mess. Madeleine knew this was not the time for a lecture. She wondered for a moment what Fiona’s bedroom was like.

‘Do you want me to clean it up?’ Fiona asked.

At this rate she would die of hunger, Madeleine thought. At least it wasn’t poison. ‘Don’t worry. You finish the vegetables. I’ll sort it.’

Madeleine rinsed off the food colouring from the basin, and washed her hands. She was happy that her red nails were bearing up under the strain. No chips or cracks in sight. She looked in the mirror. Her makeup was also bearing up. The spirit of Dolores must be watching over her.

At the kitchen sink, Madeleine peered over Fiona’s shoulder. She had finished cutting up the haloumi and zucchinis into neat length-wise pieces. If only she were able to transfer such meticulousness to keeping the bathroom in an acceptable state, Madeleine mused. She looked at her watch. ‘Do you want some help?’ she asked.

‘No. Making this lunch is really homework from our teacher. We have to report back.’

‘Right. Have you got some kindling?’ she asked. ‘I can prepare the barbecue.’ She was an expert when it came to lighting fires. Her family regularly went camping in summer when she was young.

‘It’s in the laundry next to the tubs.’

Madeleine carried the cardboard box to the barbecue which was one of those old-fashioned creations made of brick with a hotplate and a shelf for the firewood. Some old beer cans, newspaper and chopped wood were stacked next to it. Rex and Spooky didn’t follow, but went under the table.

She bent down to see the state of the wood shelf. She stepped back with a start. Two shining eyes were staring at her from under the hotplate.

A python.

‘Bloody hell!’ she shouted. It was coiled like a huge spring. It’s body as thick as her wrist.

‘Oh, you’ve met Sally?’ Fiona called from the window. ‘I thought she’d found a better place for her eggs.’

‘Eggs? I wish you’d told me earlier!’

‘Honest, I didn’t know, Maddie. It’s no problem. I’ll fry the food on the stove. I’ll let Sally have her space.’

Madeleine bit her bottom lip and looked at the pets.

While Fiona cooked and placed stuffed vine leaves and flat bread on a platter, Madeleine took several sips of Fiona’s cheap chardonnay. She decided that she felt sorry for Rex and Spooky. No wonder they went nowhere near the barbecue. At times like these Madeleine thought she liked animals better than people. Animals were uncomplicated. One knew what to expect from them. Like now. All the animals involved knew their roles like in a Greek tragedy. Rex and Spooky knew if they weren’t careful they would end up as lunch. The python knew they could be lunch. The only person who didn’t was her cousin, Fiona. What a dreamer!

Fiona lit the candle and mosquito coil as it was late afternoon. ‘I guess a late lunch has ended up being an early dinner.’ She laughed. ‘Alberto, our cooking teacher, says that a light, early dinner is always preferable for the digestion.’

Madeleine slapped an insect that had landed on her skin. ‘Really?’

‘Yes. And he says olive oil is good for the skin.’

‘So he wants people to put it on their skin?’ Madeleine replied.

‘You could.’ Fiona took a bite of the stuffed vine leaf.

Madeleine heard the beer cans clatter onto the ground. She looked around but could only see Rex. He was scampering away.

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After Madeleine had fed the fish, she sat at the computer and began her draft:

Lady Sarah strode up to the back entrance of the inn and was met by one of the maids whose chemise was so low it revealed most of her ample bosom. Lady Sarah was dressed in black, befitting a woman in mourning.

“The mistress is out the back in the kitchen.”

“Thank you.”

Lady Sarah followed her into the stifling, hot kitchen. She saw her Aunt Mary scolding one of the kitchen boys. He could not have been more than ten and was as slight as a bird. Aunt Mary smiled when she saw her and began walking towards her.

What had her aunt done to her brown hair? Lady Sarah wondered. It was now a coppery colour and she had become very buxom. Maybe because she was constantly surrounded by food. Aunt Mary walked up to Lady Sarah and embraced her. She smelt of garlic and onions.

“I’m sorry to hear about your father’s death. I loved you father very much. He was a such good brother to me. It will be a difficult time for us both, Sarah. It was very difficult when I lost my husband.”

Madeleine stopped typing. Her own husband leaving was the best thing that had happened to her. What a bludger! A work-shy musician and composer who turned down any commercial offer that came his way. He’d told her he was an artist, not a jingle writer. She took a sip of water and continued typing.

Aunt Mary led Lady Sarah to a small table and chairs in a cool corner of the room near an open window. "You can stay with me until you make arrangements," her aunt assured her. "Don't be concerned about anything."

Was that ever going to be possible after all she had been through? Lady Sarah wondered. She thanked her aunt and suppressed her desire to cry. Her aunt had become a different woman since her husband had died. She never remarried and she supported herself by way of her inn.

The maid brought them some wine, cheese and bread, and Aunt Mary continued, "When my husband died, your father helped me in every way possible, Sarah. He made me welcome in his home and put me in contact with the merchants he knew from the East India Company. I was able to sell paisley fabric and tea in a store he gave me for a very low rent in High Street. Then, he even gave me some money to buy this inn. My brother, George, was a very generous man."

And Madeleine's real life uncle was the same. He'd helped Madeleine when her marriage fell apart and the bills began to pile in. He'd helped her set up her online professional and technical writing services for small businesses and corporations, so she didn't have to put up with the little grubs at uni.

Lady Sarah looked at the black cat sitting by the fire while turning the emerald and gold ring on her finger. "He loved adventure, Aunt Mary. That was his life."

"True."

As her aunt took a sip of wine, Lady Sarah stared momentarily at her hair.

"Oh, and what do you think of my hair, Sarah? I bought this powder from an Indian trader who stayed here a month ago. Henna, it's called. The Indian ladies even use it to paint designs on their skin. See." Her Aunt pushed back her sleeve and showed her a design of petals and leaves.

Then her aunt recognised the ring on Sarah's hand. "If you don't mind me asking, Sarah, how did you get the ring?"

"It was found in the belly of the crocodile that took Father while he was trading in northern Australia." She put her handkerchief to her mouth to suppress her sobs.

"I'm so sorry, Sarah. He didn't deserve this end."

Aunt Mary put her arm around her niece. "There, there, my love."

Madeleine leaned back in her chair and smiled. Dolores would have been so proud of her.

The phone pinged. It was a text from Fiona. ‘Can’t find Spooky anywhere. Hope she hasn’t been run over.’

Madeleine didn’t have the heart to tell her that Spooky probably hadn’t been, and that Sally would be undoubtedly digesting a feline meal for the next few days.

‘I’m sure she’ll show up,’ Madeleine replied, then looked in the mirror. Her lipstick was perfect.

Rosanna Licari’s work has appeared in various journals and anthologies including FourW: New Writing, Idiom 23, e:ratio (US), Shearsman (UK), Wild Court (King’s College, UK), Silence: The University of Canberra Vice-Chancellor Poetry Prize anthology, Scar: anthology of microlit (Spineless Wonders, 2020) and The Anthology of Australian Prose Poetry (MUP, 2020). She is the poetry editor of online journal, StylusLit.