

DUCK FOR DINNER

by Sheryl Gwyther

With the half-innocent cruelty of big brothers, Marco grinned. ‘Guess what? We’re eating Fluffy Duck for dinner on Sunday. I heard Ma say.’

‘Stop lying, you *mean* thing!’ Nina scowled, but deep in her heart, she wasn’t so sure. Their father still hadn’t returned from the yearly cane harvest. Their mother had roasted all the hens, and broiled the rooster. Only Fluffy Duck remained in the chook pen.

Nina sat her baby brother on a blanket spread beneath the mango tree, and squatted beside him. She called to her pet duck.

Fluffy Duck waddled into her arms. Nina smoothed his soft, downy chest. He rubbed his head against her chin and snuggled against her.

Marco had a pet dog to call his own.

Ma had baby Gino.

And she had Fluffy Duck. He didn’t seem to mind when she dressed him in doll’s clothes and pushed him around the yard in Gino’s pram ... until Ma noticed.

Nina left Gino on the blanket and hurried inside. Her mother bent in front of the wood stove, setting the kindling alight with a match.

‘Ma, Marco says we’re eating Fluffy Duck for dinner on Sunday. He’s a mean, rotten liar.’

‘Don’t speak about your brother like that, Nina.’ Her mother blew a flicker of flame until her face turned red.

‘You *are* going to cook him!’ Nina huddled on the top step in silence, her heart in a heap.

Fluffy Duck strutted across the backyard.

Beyond their small farm, the rainforest pressed in. It was a place where she'd never go – a place her Nona said you'd get lost with three steps into its green shadows.

She hated living so far away from people. No friends. No shops.

Not even a real school. Ma had to teach her reading, writing and arithmetic – when she found the time and energy.

It will only be for a year or so, Papa had promised them. Until he earned enough money. But they'd lived in this isolated, small selection cut from the rainforest for two years already.

Nina laid the cutlery and plates on the kitchen table, resolving not to touch a morsel of Sunday's roast dinner – she'd rather starve than eat Fluffy Duck.

'Where's Gino?' Ma asked. 'Does Marco have him?'

Nina shook her head, guilt in her heart. She'd forgotten all about her baby brother.

Quack! Quack! Quack!

Frantic duck calls came from the backyard. Then baby Gino screamed at the top of his lungs.

Nina raced to the door, her mother at her heels.

Marco dashed from the shed, a spade in his hand.

The taipan slithered closer to Gino's blanket, its brown scales glistening in the sun.

Fluffy Duck flapped and darted behind the snake, quacking and snapping at its tail, distracting it away from the baby.

Marco reached them first. He shoved the spade down on the snake's head, and drove the metal in with his boot.



Ma, her face pale, examined Gino's arms and legs. Finally, she breathed a sigh of relief. 'No bites.'

'*Fluffy!*' shrieked Nina. 'Ma, he's been bit.'

The duck huddled on the ground, panting with his beak wide open.

Nina's mother smoothed her fingers down Fluffy Duck's neck. 'C'mon, you brave duck, *don't you die.*'

They waited.

Then Fluffy scrambled to his feet and shook out his feathers. He puffed up his chest and gazed at Nina as if to say, 'What a clever bird I am.'

Everyone laughed.

'There'll be no oven for this plucky duck, that's for sure,' said Nina's mother. 'We'll eat vegetables and freshwater yabbies instead.'

Nina grinned. 'You're the best pet in the world, Fluffy. And from now on your name will be *Fearless Duck.*'

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