

My Aunty Jill's Treasure

by Erika Byrne-Ludwig

The day Aunty Jill passed away I knew I had tasks to perform. To begin with I was granted guardianship of her cat, Tippi. I took her home and slowly got her used to my, yet unknown to her, hands and voice. Secondly, in my aunty's old home was an antique wardrobe. It was to be mine, wardrobe and contents. Both surprised and intrigued, I went for my treasure hunt.

Aunty Jill lived in another town. I drove to her place and stood on the footpath, facing her house. Memories of our many encounters rolled smoothly in my mind, finding straight paths to my heart without any bruises along the way. The key to her door was heavy and had already warmed up in my hand.

In her bedroom stood the wardrobe, large and heavily carved, with bronze locks and keys. I opened its doors. Their squeaking reminded me of their age. Asking for caution, perhaps. I looked at the display inside — a row of outfits dating back to her days as a young woman. Large collars and bows, scarfs and hats. A still life display. I took a scarf and knotted it around my neck. Blue like my aunty's eyes, blue like mine. In a drawer I found some silk gloves in the same blue, tried a pair on and cupped my cheeks. I could feel the stir of past voices.

On the top hand corner was a suitcase. A blue leather one. I pulled it out and placed it on the bed. It locked with a small brass key. The inside looked like a satin-padded coffin. Violet blue, glossy as satin tends to be. Carefully, I unfolded the top covering, then the second layer.

Like a thin river a string of pearls was flowing on the soft material, meandering gently on the padding's small dunes. A card addressed to me was attached to it. I picked the necklace up and let it flow in my hands and curl around them. Tiny moons, smooth pearly gems. I slipped the necklace over my head. It rolled around and over my breasts, twirling like a stream of marbles. I played with

them and they played with me, twining around my fingers, my hands and my wrists. A wonderful animated jewel.

Now to get to the bottom of the suitcase. There was a distinct violet fragrance mixed with an indefinable whiff. I unfolded the next layer carefully. Scattered on the satin surface were small violet soaps, dried violet petals and a bundle of photos tied with a ribbon. I undid the bow, spread the photos on the bed. From kitten to adulthood was her first cat — a beautiful sandy long-haired cat, one I had seen before. I remembered her name: VIOLETTE. Another still life.

When I lifted the fourth layer of satin I gave a start and immediately put my gloved hands over my eyes. After a short pause, I was ready to affront the contents again right on the padded part: the actual bed. And still I whiled away, just staring inside the suitcase, fighting thoughts, waiting for them to renew themselves or to drift off. Finally, one by one, they dispersed. My gloved hands started to move, slowly, gingerly. They were now ready to pick up and hold.

Aunty Jill's treasure lay there inert. Still attractive — her first cat Violette — uncoiled, resting on her side; on her neck a collar and a bell, green like her glassy eyes. In her taxidermy state, she seemed almost unchanged, rather nicely brushed, her tail still bushy. I paused a while longer with my hands ready but not quite knowing what to do. Violette ... Aunty Jill, you never told me.

I finally lifted her up. She had left an imprint on the lining. A blend of soap perfume and musty fur reached my nose. With my left hand I held her stiff, lifeless body. With my right hand I stroked her, from her head, down along her spine, to the tip of her tail, reminiscing on my aunt's life, her loves, her secrets, her ways.

Then I placed Violette back delicately, filling the imprint, smoothing her fur, covering her as before, spreading the soaps, the dried petals, adding the photos in one corner and the last layers of satin. Finally, I closed the lid, turned the key, curled my hand around its brass handle, walked along the corridor, gave my aunt's portrait a

glance. Her eyes appeared amused and her mouth ready to tell me yet another story. Maybe even a secret.

As if for the last time, I stood on the footpath, making sure I would remember all the details, imprinting them on me as Violette had done so on the satin dunes. There on the front verandah she was, Aunty Jill, sitting, a scarf around her neck, reading. I called her. She raised her head. With a smile I lifted up the blue suitcase. She waved at us with her gloved hand.

Once home, Tippi greeted me. Together we started digging, she roaming nearby. In the back garden, under the purple hibiscus tree, near the hedge, away from searing sun and gusty winds, I dug a hole big enough to fit the blue suitcase. I knelt down, placed it slowly in the grave, covered it and surrounded the mound with white rocks. In the middle of it I made a tiny lake with smaller blue pebbles. In memory of Aunty Jill and her dear Violette, I left a fresh bouquet of violets floating on it.

