

## Fur Baby

by Francesca Ryan

We had got talking by one of the brightly painted shelters on that part of the promenade, right next to the popular coffee and snack shack. Young hipsters, old eccentrics and day trippers queue amicably together for a flat white. It's a quite a spot. You can sit in relative shelter out of a direct wind. Sun warms your face, the light sparkles on the sea. True, it's not without hazard; seagulls keep you under surveillance, beadily waiting for you to slip your guard. It only takes a moment. With reflexes sharp as a fighter pilot and more accurate, a sudden dive and your sandwich becomes their booty. To triumphant cackling from their comrades, they wheel to the stony beach in front of you, quarrelling over the spoils.

I was laughing about it with the young couple next to me, as we witnessed the feathered guerrillas make a kill. We sat and watched the early evening passeggiata: dog walkers, lovers, cyclists and skateboarders. Families with strollers, shrieking happy children darting to and fro. A passing small toddler stretched out a fat fist and offered a half-chewed biscuit to Jenna. She accepted it, mimed a bite then returned it, sending the laughing child back towards his parents.

A striking young woman, Jenna. Intense blue watchful eyes, set off by close-cropped marmalade hair; a feline looking face. Fingers that flexed now and then as she spoke, showing off her long silver nails.

'You like them?' she smiled as she caught me admiring them. 'I had them done yesterday, to cheer myself up.'

Her partner Josh looked towards her, his brown eyes warm with kindness. 'Been a rough time, pussycat. Better days ahead.' Her small mouth parted to show a row of neat white teeth. 'Here's hoping', she said. 'Another coffee?'

'No, I'll get them, I need a little stretch.'

She uncurled herself and made her way towards the hut. Josh sighed as she passed out of earshot. 'I just so wish I could make it right for her. But I suppose men can never really understand what it's like.' His frank face crumpled as he turned towards me. At that moment he looked all of twelve years old. On a maternal impulse, I reached over and patted the hand that scratched at a splinter on the edge of the bench.

'It's just that it's happened twice now,' he said, 'it was early both times, and the medics say there's nothing to worry about at this stage, but it's been devastating for her.'

I felt for them both. I remembered how it was when people made those unthinking remarks about plenty of time; you're still young, the usual cliches. They don't know about the private pain. The stabs of envy and resentment towards the luckier ones, that feeling of shame when the news of another friend's pregnancy leaves you privately raging.

I bumped into the two of them again the following year, a couple of days after we buried my lovely old aunt Binky. At 93 years old, surrounded by family, she left peacefully. The day after she died, another great grandchild arrived. As my old Da used to say, 'one out, one in'.

I'd been sitting in on the seafront enjoying the watery winter sun on my face when I spotted Josh, a baby sling across his chest. As I went over, I saw Jenna's face as she laughed at something he'd said. Her eyes caught mine and she smiled back in recognition,

'The seagull lady, isn't it?'

'How lovely to see you, Jenna!'

I turned towards Josh. He looked tired but happy. 'And who is this little one...?'

Josh grinned by way of reply.

'May I have peep?'

I gently tweaked the soft blanket from around the small head, bending in to say a whispered hello. A pair of topaz-coloured eyes met mine. The soft coppery fur was the same colour as Jenna's crop, only streaked with a white patch. Then a wide yawn, a bubblegum pink mouth with sharp white teeth, and a little pink tongue. The whiskers were long and black. The topaz eyes blinked at me as I looked back at Josh.

The silence behind the moment seemed deafening. I caught my breath, as my mouth opened to speak. It could only have been a couple of seconds before I found any words, but they stretched into another dimension altogether; one where I had to check myself. Did I find myself in a lucid dream, or an altered state of some kind? The silence was broken by a faint mewing from the little bundle.

'What are you calling her?' I managed.

'He's called Felix,' said Josh.

His eyes met mine, with a look at once both supplicant and defiant.

'He's adorable,' I replied.

'Unfortunately, our new addition isn't going down well with our pet cat,' he said. 'You know how it is. Lady Kipper is a bit jealous of the new arrival, we think. Bit of a worry because it means we'll have to rehome her. He lifted a protective hand to cradle his precious cargo even closer. 'Lovely to see you, but we can't stop. On our way to our first postnatal check-up.'

I watched them as they strolled away. I smiled. Time to go home and feed my own darling fur babies, before they scratch the hell out of the sofa.