



Paintings: Susan Rios, www.susanriosdesigns.com

Felicia's Folly written by Mary Kane

Felicia's addiction to verse occurred around the tender age of fifteen when she was at Lakefield College and assumed her breasts would probably never develop beyond clementine-sized bumps.

True love, Felicia thought back then, might only come to those better endowed so losing herself in the romantic verse of a bygone era offered a welcome escape. Breasts and a romantic courtship did come, but much later, as did her passion for horticulture

Felicia's children had long fled the nest, leaving her with time on her hands to sit and read poetry when not tending the garden behind her home in The Beaches, Toronto. With guidance from a friend who had trained at the gardening design school at Sparsholt College in England, Felicia created a veritable cornucopia of flowers and produce.

Despite the fact that she and her husband lived cheek by jowl with neighbours on one side and a small but well-walked ravine the other, mature trees and large shrubs meant that her paradise was completely obscured from view. In addition, an ultra-modern and

horizontally paneled fence, which encased the paved courtyard and outside dining area, also set the house apart from her personal domain.

In a bold attempt to be different, Felicia had eschewed traditional design, instead going for a riot of style and arrangements using both raised and ground-level beds; mingling cabbages with roses, sedum with carrots and garlic, entwining runner beans alongside sweet peas, planting onions, leeks, asparagus and tomatoes amid hydrangeas, day lilies and allium.



Even the smallest detail was taken into consideration. As pansies and jumping jacks grew jaded towards the middle of summer, radishes flourished in their stead. At the very end of this visual delight and tucked behind a mature boxwood hedge, was Felicia's most cherished accomplishment; a raised bed just for herbs, although even here sage, bee balm, rosemary and lavender added splashes of floral intervention throughout the growing season

Behind this bed in all its glory stood Felicia's Folly. A gift from her husband and her gloriously private retreat. In a moment of artistic inspiration, Felicia had constructed her herb bed to match this retreat. It was a truly inspired melding of style and material, causing all their

friends to gape in amazement. Her husband had their contractor build the Folly to his specifications when he'd renovated their terraced home. It was a small rectangular edifice with a river stone base and palest green siding to match their home. The roof, unlike that adorning the house was real slate, not reconstituted rubber tire. It had power, plumbing and insulation so that in all weathers Felicia could escape, book in hand, to daydream with Byron, Shelley and her personal favourite, John Keats.



Felicia appreciated her marriage had long ceased to be a great passion. Her husband was of Italian extraction and had been very romantic at the beginning. Although she had to admit, he was still affectionate and respectful towards her. But he spent more and more time either at work, or on trips to Europe which he never invited Felicia to accompany him on. She did not mind overly although there were famous parks and gardens in Italy and France she would have loved to visit. But his prolonged absences gave them breathing space to maintain the illusion of an idyllic marriage.

She hadn't fallen madly in love at first sight but he was the only man who paid serious attention to her and, on their third date, had taken her home to meet his non-English speaking parents in Little Italy along with his numerous brothers and sisters. He was almost a head shorter than her, dark and rather pleasing to look at. And wealthier than she had initially assumed, as he and three of his brothers owned a successful factory in Mississauga that

made European designed garden furniture but out of materials that would stand up to the rigors of a Canadian climate. Rather foolishly, and with a nod to Keats, she had married him because his name took her fancy. He was called Lorenzo.

It was early spring and Lorenzo upstairs packing for a trip to Milan when Felicia popped into the kitchen to make herself a coffee and invite her friend over for lunch to help redesign one of her flowerbeds. Miranda was second to none when it came to knowing which veggies worked best as part of herbaceous planting. Felicia absently reached for the phone as she spooned foam over her espresso when she realized someone was on the line with Lorenzo.

"I am fed up that you always say, I will tell my wife but never do."

"Cara mia Chiara. I am totally taken up with the trade show in Milan, but if you want to fly out on the last day, there is a beautiful boutique hotel I know just outside of the city."

"If I come, will you tell your wife about us before you leave?"

There was a long pause and when Lorenzo spoke it was clear to Felicia he was prevaricating. "I have to go to this meeting at the Metro Conference Centre on Front before



my flight to Milan so I have no time to talk now. If you want to join me, Chiara, book a ticket for yourself. But better if you sit in coach and not business. You can tell my brothers you are going home for a family event.”

Lorenzo hung up before Chiara could reply. Felicia heard his footstep on the stairs and even though she was almost too stunned to move, she managed to slide the phone back onto its cradle before he entered the kitchen. He looked surprised to see her. “I thought you were in the garden?”

“I was,” she replied as she leaned back against the counter cradling her mug in both hands. “I just came in to make some coffee.” Felicia took a deep breath and tried to steady her voice. “Would you like a cup or are you in a rush?”

He kissed her gently on the lips. “My limo is outside.” He made as if to leave but turned and what he said next took her completely by surprise. “You work so hard in your beautiful garden and have planted many flowers. My garden is molto piccolo and in it a single rose. That rose is most precious to me and I know I have been neglecting it of late. When I get back would you care to spend a weekend in Niagara-on-the-Lake? We could catch a couple of plays.”

Felicia was stunned for the second time in the space of only a few minutes. “But you are always so busy...”

Lorenzo shrugged. “Then it is about time I changed that. There will be a staffing issue to deal with when I get back but with a bit of luck, it may sort itself out in Milan. Fino al mio ritorno.”

Felicia knew only too well that Lorenzo seduced most of his secretaries. She had chosen to ignore it when the children were little rather than turn their lives upside down, and that blind eye had grown into a habit. The affairs never lasted and he seemed content to stay put. She pursed her lips as it occurred to her that perhaps her devotion to the children and then her garden had caused him to feel neglected. But there was no doubt he was extending an olive branch. Question was, did she want to take it?

Miranda came and went. Over lunch, planting had been discussed, plans put to paper. Miranda suggested as she left that Felicia might reconsider her usual design for the raised herb bed this year. Felicia’s reply was noncommittal, as she rather liked that particular scheme. Shutting the door behind her friend, Felicia decided she would ignore Miranda’s final remark. After all, it was her space.

Much later the doorbell rang again and Felicia went to answer it. She only went to the factory once a year for the annual Christmas party but was fairly certain that the blond and well-endowed woman with painted and-plucked-to-oblivion eyebrows posing aggressively on her doorstep was the Chiara of recent telephone conversation. She said nothing but held the door open as Lorenzo’s secretary stepped over the threshold.

“You don’t know me,” Chiara began.

“I believe you are Lorenzo’s secretary.” Felicia’s heart began to race uncomfortably. Before closing the door, she glanced onto the driveway. “Did you leave your car on the street?”



“I do not have one; I come by go-train and bus.”

“Can I offer you a cup of tea, a glass of wine?”

The bravado with which Chiara had entered the house seemed to dissipate and for a second the woman appeared anxious, as if she regretted coming and wanted to bolt. But she squared her shoulders, seeming to Felicia that she had puffed up her rather prominent breasts a bit like a pigeon. “Maybe a glass of wine?” she sniffed.

“Then come through into the garden.”

It was the beginning of May and the afternoon still warm although there was the hint of a slight chill in the air. Stumped for what to say after she had poured the wine, Felicia found herself offering to show Chiara around the rest of the garden. In high heels, Chiara stumbled along the graveled path behind Felicia as she spouted plant names willy-nilly, all the while feeling an absolute idiot until the droning catalogue sounded terrible to even her own ears.

She turned to see Chiara studying her with a look of complete incomprehension upon her face. “I cannot think why your beautiful husband can stand you. You are an old woman, dried up like a bag of soil. I can offer him everything. Youth, a beautiful body and a face I take care of. You on the other hand wear no make-up, your face is lined like crazy what do you call it? Paving! You only plant seeds while I am able to let him plant a child in my belly.”

Felicia stopped in her tracks. She looked absent-mindedly down at the empty wine glass in her hand and then back to Chiara. “Excuse me, but did you say you were pregnant?”

Chiara glared defiantly at Felicia before lowering her eyes. “No,” she finally replied with a shrug. “But there is no reason why not.”

There it was, the gauntlet thrown down. “Excuse me for a moment,” Felicia said as she sidestepped Chiara and returned to the kitchen. More to gather her thoughts than a real need for alcohol she refilled her glass far too full of Pinot Gris and returned to the garden. She realized with a jolt as she made her way back down the path to Chiara, that the olive branch Lorenzo had proffered a few hours ago was something she truly wanted to flourish. All of a sudden, high-pitched screaming pierced the afternoon air.

Startled, Felicia broke into a half run and dashed around the boxwood hedge, spilling wine as she did, to find Chiara appeared to have gone completely crazy. She was ripping out prized perennial herbs and wooden stakes that marked the sowing of more delicate varieties, hurling them about the meticulous garden in a fury. And all the while, cursing in Italian. It was clearly an attack on her and what Chiara assumed she stood for. Felicia saw red. Her now almost-empty glass slipped to the ground and as she stared in horror at the desecration, she noticed a spade standing upright in a peony bed where only this afternoon she and Miranda had decided to plant purple kale. Felicia snatched it up with both hands and swung with all her might. It took three bashes before she was certain Chiara was no more.

Felicia sank to the ground shaking and out of breath, but finding herself grateful for the knowledge that Chiara was not with child. Snuffing out a seedling human would have been too awful to contemplate. Chiara, she regretted not in the least. With shaking hands, Felicia rescued her wine glass, which had fallen onto freshly turned soil, so not broken, and hurried back to the house.



The next day she rose before dawn and by lunchtime had designed and planted a brand new herb bed. It had taken quite a while to wash down the pale green siding and then to empty out every last ounce of soil. But the finished result was worth it. Standing back to admire her handiwork, Felicia had to agree that Miranda was correct. It did look entirely better, grandly Victorian in theme and extremely elegant in its final execution. Life sometimes imitated art and sometimes it was the other way around, Felicia mused. But that summer her basil surpassed all expectations.

As trees in the ravine donned brilliant fall shades, Felicity put her garden to bed earlier than usual. Lorenzo had planned a wonderful trip flying first into Rome’s Fiumicino Airport, spending three days in that beautiful city, then driving south with no specific plan stopping wherever they pleased. The general idea was to end their vacation in Florence visiting the glorious Boboli Palace Gardens and Uffizi Museum, before flying home to Toronto. Felicity was quite certain the opportunity to lose a cheap wallet, now full of Euros alongside a few Canadian dollars, would present itself somewhere along the way and if discovered, the continuing hunt for Chiara might possibly move away from home turf.

“O cruelty, to steal my Basil pot away from me!” John Keats

