Vertical hold

From the oldest girl's journal

I was not her favourite daughter. Although, of the four siblings, I was the one least likely to create problems, or ask for too much, or seek attention. My indistinctness worked for and against me. It was an invisibility wrought of experience.

The stress was intense, even to a child of five or six – how does one remember how old one was? One does not, during early childhood, register one's age when woe visits a household. Unless that is, it wreaks confusion and distress on a birthday.

And that is how, it's clear now, memories connected to age were registered. My birthdays were days of dread, either because of the fear they might be forgotten, as indeed my seventh one was, or that they would be eclipsed by those of my three sisters, which they always were, or that some household disaster would choose to play itself on that particular day. It was not at all unusual for household disasters to rend their drama on us; in fact, it would be much easier to find and recall calm and serene days, for they were memorable.

I was not her favourite daughter at all, but in the later years, when Anthea and Arabella and yes, even Lottie, disappeared from our lives to keep homes of their own, have families, and endeavour to compete with and outdo each other in matters of domestic complexity, I was the only one left with her in that huge house.

It rattled and shook in winter, and sweltered in summer, and was at last quiet and if not serene, at least calm enough when she was well enough to sit up and knit or watch the television, which was nearly always on. The curtains ballooned either with a welcome but rare breeze, or allowed the cold in through ill-fitting windows and poorly maintained external shutters.

One of the village men would have to climb long ladders to fix the elaborate metal shutter holders that swivelled on their ancient ratchets, or they would slam and rattle back and forth, shedding odd slats and crumbling putty, together with old dowels and nails. The men were no longer in her employ; how could she ever afford it? But they would pity us and fix this and that. They spied patently obvious tasks that needed doing; a nest in the chimneypot, a missing roof tile, the side fence bowing outward. They'd see these things as they passed on the back laneway, and would knock at the kitchen door.

'Oh, hello … um …' They were often startled to see a fourth daughter. And it was a rare neighbour who remembered my name.

When I stood back, uttering a dull greeting, digging fists into apron pockets, they just pointed upward, or sideways, or brandished a hammer or broom or screwdriver, to indicate they had better secure or repair whatever it was before the house came crashing about our ears; the ears of her in the front room and myself, whose kitchen it now was, lest no one ate another morsel in that house.

It would have been a disaster indeed if that happened, for the laneway would be blocked and no one in the neighbourhood could go about their normal business. Disasters were avoided and pushed, kicked, thrust a little further down the road. Everything was a temporary fix that would last 'a while'. We learned as youngsters that the length and endurance of *a while* depended on the motivation and energy of whoever doled out help.

I was not her favourite child, but the one who exerted the irony of staying on, long after the better-loved others had disappeared, coming back all the distance perhaps once a year to make sure we were both still alive and more or less well. Staying on was more a default condition than a choice, for no one had come by to claim me. No gentlemen callers, nor any messages from the village to suggest someone had taken a fancy to how I looked or the way I dressed, or even the way I showed my skills in the kitchen. None of those things merited

mention in the village. The house might very well have stood empty for the visitors it received; I might very well have never been born, or perhaps have succumbed to the paralysing numbness that surrounded our end of the lane.

I was not her favourite, like Anthea was her favourite for a few years, when blue yarn and white yarn and grass green yarn flew through her fingers and past those ever-clicking needles to dress her firm little frame with all manner of what she called 'jerseys'.

'Hold out your arm, Anthea darling girl,' she would say, and the alert sister would oblige, be measured and fitted, and soon garbed with yet another *jersey*, this time a green and white cardigan she would wear to school.

I never, or nearly never, held out an arm to be measured, for I soon learned to knit my own, and by the age of eleven would sagely wind together odds and ends of wool until enough yarn was gathered for a multi-striped jersey of my own. Skill was not hard to garner, for I was excellent at observing and imitating. Watching and copying; it was a matter of survival. If I was to be remembered at all, it was by myself. I had the ability to remember things. I remembered me.

'Who made you that?' She would look at what I was wearing; a candy-striped cardigan, or repurposed pinafore, or altered jacket.

And before I could open my mouth, she looked down and shook her head, as if I had done something naughty or rude or unacceptably brazen.

I often sat on the kitchen doorstep in the sun, looking up and out at the bank of cloud that sat perpetually on the horizon whose brightness told of the sea out that way; looking up and out at enormous flocks of birds I learned to name, from the big tattered book I found under the stairs. I named all the birds to anyone who would listen. They rarely did, or raised and rolled eyes at my peculiar pastime.

'What will that get you? How useful is naming birds?'

I unravelled and picked apart old garments and patiently skeined and rolled and wound and wrought together ball upon ball of wool, metre by knotted metre. I soaked it in warmish water laced with a bit of castile soap and then watched the skeins loop and swing on the line as I waited for them to straighten and dry, knowing that when the days shortened and chilled, I would have enough for a 'new' garment I would knit on a borrowed pair of steel needles from the basket.

Damping knitted shapes before sewing them together, piecing and blocking using the old electric iron with the frayed lead, which only just did the job, was a pleasant task undertaken in a warm-enough kitchen using an old thick blanket on a corner of the table in place of the ironing board, which had long ago gone the way of all else, its broken bits of timber serving as firewood one winter. The smell of that scorched woollen blanket stayed with me all the years, Sunday after Sunday, when I took care of the whole family's pile of laundry, of which the pillowcases were of particular pleasure to iron, corner to frayed corner, folded to a specific plan I devised for myself.

'Is that the way to … who taught you to fold that way? We don't fold lengthwise!'

But I did, and she soon forgot to mind me, for the simple expedient of knowing the chores got done, folded differently or not.

Who indeed had taught me to fold that way, iron that way, knit the way I did? Some aptitude came through mere observation, and some through a determination to do things differently. Most were derived through patently obvious improvement on old ways and habits.

Arabella could neither fold nor knit, nor block and piece garments for sewing together. Stubbornly inept, she would meet and marry someone who could afford all that to be done for her, in another town altogether. She would consciously place herself so distant from the

tumbling-down house that she was not merely an infrequent visitor to her childhood home, but an uncommon one. Even so, she was not as forgotten as I.

‘Do you not buy vegetables at the blue shop anymore?’ She asked me once. ‘They don’t remember you there.’ She knew very well no one remembered me anywhere. And if they did, how could a connection be made with her who rarely – or never – left the house in my company when I was a girl. At all school assemblies, I was the one who garnered, for my quite amazing certificates, a few clapped hands in the spirit of pity.

And Lottie? Ah, Lottie was the pretty one who stole away my true love. But was it really Lottie, who could not plan or strategize or for the life of her plot or scheme? Perhaps it was not Lottie who lured his eyes away. Like all stories of love and life, it is a simple one, with complex characters.

Life has its way of sorting through stories, but some people manage to wrangle a convoluted history for themselves out of the misery of others. That might sound envious and cynical, but it is nevertheless what happens; what did happen in that house, where clattering shutters, damned draughts, imperfectly dried tea towels and chipped crockery were the props. Where love went unnoticed, and loneliness endured. Parts were played to some cruel script.

For a stage it was, and lives strutted upon it, a long time before people had their own telephones fixed firmly to walls. Before the television entered everyone’s home, and the funerals of prime ministers and popes could reach the people as awe-inspiring spellbinding events they could not have been before.

Arabella and Anthea were wooed properly, with permission gratefully given by her, from that armchair-turned-throne, one winter apart. First Jamie, the plumber’s son, noted for ingenious innovations with plastic piping, which would endow them with convenience and wealth beyond what she could ever have imagined, came to the house, cap in hand. He

wondered whether he might *walk out with Anthea*, and take her to the pictures, and perhaps take a trip on the bus to the seaside one day.

All that they did, and soon his ingenuity and its rewards bought them a little semi-detached in the new estate. It smelled of cement and putty and newly-planed wood, that place, if Arabella were to be believed. I saw it but once, long after it was new. Still, it did smell of a kind of novelty I guessed would never grace my life. And soon, no doubt, it smelled of babies and talcum and nappies hung to dry in a purpose-built utility room on a rack hauled up high out of reach above a plumbed washing machine, if Arabella – who deeply coveted all those things – were to be believed.

'Mine will be bigger, and lighter, and I won't have any of those chintzy florals, you know.' She made plans even before the oldest Wilson made his 'serious proposal' clear to her and to our ever-watchful mother.

'They want nothing but the best, my daughters.' She pointed a finger, or rather a knitting needle, at the poor startled young man.

'The best, yes.' Uncertainty and fright wrinkled that pursed mouth from then on, even after two little Wilsons had their nappies strung up higher than Anthea's in a larger utility room, and they had their dinners in front of a larger TV set, which had a little button labelled *vertical hold*.

Not that I ever saw it, but those two words stayed in my head long after she said them, on a rare visit when she came bearing a shop-bought packet of biscuits.

'Vertical hold. All televisions have that control.'

That's what it was; control.

And losing control irked the mother of four grown daughters. 'Too close together, those babies. Arabella's waist will never forgive her.' She undid the headscarf knot on her return

from distant suburbs and gave it and her coat to me to hang up; automatically, knowing I was there without having to look.

Vertical hold made me imagine a grip on a predictable family. A preventative, a cure for uncertainty. A rack pulled high, with a dozen or so bleached nappies, wrung out so hard creases stayed in their weft, swinging above my sister's head and those of her babies and frightened husband. Poor Dave Wilson; he might one day wake up and look around at what was created for him.

And you might wonder about Lottie, who was born last and wrested out of us all the most attention. Pretty baby, she was, staying pretty and sulky and selfish because of how he spoiled her like a miraculous princess. He, who had no control.

Yes, you must have wondered whether there was a father in the picture, which inevitably there was, for four daughters to even stage an appearance. Donnie Egerton, lean and inconspicuous, affectionate and patient, nevertheless had three very visible daughters. And me. And Lottie was his favourite.

No one knew what happened to him, after he went out for cigarettes one May evening, failing to return even after the long twilight, after the dark settled and the spring chill rose from under the jonquil bulbs he tended, after everyone forgot it was my birthday; after the half-hearted searches and inquiries, after questions stopped being asked. Perhaps that was when everything hardened; or softened and turned to rot, slow rot. But how was I to know? I was seven, and little Lottie barely out of nappies. And Anthea and Arabella tight conspirers, vying against each other, imitating each other, and still contriving to appear so different.

And her, in her armchair, who after four daughters too close together, whose waist thickened and spread, was reduced to scrimping and saving and knitting all our garments out of scrounged yarn.

Lottie was the baby who got everything. Listen; everything. When he appeared, Ronald Hull, he of the Jewish ancestry so wondered at in the village, it was a matter of staring and taking deep breaths. He was different, with smiling grey eyes, a nose that looked battered, and confident countenance. I have a small idea of how long that confidence lasted before it was squashed, but when he came to whitewash our kitchen ceiling, to restore what whiteness it might once have had, after years of cooking and cigarette smoke, I watched from the kitchen step near the kerosene refrigerator. Just watched, as he dipped a broad brush with a flat wooden handle like a paddle into a zinc pail of stuff he mixed out near the garden tap.

Just watched.

He winked at me, drank the tea I passed up in the largest mug with fewest chips, and passed it back. Despite the messiness all around him – whitewash splashes and dribs, flakes of old paint and the inevitable dust rained down on the drop sheet spread upon our kitchen table, on which he stood – his dark blue machine-knitted, shop-bought jumper remained unmarked.

There was no room, in those early days, for uncertainty in those eyes.

Dreaming of him even as he stood up there, one hand splayed against the big central beam, my entire physical being altered, from heightened skin colour to accelerated heartbeat. Even as I looked in the mirror to try and detect what had changed, in my nineteen year-old appearance, I dreamed. Awake and busy, exhausted and resting for a while with heels of hands pushed into the ironing blanket, I dreamed.

'That will, um – that will be …'

'Give him four pounds from the jar, Lottie!' She called from the armchair, and that was all it took. A whole year later the realization dawned on me, how she manipulated them. Both.

And disregarded me. For you see, I had no discernible feelings to hurt. If one is invisible, one's emotions are imperceptible too.

He had already asked me to the pictures. He had already leaned against the garden wall, reviving that spatulate paintbrush, rinsing out his bucket a fourth and needless time. He had already looked inside me through my eyes and seen what lay hidden there. We had already eaten small cones of ice cream from the summer van that came up the lane playing *Greensleeves*. And he had already passed a quick and soft index finger over my right hand as I held the iron.

Lottie always took what she perceived to be mine, from clean underwear to wound yarn to pressed school blouse. But it was her, her, from the depth of the armchair, who took Ronald Hull – he of the dark tightly curled hair and the clean machine-knitted jumpers – and gave him to Lottie.

I thought he was mine, but she, just like Arabella and her black-and-white television set, had vertical hold. In two weeks, he was asking politely, with a deep sense of uncertainty, whether he could take Lottie to the seaside on the bus one day. Just as if she had taken hold of his upper arm and tugged him clean away.

'Lottie?' The smile, little did I notice then, was devious. 'The youngest! Well, you dark horse.'

He nodded, gaze fixed firmly away from where I stood folding pillowcases lengthwise. Where I still stood, six or seven or eight years later, trying to figure the booklet of a new electric iron still in its box, with her breathing heavily in the same old armchair, which I re-covered in russet corduroy found – surprisingly new – at the charity shop.

Russet armchair, new tea towels, kitchen repainted in light blue, done by standing on the kitchen table. Observation and imitation is what I do best. I need only see something done once and I can repeat it almost identically – faithfully, you might say. It was a matter of

finding the right brush and bucket. A matter of covering the kitchen table with an oilcloth and standing up there, as if in perfect control. Perfect balance. I could do that at home; I could possibly do it elsewhere.

Asked, when I did a few hours at the mixed goods store, if I could man the switchboard at the telephone exchange, I replied that yes, of course I could, turning swiftly into fulltime operator even before I knew what the wages might be. I am the anonymous voice at the end of everyone's line. *Connecting you now*. And yet hardly a soul in the village knows I exist.

I walk her to church for Saturday's vigil, in darkness or light, fair weather or foul, and she occasionally stops to exchange a sentence with neighbours on the lane.

'What do you mean *who's this*? This is Cecily, my daughter.'

'You have *four* daughters?'

And she laughs. 'This is who you might call the forgotten one.'

They laugh too, as if being forgotten is the height of hilarity, or humour, or wry amusement of harsh truths told in jest.

And I take her unsteady form, by the upper arm, in what you might call a vertical hold, and lead her to the church, where all candles blaze and not a single one of the statues' plaster faces shows the least little sign of loneliness.

oooоOOOOoooo

3265 words