

## A Good Sunday Roast

The crisp clear morning was quite welcome after the searing heat of the past few days. Sandra found herself rising in the early dawn denying the sun's rays, which usually streamed through the small attic window, the opportunity to tap her eyelids and announce the beginning of another day.

Sandra dressed quickly donning her usual attire - a well worn, grey, calf length skirt and a washed out blue button through blouse. She thought it best to take her brown cardigan; given the change in the weather, uncaring that it probably didn't quite match the rest of her ensemble. And today, she thought, she just might go without her stockings. Without even a glance in the mirror she headed for the door and started on the path towards the beach.

As soon as the path met the cool, dew covered sand, Sandra discarded her sandals and pushed her toes deep, wiggling them so the tiny grains squeezed through the gaps between her toes. She closed her eyes and let out a huge sigh.

The beach was deserted, as she knew it would be at this time of morning, so she allowed herself a small, if very inelegant, pirouette, arms flung out, and the crisp air hitting her palms as she turned. Humming to herself she continued on towards the pier which lay about fifty meters further along the beach. It would take her a little while to get there but there was no hurry. Sandra didn't hurry anywhere these days and probably couldn't even if she wanted to. Her ample girth weighed heavily on her knees and over the last few months her walk had slowed perceptibly. She could have her knees operated on, they had told her, but first she must lose some weight. Sandra had tried, of course - every diet advertised on the market - but she never seemed to be able to shift more than a few kilos. She shrugged her

## A Good Sunday Roast

shoulders and decided today was not the day she was going to worry about it.

Hands behind her back and with the early morning sun on her face Sandra wandered, contented, to the water's edge. The sea's surface reflected the small wispy clouds floating aimlessly in the sky and its gleam was so bright she had to shield her eyes from its glare, even at this early hour. Almost at the pier she stopped. A small white lump of something was floating on the water's surface. Sandra stood quietly, watching. The white object bobbed up and down in rhythm with the flow of the tide, its gentle ebb bringing it slowly to the shoreline. It wasn't long before the white object lay at Sandra's feet, like a gift from the sea. Looking down she realised this was no gift. The seagull's head was lying at an odd angle to the rest of its lifeless body - the sea was cleansing itself of unwanted debris - a life spent, now discarded. Sandra gently nudged it with her toe, turning it over.

For a long time she watched as each new wave coaxed the dead gull further ashore. Eventually she turned to make her way back home. She no longer wanted to go to the pier.

The rest of Sandra's day went pretty much as usual. The only difference was the sound of her humming as she fed the chickens and went about the other daily chores. Sandra loved her chickens and it was not unusual for her to spend hour's hand feeding and petting them.

The next morning Sandra was in the coop talking gently to a small chicken, she noted its usual shiny brown feathers had dulled slightly. Speaking softly she coaxed it to her with a hand full of grain. She scooped it up and stood patting and caressing its long neck. With the chicken cradled in the nook of her arm she made her way back towards the house. Once out

## A Good Sunday Roast

of sight of the coop Sandra stopped. She bent her forehead to rest momentarily on that of the chicken's and then, with strong practised hands, broke its neck.

Dinner was a quiet affair, for a birthday dinner. There were just the two of them, as it had been for five years now ever since Sandra's Jacob had passed on and his sister had come to live in the tiny cottage to keep her dim witted sister in law, company.

Brenda stood at the head of the table and heaved a sigh staring at the table that Sandra had taken such pains to make just right. 'Haven't seen so much food on this table since dear Jacob's wake,' Brenda mumbled. 'Such a fuss,' she huffed, although a small, not oft seen, smile crept onto her severe, aquiline face.

Sandra stood off to the side waiting for Brenda to finish her scrutiny of the fare spread in front of her. A small vase held some of Sandra's prized gerberas, which had been specially cut from the front garden that morning, their bright red hue a splash of colour among the white crockery and the snowy white table cloth on which they stood. Sparkling glasses reflected the overhead light and twinkled small diamonds onto the faded paintwork of the dining room wall. An aluminium tray held a variety of steaming fresh leafy greens, which encircled an even greater variety of root vegetables, their encrusted outer layer crisp and golden to match that of the small, roasted chicken which lay beside them on a separate white porcelain platter. Steam rose from the minted peas and the gravy boat.

Brenda stood holding the carving knife and fork in her hands. Sandra held her breath waiting for the inevitable tirade of insults which usually followed this little ritual. Brenda was very particular about her food, especially roast

## A Good Sunday Roast

chicken, which was her favourite. She plunged the knife deep into a succulent breast and let out a small gasp of excitement. She was practically salivating, Sandra noticed disgustedly as relief shone clearly in her light brown eyes. She was unable to take her eyes off the pictures of lust and greed playing across Brenda's face. It had taken Sandra most of the day to pluck, prepare the stuffing and roast the chicken just right. And it appeared, after five years of trying, Sandra at last had roasted a bird to perfection.

The plucking had been the hardest, plunging the chook into boiling water, softening the skin to make the pulling of the feathers easier. She had scalded her hands twice but now standing at the table, looking across at her sister in law, she decided it had been worth it.

Sandra didn't mind the time it had taken to prepare the dinner as it had given her time to think over the last five years living with Brenda. Sandra wondered how she had, literally overnight become Brenda's maid - washing, cleaning, sewing, cooking - while Brenda floated around as if she, not Sandra owned the cottage. She had even decided she would redecorate after Sandra had gone - it was inevitable, wasn't it, that Brenda, younger and with a far slimmer, healthier figure would outlast big fat dim witted Sandra. It was a no brainer, not that Brenda wished any harm to come to Sandra. Oh never, it was just a fact that fat people did not live as long as thin people, so there was no use pining about it.

We should just take each day as it comes. That was Brenda's philosophy. But it didn't hurt to help things along a bit, Sandra thought ruefully, as she carried out all the chores, including the daily walk to the shops to drag the groceries back home. But that was one thing Sandra didn't mind. The daily walk to the shops. It gave her a chance to

## A Good Sunday Roast

wander down by the beach and every now and then she would stop off at the pier and feed the gulls.

Now Sandra had prepared this lovely feast for Brenda's birthday. She knew Brenda hated celebrating birthdays and all they represented but you couldn't berate someone for giving you a special birthday supper, could you?

Brenda cut into the chicken, slicing a large piece off and putting it onto her plate. She followed this with a few vegetables, not the roasted root vegetables - too fattening, but you go ahead Sandra, I know you love them, she coaxed as she forked a few healthy green ones on to join the chicken. Sandra waited until Brenda had helped herself before loading her own plate. She was quite ravenous after the long, exhausting day.

Even before Sandra had finished serving herself, Brenda had commenced shovelling her food into her mouth. 'Not bad', she mumbled between mouthfuls. 'About time you learnt how to cook a chook properly.' Sandra took this as much of a compliment as she would ever get from Brenda.

Sandra often wondered where Brenda put all the food she devoured. She had not put on any weight in the years she had been with her and she still looked as scrawny as she had when she first arrived, on the day before Jacob's funeral, announcing she was moving in.

Sandra watched from under lowered lids as Brenda stood and helped herself to more chicken. As she watched Brenda devour her meal, Sandra thought back to the dead seagull lying on the beach.

A slight pang of remorse flooded over her. Poor Cecil, she thought. She had named the gull Cecil. She felt he needed a name - more personal that way. She had picked Cecil

## A Good Sunday Roast

from all the other gulls to be her favourite and had named him after Brenda's favourite movie star. Sandra had fed Cecil each day for over a week until he had been so used to her presence he didn't hesitate to come up the moment she found her usual place on the wooden bench on the pier.

The day before the gull had washed upon the shore Sandra had sat on the pier, the packet of chips wrapped firmly on the seat beside her. It hadn't taken long for Cecil to perch himself on the rail. The other gulls kept their distance. Cecil saw to that. Sandra's persistence in only feeding the one gull helped. She had chosen the biggest one, drawing it closer each day until she was able to hand feed it without fear of scarring it off. When it was feeding on the chips at her side Sandra had taken a blue felt marker and managed to dab a large blue dot on its chest, so she would recognise him if he was away from the pier. A small tear trickled down her face as she remembered toeing the dead gull and finding the blue dot on its chest. Poor Cecil.

She was brought back to the present at the sound of Brenda's voice. 'I told you, didn't I?' she waved her fork in Sandra's direction. 'It's all in the timing.' She plunged another piece of chicken into her cavernous mouth. Sandra looked at the chicken laying on its resting plate and imagined the gull lying beside it.

Sandra wiped her mouth delicately with the napkin and waited for Brenda to finish. Brenda had managed three helpings of chicken but very few vegetables, as was Brenda's want. 'You don't know what you are missing', Brenda scoffed before she had dug in for her third serving. 'I can't understand how anyone can only eat vegetables.'

The next day Sandra sat on the pier watching the gulls watching her, hoping a feed was in the offering now the big

## A Good Sunday Roast

gull was nowhere in sight. 'Not today', she mumbled softly, 'not today.' She twirled the stem of the oleander twig in her fingers just as she had done on the last day she had fed Cecil. She had broken off small amounts from the twig placing a sliver into each chip she had offered and he had greedily accepted. He gulped them down unsuspecting, just as the chicken had done with the bits of vegetables she offered.

She wondered how long it would take for the effects to work through to Brenda. Jacob had been a three chicken man and sanctimonious, bony assed Brenda was much slighter than him.

All in all Sandra had to admit, she just loved a good Sunday roast and Brenda was right - it was all in the timing.