

## **Fijian Fantasy**

(a short story of 600 words)

### **Mairi Neil**

My brother did this weird thing with turtles when he was drinking. I'm not talking tea or coffee but the hard stuff. Straight whisky. 'Shots,' Jack called them. After a few shots, he'd balance the turtle on his head, sway forwards so the turtle slid down his neck, and disappeared into his ghastly, fluorescent shirt. I don't know how, because they're the slowest of creatures, but the darn thing popped out the front of his shirt the minute he straightened up. Much to the surprise and applause of the audience.

Jack wasn't on a stage but in a bar. Any bar, makeshift or otherwise. One of many found in the Fijian Islands, where he's lived for the past eighteen years. Needless to say, his audiences all mad or as drunk as him. It wasn't the life our conservative parents envisaged, and they clung to a belief Jack would, as father often said, 'Grow up and get a genuine job.'

But tropical sunsets and island life suit Jack, and he can sing too. He's made a precarious living entertaining the tourists with his weird turtle act and Frank Sinatra voice - until that weekend in Duluth. Duluth, outback Australia, the most boring place on earth, but where my parents retired and requested brother Jack and I turn up for their 50th wedding anniversary celebration.

When Jack received the invitation, he said it was more of a royal command and spoiled the promise of the best relationship of his life. 'We're drinking champagne and losing our shirts,' he boasted. 'Susie's teaching me yoga and my body's discovering positions I never knew possible.'

'Too much information, Jack!' I said, 'And you have to be here. Now get on a plane with a shirt, minus turtle and be in Duluth by Tuesday.'

He never showed.

Devastated, the oldies despatched me to Fiji to check Jack was okay, because he'd fallen off the radar since our last conversation. I arrived at his house - a shack, really. (The smell of Susie's leftovers still cling to my nostrils. Jack told me she had a penchant for kippers and hash browns.)

Definitely not clean freaks, because the place looked like the aftermath of a hand grenade explosion. I doubt if Jack could find a shirt for turtle act or anything else among the piles of gaudy floral clothes. By the stench, they may even have taken root.

I discovered toenails of the yoga girl strewn like red confetti on the bathroom floor. I assume they were hers unless Jack had more secrets from the oldies. Blood pressure rose along with my temper, but as I turned to leave, I spied a scrap of rainbow-coloured paper fluttering on the fridge door.

*'When you're ready to leave turtles and shots meet me at Hotel Marau.'*

At the swankiest hotel on the island, you're assaulted by fresh floor wax, sparkling mirrors, polished mahogany tables, and an ambience of soft piano music. Add tinkling water fountains and slippered feet gliding on parquet tiles.

Jack's dirty shambles existed on a different planet so I almost fainted to see him on stage, in dinner-suited elegance, crooning a la Frank Sinatra. A glamorous woman, oozing chiffon and bling, sat enthralled at the front table, red fingernails tapping a martini glass. Susie, the yoga girl? A wedding ring glittered on her finger, matching the one on Jack's hand clutching the mic.

Duluth may not be amused but at least no turtles or shots in sight.

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