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Unexpected Lessons in Love

Written by Bernadine Bishop

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Unexpected Lessons in Love

BERNARDINE BISHOP

JOHN MURRAY

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1

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In loving memory of my mother,
Barbara Wall

PART I

Gut Feeling

Chapter 1

She was still in bed at eight, which would have been unthinkable until the last two years. It was acceptable now because she was ninety. She had been Sister Mary Vincent in 1939, then she had been Mother Mary Vincent, respectively informally addressed first as Sister and then as Mother; then she had been Sister Diana Clegg, and had simultaneously forfeited, or been relieved of, the veil. Now she was Diana, or Sister, or, to differentiate herself from other nuns in a context where identification was needed, Sister Diana. She was accustomed to 'Diana' now, but it had at first been distasteful, for Diana is not a Christian saint, and the name offered no star to follow, unlike the resplendencies of Mary and of Vincent.

Married women change their names, or had in Diana's young day. The change signified the start of a new and dedicated life. She had welcomed setting aside the familiar 'Diana Clegg' and had welcomed renascence under the name of Mary Vincent, and not only because she loved both those saints. It was also a rite of passage. She was no longer only the intense, tousled Diana Clegg who had been good at hockey and bad at maths, who had adored her mother and feared her father, who had decided one windy day alone on the top of the South Downs to be a nun. She knew she was not going to become a different person, tempting though that fantasy was; but she had gathered her whole self together and pointed the pieces in the one

direction, excluding other choices, in the name of love. When in her hard-working, habit-hardened forties she and her confrères had been instructed to revert to their birth names, she had taken it with grim humour, as a sign that she could only ever be who she had always been, and that God knew and accepted that, unaccountably loved it, even. Nevertheless one of her mottoes remained George Eliot's 'It is never too late to be what you might have been' and at ninety she was trying as hard as ever.

In a hotel bedroom in a small town two miles away from Diana's convent lay Cecilia Banks, not at all startled still to be in bed at eight. She reached for her mobile and texted: 'OK confèrnce niceish hotel will be seeing M M V this a m See you pm Rmember to feed Thor.' Her paper had gone down better yesterday than her laconic reference to the conference suggested, but her husband knew her and would know this. Participation in the conference had been her first professional reappearance since her operation and consequent retirement from regular work. Her first reappearance, or her only one? Time would tell. Her hand went to the colostomy bag. It was the first time she would change it, if it turned out that she needed to, away from home.

It felt about half full, and her fingers pressed the clayey substance through the smooth plastic. Her guts had worked overnight without her knowledge. She was used to this. It was one of the things that made excretion so different from excretion in her life up to the age of sixty-five and so different from the norm. She had reflected, well, I used to shit in the mornings; it must always have been during the night that the shit was funnelled unnoticed past this point near my navel where it now comes out.

The unhealed, perhaps unhealable, surgical wound hurt as she got out of bed. In the bathroom she considered not changing the stoma bag until she got home. It might be due

a quiet day. On the other hand, she thought, beginning to remove and replace bags, it might unpredictably awaken, and be in full cry, or rather full chuckle and whisper, on the train. Anyway, it would be unseemly to share toast and marmalade with MMV, knowing that there was a portion of shit, albeit unseen and unsmelling, an inch from the tablecloth.

These were new decisions for Cecilia, as they would be for anybody, and she was still surprised that she had to make them. In one sense, as a practical person, she had in the past year got used to her changed body. In another sense, she knew that if her wrist was strapped to a lie-detector, it would register that she had no colostomy. Cecilia had been a psychotherapist for the thirty years before her forced retirement, invalided out of the profession; so she was accustomed to thinking about degrees of truth, of belief, of honesty.

And it was good to register that she had on a clean and empty bag when she embraced Diana, who rose to greet her, then sank back into her upright chair, beaming beautifully and still holding Cecilia's hands. Nuns are great hand-holders, remembered Cecilia. 'It's wonderful to see you, Mother,' she said.

'It's wonderful to see you, my dear,' said Diana, 'and looking well. You have been through so much since last we met.'

'I certainly have,' said Cecilia, noticing that Diana had heard and been pleased by 'Mother'. 'I know we have to call you Diana, now, but once Mother, always Mother. What a year. Two years, really, since the cancer was first diagnosed.'

She had got into the cancer absolutely at once, she observed. Perhaps no surprise, for she had always perceived MMV as a life and death person, fully signed up to both. So Diana heard the whole story, and occasionally said, 'My dear, what a story,' 'So what happened next?', 'How awful for you,' and 'Don't ignore the toast while it is still hot.' She was glad her hearing aid was working well, and indeed she thanked God.

These two went back a long way, for Cecilia too had undergone her tousled intensities, and also had felt impelled to enter religious life. When she arrived at the convent with her suitcase, Mother Mary Vincent was novice mistress. Though at that time relatively inexperienced, Diana knew enough not to have a lot of trust in Cecilia's vocation. Cecilia was too much inclined to adoration of the senior nuns, particularly the novice mistress; and Diana did not hold with such adorations. Cecilia scorned the recreation hour, and was to be found kneeling in the rain before the garden *pietà*, and Diana, torn from reading *Middlemarch* aloud in the common room, had to seek her with a brolly. Cecilia had imposed fasts on herself, and other acts of supererogation of which Diana disapproved. Theory and intuition told Diana it was better that Cecilia should realise she had made a mistake. When that time came, they had an emotional parting and had kept loosely in touch through the decades.

When Cecilia arrived home, home being London, she found Thor in but Tim out. Almost before putting her bag down, she looked for a note from Tim on the kitchen table. There was no note, not even in the places he sometimes put a note where no one in their senses would be likely to look for it. His text in answer to hers in the morning had merely said: 'Glad all went well. See you later.' She put the kettle on. Next she checked messages on the home phone, and heard other voices but not his. Then she unpacked the overnight bag, to whose ordinary things, including her paper for the conference, had been added for the first time colostomy supplies. Then she turned her full attention to Thor, who had been asking for a response all along. Thor at least had greeted her wholeheartedly, with purrs and self-stroking round her feet, and she could not let him go longer unthanked. The cup of tea would have to wait.

She loved it when Tim was in when she got home. She

could hardly believe he didn't know this, but perhaps he didn't, or didn't remember it. It was so different, after all, from anything he might feel, or so Cecilia thought. The sense of being alone settled on her. She loved Thor, possibly more than she loved Tim, though it depends on what you mean by love; but the sense of sustaining presence offered by Thor was limited, however much attention he was paying her. Tim only had to be sitting at the computer with his back to her, groaning a distracted greeting, and the world was an unfrightening and adequately populated world. She had been admired and perhaps celebrated at the conference, and the conversation with MMV had induced even exuberance. Now she was deflated and tired, a lonely, elderly woman with a colostomy and a sore bottom, having a cup of tea with the cat on a grey Sunday afternoon in London.

One of the answerphone messages had been from her son Ian, and he had asked her to ring him back. She did this now.

'Mum, I've got tons to tell you. Are you sitting comfortably?'

'Yes,' said Cecilia, who remained standing. Sitting was less comfortable than standing, but she could tell that Ian was in no mood to hear about her state of health. It was unlike him not to enquire: something must be up.

'Well, I'd like to come over, because all this is rather long and complicated for the phone. But I can't come over without talking to you, so . . . OK. Tim's not there, is he?'

'No.'

'OK. Do you remember Leda?'

'Yes, of course.'

'Well. Because you disapproved of her so much, and of course I saw why, I didn't tell you things. She was pregnant from me, insisted on having the baby, and the baby was born. Are you there? Sorry to be catching you up with so much so quickly, but the moral for you is, don't disapprove too much and you will get stories in digestible instalments.'

'Of course I'm here. But stunned. Well, catching up.' Cecilia was remapping her world. She had a grandchild.

'Leda had lost interest in me, and I in her, and but for the baby I would have faded out completely. She is a lot madder, as well, voices and everything now. Of course I've been giving her money and coping with her decision not to have an abortion, and I was there at the birth. I've registered the baby and everything. But that's irrelevant. I'm sticking to the headlines, and I haven't got to the banner one yet.'

'You were there at a birth,' Cecilia couldn't help interjecting. 'And it didn't even show in you whenever it was I next saw you!'

'Mum don't be silly, remember I've reported from Afghanistan, I knew you'd get distracted by that. It's nothing after what you see.'

Cecilia was disappointed. 'When was the baby born?' She didn't like to ask if it was a boy or a girl in case that also wasn't a headline.

'Couple of months ago. It's only tiny. But this is the important thing. It was left literally on my doorstep in the night. I'll read you the note.' Rustling. '"I have been called away, and I shall never come back. Cephas and you must live together. That is what has to be, as you well know. You will see the packet of his food and you can buy the same. Some say I am dead and perhaps I will be. Waters easily close above a head." Then there's a bit I can't read. Then, "You will never see me again." Well, that's not very good, is it?'

'No.'

'Well, of course I phoned her number, and have been phoning all day. I've rung the police. I'm rather stuck here because of Cephas. I don't know why he's called that, she wanted me to register him as Julius Perdito and my surname, so that's what I did.'

'You've been through so much, and I didn't even know.'

'Well, you were ill, and the whole saga's so mad, and I don't want Tim to know, though he'll have to now. What I want to do is get a taxi and come over and leave Cephas with you. I can't look after him, possibly. Of course I'll see him, often I suppose, at yours. I'm so sorry, is this all right? Otherwise he'll have to go into care.'

'Might Leda reappear?'

'Well, she might, anything's possible, she might be at home not answering the phone. I'll go round and try to find out once you've got Cephas, but I won't be surprised if she doesn't reappear. She's got much madder than she was when you knew her.'

'I hardly did. Only that extraordinary evening.'

'She's been talking lots about the sea and suicide. She doesn't call it suicide, she calls it offering her breasts to the deep. That's why she decided she shouldn't breastfeed, because her breasts were bespoken by the deep.'

'Darling, what a time you've had.'

'But for Cephas I would have been history for her and she for me. Immediately. Within a few weeks. I don't like mad people, nor babies, actually. Both are scary. Luckily for me, Leda didn't like me much. I think she took against me as an evil force. It would have been easy to extricate myself.'

'Yes, and I thought you had.'

'Yes. Well, I want to get in a taxi and come over.'

'Of course. Do you love Cephas?'

'No, I'm much too worried. I need to offload him. Mum, I've got other things in my life. Yemen the day after tomorrow. Fatherly feelings didn't stir at the sight of him. Nor since. I wanted Leda to have an abortion, but I could see the thought of that was making her madder. I don't love her or him. What if he's as mad as his mum? Of course I'll always pay for him, and I have been. He's of no interest to me, and I'm hoping he will be of interest to you.'

'He is.'

'Good. I'll be over in half an hour. You'd better warn Tim.'

Left to herself, Cecilia had good reason to reel. But diagnoses of cancer and the threat of its recurrence had immunised her against reeling. Nor did she phone a friend, or attempt to track down Tim, though both impulses were there. Instead, she considered her task, her difficulties with it, and her resources. Tim. Tim would be all right about this. The house. She and Tim slept separately now, and the baby would of course have his cradle in her large bedroom. She and Tim were both retired, and, like a lot of retired professionals, had quite a lot of energy left, and were more afraid of being bored than being overoccupied. It was very important that Leda should know where her baby was, but managing that could safely be left to Ian.

It was Sunday, so there might be a crisis about baby milk, and for the first time Cecilia felt a physical qualm. A packet had been mentioned in Leda's note, but would that see them through until tomorrow? And what about a bottle, and sterilising equipment? Then there was the matter of Cephas himself. How much harm would have been done to him, or how much good would he have been able to extract, from his time with a mad mother? And what if Cephas became attached to herself and then was snatched away from her, either by Leda or by cancer? The adrenalin customarily prompted by answering a new and sudden challenge began to subside. This was indeed a grave responsibility. Should she have accepted it so readily? But what choice had she had?

She tried to bring to mind Ian's early life and the routines she had presumably become reasonably proficient in. She had been married to Gerry then. She had of course been young, and was not practical, brave or calm. Things should be easier now. With luck it might count for something that she had studied child development, and done an 'infant observation' as part of her training. Also, forty years ago, she had no doubt

spent time hankering for a fuller life, for happiness, for fun, for freedom; such aims troubled her no more. Gerry's philandering had also been a source of anguish. Poor Ian. She was in a better position now to take on a baby than she had been at twenty-four. But that was nonsense – she tired more easily; she was at least something of an invalid; she had long taken undisturbed nights for granted. Nature did not give you babies at her age, and no doubt wisely.

She must make sure Ian saw the baby often, very often, and, once he didn't feel trapped, he would be able to begin to love him. This must be a major, though at first covert, objective for Cecilia. She must never lose sight of this, however much she might at some distant but imaginable point want to keep Cephas herself. For the first time in her ponderings the likelihood of her love for Cephas hoved explicitly into view. This made her think of Thor, and then of how he would be about Cephas; and her spirits fell again. Not only would Thor dislike Cephas, but Cecilia would have to conceal the fact that this raised divided loyalties for her. What grandmother preferred the cat?

There was a commanding ring at the door and she opened it to Ian, with a carrycot in his hand. He put it down on the floor of the hall, fairly gently, and embraced his mother. He was grim, tense and determined, facing an emergency. He turned to go into the kitchen.

'Darling, you'll have to bring him in with us.'

'Oh. OK. He's asleep, I think. We can leave him . . .' But he brought him in.

Cecilia couldn't resist now, though she knew it would be more diplomatic to concentrate entirely on Ian. The carrycot was on the kitchen table. In it was a muddle of shawls, a baby-milk packet, a bottle, a couple of babygros, the *Guardian*, a label with letters cut from newspapers saying Julius Perdito Forest, aka Cephas. She parted these things and underneath them saw the little face.

'Oh. He isn't asleep,' was all she could say. The baby's eyes were wide open, looking back at Cecilia with a considering, curious, wise expression, his mouth moving as he sucked his lower lip in and out. Cecilia felt startled, almost found out, by his gaze. She had been anticipating him as a wonder, a problem, a project; his little face, as he slightly moved his head to get a better look at her, told her firmly, though without accusation, that he was a person.

The impulse to pick him up was too strong to resist, though Ian was tutting for attention, and Cecilia felt the extraordinary, always unexpected weightlessness of a new baby. She put his face to hers and swayed. Tears came to her eyes.

'OK, Mum, you've bonded,' said Ian. 'But there's lots we've got to talk about, I've got to get over to Leda's, I've got to phone the police, then I've got to meet someone. Sorry to be pushed for time. Don't think I'm not grateful.'

'Make sure Leda knows where Cephas is,' said Cecilia.

'Yes, of course. If I can't get into her flat I'll leave a note. I've written it already in case. And I'll tell the police. And if she goes on being missing the police have said they'll list her. They'll break in, of course.'

'Does Leda have a social worker?'

'No. She didn't really seem mad at the antenatal clinic. I know because I went with her a couple of times. I hounded her on the phone from abroad to go to her appointments, and I think she often did. When she was giving birth she passed for normal, or so it seemed.'

'How could she have?'

'She's white, middle class, educated, stylish, beautiful. Would anyone look further? Anyway, they didn't. She was in hospital only a day. She's very healthy. The weirdness of her calling me Caliban was lost on the nurses. They ended up calling me that too, thinking it was my name.'

They both laughed snobbishly in spite of themselves, Cecilia

still swaying slightly, and feeling Cephas's lips moving against her cheek. He might be getting hungry.

'What about food?' she said.

'Yes. He's had three meals already today. And there's a bottle in his cradle. And a bit of food.'

Cecilia's imagination boggled. 'Did you prepare the feeds?'

Ian looked sheepish. 'No, Marina did. It's Sunday so we couldn't buy this sort of stuff, but all her friends are having babies, and she phoned round and got three disposable bottles, and she fed him. One not much more than an hour ago. We didn't want to use the powdered baby food or you would have been left in the lurch overnight.'

'Are you and Marina properly together now?' If Ian hadn't been at this moment profoundly in her debt emotionally, something neither questioned nor commented on by either of them, this enquiry might not have been dared.

'You could say yes, but don't get the idea we could have Cephas, we don't live together yet, if we ever will, and it's much too soon to . . . And anyway our lives aren't like that. Then she had to go to work, but we're seeing each other later.'

'I'm very glad about you and Marina,' Cecilia slipped in seriously. She was never sure that her comments counted for nothing, though Ian liked them to appear so; and Marina, who had been around for years, she liked and approved of. 'Didn't Marina fall for Cephas?' she ventured.

'She coped in her nice businesslike way, and yes of course she liked him. Not as much as you do, though.' At this moment Ian looked tenderly at his mother holding the baby. He smiled. 'I must go,' he said. 'When will Tim be in?'

'Soon, I should think.' She had heard a text come through during the conversation and was looking forward to checking if it was from Tim.

'Now you are OK, aren't you?' said Ian. 'I'll phone tomorrow

and come round in the evening if meetings don't go on too long. I'll phone anyway and see if you need me.'

He went. Cecilia removed a hand from Cephas and steadying him against herself checked her phone. Tim. Home in twenty minutes.

Cecilia looked at the beautiful little face, her hand behind the dark-haired head. Cephas looked back at her, and a frown flitted across his forehead. His mouth was moving still, as if absorbing something, and his eyes intently met hers. Mine is the wrong face, she thought, and he knows it.

She held him more closely, so that for the moment he needn't look at her. What she wanted now was to be able to offer him a bottle. But she couldn't make one while cuddling him. And she couldn't put him down. Meanwhile she felt two things. One was love. It was a love she had not chosen or expected. It had quietly but completely claimed her. She had no choice but to submit to it. It was as well she felt it, in the circumstances, for the other feeling was loss. But for the love, the sense of loss would have been overwhelming, and she would have acted on it. She could and would heartlessly have made a case to Ian for Cephas going into care. Even in the shadow of the love, the sense of loss was severe. In the year since her operation and her retirement, she had lived a life of leisure. That life had been difficult, in many ways, fraught with pain, fear and novelty. But she had gradually come to enjoy it, even to revel in it. She had no doorbell to answer, no timetable to keep, no need to go to bed at night or get up in the morning. It was a selfish life, and it went unquestioned by Cecilia and her friends that it was right that she never had to make much effort; and she was mostly regarded as rather brave and wonderful although she did almost nothing. Now she would be tied to a schedule more demanding and involving than the busy practice she had for years been used to. She shrank from the future.

It was not only this sudden, new love, she thought, walking steadily up and down the kitchen, Cephas held close. It was the old love too. It was the love for Ian, a scarred and seasoned forty-year-old, rather than a pristine love, but equally unnegotiable; and it made it impossible for her to say no to him. This realisation made her feel both proud and ashamed. She knew that, hidden behind the conversations on the phone and in person that they had just been having, there had been a familiar emotional semaphore – from him, the gesture of need; from her, that of availability. It was true that he wanted to offload Cephas, but he would repine and ultimately rebuke her if he could not offload him on to her. Putting the child into care was a card in his hand, but he knew he would not really have to play it. *Are you going to put me first, as ever? Yes.* That had been the semaphore exchange.

And now she heard Tim's key. He came into the kitchen wearing full tennis regalia and prepared to be apologetic. Then he saw Cephas.

'Hullo hullo hullo,' he said, 'Who's this?'

'Ian's son. My grandson. Your step-grandson. Cephas.'

'I didn't know . . . Did you tell me . . . Ian . . . Have I forgotten something?'

'No. It's as much of a surprise to me. The greater surprise is that we are to look after him. At least at the moment.'

Tim came over to look at him. Cephas looked back at Tim. Tim put a finger in the clutch of a tiny hand. Tim was initially rather pleased, as Cecilia had known he would be. He liked an emergency. He liked rising to an occasion, and for this there was ample scope in the mixing of the feed, for which there were instructions on the packet which he read aloud and carefully followed; the sterilising of the bottle and teat by boiling, and the eventual cooling of the milk to blood heat. All this was new to him, as he had no children of his own, and he approached these tasks without recognition, nostalgia or dread. Cecilia loved

his painstaking competence, and it came into its own now as she had hoped it would.

However, it was rather slow, and Cephas was crying before Cecilia was able to offer him the bottle. Cecilia hated to see his alert, intelligent and approving expression break up into the red wrinkles and oblong mouth of screaming. Thor had been asleep on a chair all this time, but the screaming sent him out of the cat flap. Cecilia had pangs about Thor. What could he suppose Cephas was? She hummed and danced and talked, and chivvied Tim, and then the bottle was ready, and to her relief Cephas was eager for it.

'She hasn't spoilt his appetite, whatever else she has done to him,' she said, but not aloud, for Tim had not yet heard the details.