

Excerpt from short story: Epi goes to the dogs.

1

I was sitting having an espresso coffee while Mrs Baldasi sat across from me dabbing at her eyes and telling me the awful story of her life, thus far.

I picked up the almond biscuit she had prepared, thought about dunking it, decided that lacked class, and instead took a bite. She was telling me how hard life had been since her husband Giuseppe died suddenly eight years ago, how she had to struggle on a measly tram-driver's superannuation, and thank goodness her son was so good to her. But now, now, tragedy had struck again. Fluffy was gone.

I stood up and looked at the mantelpiece displaying the history of her life. To the left the photos of her as a young woman with Giuseppe – sepia tones featuring a brooding young man and her counter-balance of a cheery Maria. Next along was married life, post-emigration, with what I presumed was her son as a baby sitting between scowling dad and the smiling mother, a small white dog at their feet. Next her son as an adult – the same brooding looks as the father. Then a large expensively framed-picture of a white dog with bright, button eyes, an ageing, male, Maltese Terrier, the joy of her life, the surrogate grandchild, her comfort, her Fluffy.

‘When was the last time you saw Fluffy Mrs Baldasi?’

This brought a flood of tears punctuated by deep sobs as she recounted the events of that fateful day. I doubted Giuseppe had been missed as much. No wonder he scowled.

It was the evening ritual. Fluffy was outside on the verandah sitting on his favourite rug, taking in the late sun and barking at anything which moved – at that time of day, probably someone delivering the latest junk-mail. She went out to call him in, as she had done hundreds of times after preparing his evening meal, on this occasion a half-can of pedigree lamb cubes with some left-over spinach and ricotta pie. How I could have done with that; maybe she would consider adopting me.

When she went out to get Fluffy, he was not on the rug. He was not in the front yard. The gate was shut. She called for him but there was no answering bark, even when she tapped on the can of dog-food. She looked everywhere, back yard, street, and neighbour's yards. Back in the house she searched every possible spot he could have been hiding in, becoming progressively more hysterical. Eventually she called her son who came over, repeated the search she had made only with the added touch of driving around a few streets while neighbours tried to comfort his mother. No sign of the little white dog. It was as though Fluffy had dematerialised. The silence of her home from that time on struck hammer-blows to the heart of Mrs Baldasi.

‘Did you hear anything unusual, anything at all, on that late afternoon?’

‘No, nothing. Sometime he bark. Everything the same.’

‘How was he with people?’

As I expected with the breed. He was a barker with anything new but generally got along with people, other dogs, possums, even children. Cats he did not like, except for the tortoiseshell next door which like to come over sometimes for a visit. Apparently a very placid cat and not the type to engage in criminal activity.

‘Did you ever have complaints about Fluffy? His barking for instance?’

‘No. Never. At night he slept inside, in the laundry near the hot water-service which is warm. Everybody loves Fluffy.’

This brought more cascading tears and a second handkerchief was brought out to stem the flood.

The Baldasis – the son mainly, Mrs Baldasi having been medicated by this time – did all one would do at a time like this: signs in the street with a picture of a happy Fluffy, enquiries of the local Council and the animal shelter agencies, neighbourhood doorknocks, reward posted, notice in the local paper. Mrs Baldasi even went to the Police who sent a plod over to her house to look around, ask some pointless questions as I was doing, then tell her they would be in touch if they found out anything. Must have been a slow day at Crime Central.

And that’s where I come in to this investigation.

Mrs Baldasi is an old friend of my Mother’s. They used to work together in the 1980s as seamstresses back when Australia still had a clothing industry. They kept in touch after they both were made redundant, and because Mrs Baldasi had learned from her that I had become a private investigator – a ‘detectivore’ as she called it – she asked my mother whether I would review the case and see if I could track down the whereabouts of Fluffy. Of course she knew how busy I was – there was so much crazy crime around – but she would pay for my time as long as it was not too much, being a poor widow; maybe she could cook a few lasagnes for me. They freeze OK and men never eat properly.

She was right about the crime wave. It sloshes back and forth and never goes down. Sure, I was busy, or would be if I had some cases. I was hitting a slow patch as every great detective does. I had just wrapped up an insurance photo shoot. That’s where you spy on some moron claiming to be incapacitated and then take a picture of them working out at the local gym – easy-peasy and the pay’s good. How hard would it be for a trained investigator to work-out what happened to a little white dog? And besides, I love lasagne.

I asked some more questions. Was the dog intact or fixed? He had been fixed which scotched the steal-to-breed-motive. Did any neighbours appear to be avoiding her or unduly secretive? No, everybody was so helpful to her in her time of need, just like when Giuseppe died. Had any strangers moved into the street? No, she knew most of them. Did she take Fluffy on walks and did he have any favourite destinations? Where he liked to lift his leg? No, he always was a yard-dog and got plenty of exercise following Mrs Baldasi around the house while she kept it immaculate. The next question was a painful one.....