

BE YOURSELF

By Tamaso Lonsdale

'Well, that's about it, Jane,' said Sunny. 'I reckon I've got everything in now.'

Her mother laughed. 'I should just hope so! Your dad and I backpacked halfway around the world with less gear than that.'

'Yes, but I'm not backpacking, am I, Jane? I'm going to be staying in one place for years. And I want my own stuff around me. I want it to feel like home, don't I?'

'You're sure you don't want to take the kitchen stove and the laundry tubs? You might as well. You've got just about everything else.'

Sunny threw a cushion at her. 'Lay off, Mother darling! Just because you're getting rid of me doesn't mean you have to get too uppity. I might just change my mind and stay home.'

'God forbid!' gasped Jane clasping her hands in mock prayer. 'Oh, no Lord! Please! Not that!'

Sunny giggled. 'That's probably what John and Sharon are saying right now.'

'Uncle John and Auntie Sharon to you, my girl,' laughed Jane. 'Just show a little respect.'

'Oh, yes, I must remember that. It'll seem really funny at first but I guess I'll soon get used to it. Do you think they'll mind much if I forget?'

'Probably not. But just remember that they've got different ideas to us. I feel for them, poor dears. Some of the things you'll do will just blow their minds. They're not used to kids being allowed freedom.'

'Yes, I seem to remember some shocked silences when I was there on holidays when I was little.'

Her mother roared with laughter. 'Yes. I believe you asked them why they didn't put the dogshit in the compost.'

'Oh, I remember that! This dog came in and shat on their front lawn! They were most upset! Then it turned out that they didn't even have any compost! They threw everything in the garbage bin.'

'But that wasn't what upset them. It was your choice of words.'

'Well, what did they want me to say? Doggie's poo-poo?'

'Something like that, I suppose. But that was only part of it. What about when you started telling their visitors about the mating habits of our goats?'

Sunny shrieked. 'Oh, yes! That was a scream! You should have seen their faces when I came out with the dreaded word!'

Well,' laughed Jane. 'You're older now. And got a bit more sense. And more sensitivity. You don't have to go around shocking people.'

'Maybe not. But I've still got to be myself. I'll try to "mind me manners" but I'm not going to be a hypocrite just to save their feelings.'

'Nobody's asking you to. Be yourself. But just take it a little easy. Sydney's not Wattle Creek, you know. There's some funny people down there. You're going to get hurt if you're not careful.'

'I know, Mum,' Sunny said. She didn't often call Jane "Mum" and for a minute they looked into each other's eyes. 'I love you, Mum,' she said softly and they hugged for a few moments, rocking gently with closed eyes.

'I'm going to miss you, love,' said Jane. 'I hope this bloody education is worth it.'

'It will be,' said Sunny. That is, if I get to be a vet. I want to work with animals.'

'Well, there's plenty of people round here who know a lot about animals without having much education. Look at Jerry Dobson. There's no one better than him when a cow's in trouble calving. And he never even went to High School.'

'Sure, Jane. We've been into all this before. But I want to be a vet. I want to earn my living working with all kinds of animals, not just know how to deliver a calf.'

Jane smiled. 'It's okay, honey. You don't have to say it all again. I'm just feeling a bit down because the time has come for you to go. I'm going to miss you like hell but I wouldn't try to stop you going. It's just so lucky that John and Sharon are happy to have you stay with them.'

'They mightn't be so happy after I've been there a couple of months.'

'A couple of months!' laughed Jane. Couple of weeks more like it! Or days. Anyway, I'm going to make a cup of tea. Do you want one?'

'No,thanks! I'm going for a walk.'

'Okay. Don't be too long. You don't want to miss the train.'

The moment Sunny stepped outside, the heat hit her like a furnace blast. All about her the screeching of the cicadas was deafening. She headed for the creek calling for Robbie, her old blue cattle-dog, as she went. The dog loped along at her heels as they wandered along the bush track, dry and dusty now as summer drew to a close. They passed a few clearings with little mud brick houses surrounded with bright flowers and small vegetable patches. There were fruit trees dotted about, fowlyards, tethered goats, a cornfield almost ready for harvest, horses in one paddock, cows in another, a small flock of black-faced sheep next door and a couple of donkeys. On this

commune there was room for everyone to do their own thing. A few people waved to Sunny as she passed and she waved back but didn't stop to talk. They'd had a big party the night before and she'd said her goodbyes then. Just now she only wanted to sit by the creek for a while.

It was all a bit scary, this business of leaving home and going away to school. She had already done two years of High School by correspondence at home but then John and Sharon had written to invite her to stay with them and go to a big city school. At first, she had loved the idea and been very excited at the chance to live in the city but now, when it was almost time to leave, she was feeling a bit freaked out. Sunny had a lot of relations in the city and had often gone there for holidays but she knew that living there would be a lot different. Still, she needn't stay if she didn't like it. She could always finish her studies through correspondence.

'Here we are, dear,' said Auntie Sharon proudly. This is your room. I hope you like it.'

'Oh, it's very pretty,' said Sunny smiling politely to hide her horror at the pink-and-white dolly-looking room. There were golden-leaved sprigs of roses on the wallpaper, shiny white painted furniture decorated with stick-on transfers of little girls in old-fashioned dresses and bonnets, lacy curtains, and a pink flowery bed-spread topped with frilly-edged pillows. It's really awful, thought Sunny, but she kept the polite smile on her face.

Auntie Sharon beamed. 'Isn't it lovely, dear? Your Uncle John and I have worked so hard over the last couple of weeks getting it ready for you.' She patted Sunny's shoulder. 'I know you've never had any nice things out there in the bush, dear, so I wanted to make a really beautiful room for you here.'

Sunny immediately felt prickly. 'But I've got lots of nice things,' she said quickly. 'At home my room's really great. I've brought a lot of my things with me.'

'Oh, how nice!' said her aunt. 'Will they match this room do you think, dear?'

'Maybe not. But they'll look good anyway.'

Her aunt looked pained. 'Well, don't forget that you uncle and have gone to a lot of trouble to make this room pretty for you, dear. We'd like you to keep it nice. We're very proud of our house, you know. We have a lot of friends come to visit and we like it to look just right in case anyone pops in unexpectedly. You'll be sure to make your bed each morning, won't you, dear? And don't leave your clothes lying around. There's plenty of hanging space and drawers so it won't be hard to keep everything neat and tidy.'

Sunny laughed. 'I'll try. But I'm not the tidiest person in the world.'

'Oh, I'm sure you'll soon get used to living in nice surroundings, dear.'

Sunny dropped her smile and looked straight into her aunt's eyes. Keeping a steady gaze she said, very calmly and quietly: 'You mean, I'll soon get used to living here. I've been living in nice surroundings all my life. Very beautiful surroundings, in fact.'

Auntie Sharon flushed and looked away. 'Anyway, dear,' she said brightly, too brightly, 'I'll leave you now to unpack. I'll go and see to the dinner. Uncle John will be home soon and he likes to eat as soon as he comes in.'

Sunny was glad to be left alone. She knew she would have exploded if her aunt had made any more nasty remarks.

She started unpacking, hanging her dresses in the wardrobe and neatly folding her other clothes into the drawers. Then she looked at the rest of her things and wondered what to do about them. They certainly did not match the room and her aunt was going to be really upset at first sight of them. But it's now or never, thought Sunny. And after all, it's my room, isn't it?

So, she set to work putting up her posters and wall hangings and placing her candlesticks, pieces of pottery and incense burner on the dressing table.

She spread her dear old patchwork quilt over the flowery bedspread and stood back to look at it. No, she thought, it looks odd. That flowery monstrosity must go. She took off the bedspread and the frilly pillowslips and covered the bed with the patchwork quilt. It looked great. The whole room was starting to look much better. The curtains were really wrong, of course, but there wasn't much she could do about them just now. And the light-shade looked like something out of Mother Goose.

Sunny had a bright idea. Standing on the chair she draped a scarf around the light-shade. She switched on the light. It was perfect.

Just then she heard footsteps in the hall and turned around as her uncle came to the doorway.

'Good God, girl!' he exclaimed. 'What have you done to the room?' He seemed more amused than annoyed. 'Has your aunt seen it yet?'

Sunny smiled. 'Hi, Uncle John! No, she hasn't seen it yet. Do you think she'll mind?'

'Mind?' He roared with laughter. 'She'll have a pink fit! You wouldn't believe the fuss she's been making over getting this room just right for you.'

'Really? Well, maybe it was just right for her but it wasn't right for me. I'm making it right for me now.'

'I doubt that's the way Sharon will see it. She'll think you don't appreciate what she's done for you.'

'But she hasn't done anything for me! She's only done it for herself. For her own concept of a poor deprived little girl, probably the little girl she never had, or the little girl she never was, I don't know which. But it wasn't for me. If it was for me she'd have left it for me to fix up myself.'

'You nasty ungrateful little brat!'

Sunny wheeled around. Her aunt was standing in the doorway, her face flushed and her eyes blazing. 'How dare you talk like that about me! I've done everything I possibly could to make this a lovely room for you. I've always felt sorry for you out there in the bush with no pretty things like other girls have. I wanted to give you a nice home so you'd grow up appreciating the better things in life.'

Her voice had risen to a shriek. She pushed her face close to Sunny's and yelled at her. 'And you! What did you do? From the minute you walked in you were rude to me. And now, just look at what you've done to my beautiful room! How could you!'

Sunny noted the 'my beautiful room'. She felt a bit shaky. Her aunt looked as if she could hit her. Uncle John was not saying a word. Sunny started to speak.

'Sharon, did you...'

'Call me "aunt" when you speak to me, my girl. I'm not one of your hippie friends. If you're going to stay here you'll learn a bit of respect. Something you've never heard of, it seems.'

'Aunt Sharon,' said Sunny 'I'm not sure I want...'

'I'm not interested in what *you* want, child. I'm giving you a good home here. Much better than anything you've ever known before. But it's *my* home and I'll have it kept the way I want it. Fancy anyone coming in and seeing that hodge-podge of junk you've got there.' She waved her arm at Sunny's treasures.

Sunny tried again. 'Aunt Sharon, I don't think I...'

'I don't care what you think. I want all those things taken down and the room put back the way it was.'

Uncle John spoke up. 'Take it easy, Sharon. The kid needs...'

'You keep out of it! You've been encouraging her! I heard you laughing about me having a pink fit.'

'And you're really having it too, aren't you?' he laughed. Then he sniffed. 'Something's burning,' he said.

'Oh, my god! The dinner! It'll be ruined! And it's all your fault!' she yelled at Sunny as she ran to the kitchen.

Uncle John smiled at Sunny. 'And you asked me if she'd mind!'

Sunny started taking down the posters. Her uncle looked surprised. 'I didn't expect you to give in so easily,' he said.

'Give in? I'm not giving in. I just wouldn't bother fighting about it. I'm going back to a loving space where I can put my energy into studying. I couldn't do that here.'

Her uncle stared. 'You mean you're leaving? Just because you can't have your own way about the room?'

'Not at all. It's nothing to do with the room really. That's not the real issue. It's Sharon's whole idea of me as a poor neglected child. She talks of respect and says I don't know anything about it. At home, I'm treated with respect and I treat other people with respect in return. It's not a matter of the words you use. I call my mother "Jane" but that doesn't mean I don't respect her.'

Uncle John nodded. 'Yes, I admit that Sharon's got some old-fashioned ideas but her heart's in the right place. She only wants to help you.'

'No, she doesn't!' said Sunny. She wants to look good in front of her friends. It's a role she's playing. But I'm not in to helping her play it. I'm going home where I can be myself.'

She began repacking her suitcases. Her uncle left the room and she could hear an argument going on in the kitchen. She folded up the patchwork quilt and replaced the frilly flowery things on the bed. With a quick tug she pulled the scarf from the light-shade, tossed it in her bag and closed the lid.

She glanced around the over-pretty little girl room. It was just as her aunt wanted it. The argument was still going on in the kitchen. Sunny picked up her suitcases and quietly slipped out the front door, glad that the station was only a short walk.

Well, Jane, she thought, I didn't even last a couple of days but it was a good experience.

Bio

Tamaso has been writing most of her life. She was first published at the age of nine in the Sunbeams children's section of the Sydney Sun and also read her stories on 2GB and 2SM radio stations' children's programs.

She is the author of nine teenage novelettes for 'reluctant readers', four books on Australian birds, several published short stories and poems and has self-published one book Skye's the Limit, a story about a young girl's fight to save a rainforest.

She has recently completed the third novel in trilogy form. The first book, Brothers? Uncles! Sister? Aunt! was published in 2002. The second book The Missus was published in 2010 and the third Beyond Darkness in 2012.

Also in 2012, a book of short stories Out of My Mind was published.

Tamaso has lived in Nimbin northern NSW for twenty years, during which time she has been a volunteer worker at Nimbin News Magazine and presented a Writers' Program on NIM-FM. Community radio. She now edits the literary magazine Beyond the Rainbow.

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