

The Extra Large Medium

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Extract

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CHOCOLATE BROWN CHILDHOOD

As a kid I used to see a lot of people who wore chocolate brown clothing. As a kid, I accepted this as the norm. I thought that chocolate brown was a very popular colour for clothing.

Chocolate Brown is the new black. They don't wear black in heaven apparently. I don't know what they wear, because, as stated, I get the door in my face. But when you aren't quite checked into your parking space behind the Pearly Gates you get to moon about in chocolate brown.

In Hell they all wear evening gowns. Heavily boned bodices. Dress shirt collars just that bit too tight. Your forehead just that bit too sweaty and the perspiration running like an itching, infuriating river down from your armpit into the elastic of your knickers. The point where it pinches your waistband.

So... I imagined that the brown clothed people could be seen and heard by everyone. At the age of five My Mother thought that I had an imaginary friend called, unlikely I know, 'Mrs Berry'. My Mother accepted her existence completely. This was one of those phases that children go through. Mrs Berry sat and knitted chocolate brown scarves and mittens and hideous bobbled hats at our kitchen table. She talked to me about household tips and gossip about friends and neighbours who were themselves long dead. She grumbled about being dead not because she missed being alive, kisses or the

smell of the earth after a summer rainstorm. No, Mrs Berry thought being dead was very inconvenient because she couldn't bottom the house.

"Bottom the house." It was her favourite phrase. Her joy was to clean and scour from attic to cellar (if we'd had one). Not for her the fragrances of Chanel or even a bottle of Tweed. No, Mrs Berry liked Ajax and Dolly Blue.

I suppose it is a measure of My Mother that she did not find it in the least odd that when I talked about Mrs Berry I talked about the war and household chores and the suet pudding recipe in this week's *Woman's Weekly*. It never occurred to her to think 'Where is she getting all this?' . But then we had Patrice staying with us and she pretty much only had eyes for him. He was a student from Toulouse. I don't remember very much about him except that he taught me to say 'Bonjour'.

The things he taught My Mother were many and myriad. As a child I had not realised that there are two worlds that we live in, the world that everyone sees on the outside, Living Room World, and the world that only you see on the inside. The world of closed bedroom doors and wet weekends in Tunbridge Wells. At seven as I was being tutored in the fine arts of Brasso and starch by a woman who had been dead for forty years. My Mother, who should have been schooling me in the ways of bedtime stories and the safe castle that should be your home, was being tutored in fellatio by a man probably half her age. In fact, if I really think about it, and trust me, I don't, she was probably tutoring him. He was after all a student, not more than eighteen. Who knows what My Mother's sexual history was before my birth. It was chequered as a chess board after me. It would have been psychedelic if I hadn't happened along to cramp her style.

You're not really allowed to say that are you. Not in the Living Room world. You're supposed to think that your

Mother and indeed, if you have one, Your Father, are next to the angels. They don't get it wrong. Then you grow up yourself and realise that Parents are irrevocably human too. I look back now and wonder at how I ever trusted My Mother with anything, she was, after all, as loopy and dangerous as I am now. If I ever manage to have any children I shall tell them at the outset, 'Don't trust me, I'm lost and afraid too. I have NO IDEA."

What he did teach her was how to cook. The growth of garlic in our back garden and a herb trough are testament to that. I still cannot smell lemon thyme and not think of Patrice and his soft voice, his strange words. I imagine that My Mother smelt lemon thyme and thought of his kisses, or the touch of his hand, hot and sweaty on the cool marble of her backside.

For me however, there was also a third world, no pun intended. This third world was The Waiting Room of Heaven world. Things arrived at breaking point when Mrs Berry could no longer keep her rather unkind remarks about my mother's housekeeping abilities to herself. My mother had a lot of abilities and quite frankly I have never blamed her for not nurturing that one. My mother cleaned the bath out with dirty laundry. She did not red raddle steps, clean windows with vinegar and scrim cloths or turn her mattresses. Instead she had a good time, giving her mattresses adequate exercise with sweaty sexual excesses. I argued with Mrs Berry. She got angry and broke a teapot. Shoved it clean off the worktop. It smashed at my feet. My Mother, who was eating pickled beet-root out of the jar at the time saw the whole thing, saw the teapot lift in the air and smash down without any help from me. I cried 'I didn't do it...It was Mrs Berry...' And we went to sleep at Aunt Mag's for the night. Even Patrice. I don't think there was a three in a bed and the little one said situation. Not knowing my Aunt Mag as I did. But there, I have

foxed my own argument. I did not know my Aunt Mag. I knew the Living Room World of Aunt Mag. The ciggie smoking, grumbling old baggage in too tight jumpers with too done, candy floss hair.

It was an odd night at Aunt Mag's. I often spent Thursday nights there. More on that later. But those Thursdays were taken up with Aunt Mag smoking and me eating her supply of garibaldi biscuits and blowing the skin off the instant hot chocolate that she always made for me. I have to confess that I didn't much care for instant hot chocolate. It was always chalky and sweet but it was something I did that was different. It was peculiar to Aunt Mag's and so, even though it was disgusting and coated my teeth with a chocolate brown fuzzy feeling, I enjoyed it. It was part of my tapestry.

On the night we stayed there with Patrice there was no hot chocolate. Aunt Mag poured My Mother a stiff whisky and they sat in front of the telly with the sound turned down. Their faces were illuminated by the flickering white light as they knocked back the amber coloured liquid from little shot glasses. They looked like women who should have been in a saloon with John Wayne. Only of course he would have put them across his knee for such louche behaviour. I stood at the bottom of the stairs watching them through the glass pane in the living room door. I couldn't hear what they were saying only vague mumbles which seemed all to be scared or anxious. There were no comforting mumbles that night. My Aunt Mag shuddered and shook ash all over her clothes. She swiped at it with her hand. As she did so she caught sight of me out of the corner of her eye and screamed. My Mother looked up and screamed too before they realised it was me.

My life had become a ghost story. I was a Midwich Cuckoo.

Mum's Eye View: Sideways On

Is this on? What do I do? Just talk?...She was scary as a kid. She was scary before she was born. I was young and wild and untamed. Untrained really for anything. No one told me about men. You know, they don't come with a handbook or an instruction manual. I got what they'd call 'hands on' training then. Their hands. On. When she...when I was...you didn't really say the word pregnant either. It was like 'Nazi' or 'bum', you just didn't use the word. It's always been hard for a single mum except in the war when they were the home front and even then I get the impression they were expected to be saintly. Not go dancing. How dare you go dancing when your husband is off fighting. Go dancing is what I'd've said. He's fighting for your right to dance. Dance because he is fighting. I think the Virgin Mary has a lot to answer for myself. But then, what do we really know about her eh? Only what's siphoned through the Bible. My God and I think I had a scary kid...

You're not born a Mum. It's a trade you have to learn you know, like being a blacksmith. Only I think that a blacksmith eventually works out how to make the horseshoes or the wrought iron fencing whereas being a Mother. A parent I should say. You're never finished. You're always the apprentice and let's face it, the kid is always your master. I don't believe much in nurture. I believe in love. But I believe you are what you are, ready made, in a parcel. The wrapping just gets torn off as you go. Some people are a diamond tiara. Others are Christmas socks. With my girl...she came out a bit like a woolly jumper knitted by your Aunt Alice. You aren't sure at first but then you put it on and it truly was made for you. It keeps you warm. It smells like home.

There's terror and fear and hatred and resentment and all the things they never tell you. But that day when I found out

about...when I knew. I thought I'd let her down. I didn't know how to protect her, how to stop this for her. I felt useless. I thought she'd grow out of it. I hoped.

Because someone was in our house talking to my daughter. Picking on my daughter. Someone I couldn't see. An intruder. You can't sleep for thinking, well what is she saying and doing now. So you go to the single mother of them all and you ask her for advice.

And after all that talk of Faith, they don't Believe you know.

BELL, BOOK, CANDLE

Mrs Berry. That was the giveaway. Her name. Mrs Berry. My mother found out that Mrs Berry had lived in our house some forty years previously. My mother confessed to my Aunt Mag that a whole series of petty but unexplained events, moving soap, folded tea towels, a rug moving across the room could all now be put down to Mrs Berry bearing a forty year house-keeping grudge on the subsequent mortgagees of her home. For forty years Mrs Berry had denied herself the pleasures of Heaven because no one was putting enough Bloo in the toilet. Small minded doesn't cover it. My mother decided to have the house exorcised and the priest, Father Tansy was called in.

Father Tansy arrived with his bell, book and candle and he droned his way through some prayers sprinkling holy water everywhere which just about drove Mrs Berry batty. I watched as she followed him around with a chocolate brown dishcloth trying to contain the mess. 'Priests' she grumbled before moving the soap from the left side of the kitchen sink to the right. My mother and Father Tansy were up in the attic by then casting demons out of the bric a brac and undiscovered antiquities that were stashed there.

Lesson number one. Other people's junk often comes with other people. It is unfinished business of the first water. Stuff they have left undone and will spend centuries trying to do. Some people cannot leave it alone. It's like leaving the grill on, they get halfway up that stairway to Heaven and they remember... 'Oh my God, I've left that Picasso in the attic...our

Gerard will never find it under the insulation...I'll just be a minute.' But a minute is an eternity and no one ever finds the Picasso under the insulation because no one can hear them.

Except me. I know what is down the back of your sofa. I have been told about the shed keys dropped under the floorboards in the dining room. I have been told about those keys some thirty five years after that shed has been destroyed to make way for a pre-fab garage.

My mother had a lot of sleepless nights after my encounter with Mrs Berry. Already I was being shown the way. I had to keep further encounters from My Mother. I should not worry her like this. I did not want to make her afraid.

At seven I was in Miss Hadley's class at school. It was an old school, built in Victorian times with high windows like a prison. On one corridor there was a stock room with a heavy dark blue door with a grille set into the bottom of it. This room was stacked high with pots of glue and sugar paper, exercise books, pencil erasers, pencils and poster paints. It had its own strange aroma and I did not like it. I did not like to walk past it. One afternoon I was sent to fetch some sugar paper and some gummed squares and I found out why I didn't like the cupboard.

There was a brown clad boy in there. Albert. He had been locked in there in 1896 and had suffocated. His teacher, Miss Whitmarsh had shut him up in there as a punishment for not having boots and she had forgotten about him. It had been raining and she had been offered a lift home by a handsome butcher who was courting her. It was only later over a dinner of pork chops that she remembered Albert. By then it was too late. The courts did not look kindly on Miss Whitmarsh for suffocating her pupil. Miss Whitmarsh was hanged by the neck until dead and the Education Authority had a ventilation grille fitted into the heavy blue door.

Which explained the brown clad lady who I had seen walk-

ing up and down the corridor every day since I had arrived at the school. At the age of seven I reminded Miss Whitemarsh where she had left him. In letting him out she let them both go. Which is the first time I had seen a real ghost as the two faded from chocolate brown to an ethereal grey before disappearing into a shaft of sunlight and dust motes cast from the high windows.

My mother didn't encourage me at all. My mother, through her own fears, did not want me chit-chatting with the dead. It was forbidden. After she had Mrs Berry exorcised, she put it out of her mind as a phase I would grow out of. Her fear made me afraid although no one ever tried to hurt me. Bore me possibly. Instead I felt that this strange Waiting Room of Heaven world was something I did wrong. It was a bad naughtiness but I couldn't rid myself of it. It didn't matter if I didn't listen to these people, they kept pushing at me. They woke me in the night shouting into my ear so that I would sit bolt upright amongst the blankets, sweating into the darkness only to be told some tedious nonsense from Mrs Ordsall about pruning some fruit tree, or there was the very persistent Mr Knightley, 'Have they bought that grand piano yet? Did you tell them what I said about Winchley's and that upright? Did you tell them?'

I have often wondered whether Mr Knightley's relatives ever bought that grand piano or if they took his proper advice and bought the upright.

It was Aunt Mag who thought I should be encouraged. She said that being a medium ran in the family. That my great uncle Sidney had once rolled out of the snug at the Robin Hood and into a Spiritualist meeting. He had been with a group of belching, farting mates, all eager for somewhere to keep warm whilst waiting for the bus. All up for a laugh at the expense of these sad gits waiting to find out about Crown Derby coffee sets and shed keys. My great uncle Sidney had

not been up for a spiritual encounter. One of the first things he noticed about the church was how many people were wearing chocolate brown clothing. It struck him so much he mentioned it to a blousy looking woman sitting nearby. She didn't mind his beer breath and smiled when he asked if chocolate brown was the uniform.

They had been rolling out of the pub into the rain. The lights from the spiritualist church across the road were golden. It was the most golden light that Uncle Sidney had ever seen. And before you get too bowled over and start interpreting Destiny, Fate and the Intervention of angels you should remember that my Great Uncle Sidney was, as he put it 'Three sheets and a couple of patchwork quilts to the wind...'

'We could hold up in there for half an hour...' he said and made to twist the brass doorhandle. A golden, glittering orb. Down to the polishing endeavours of Mrs Berry as it happened.

'Not going in there.' Hugh shivered into his elder brother's best jacket, brought out for funerals and pub crawling. 'Full of old bags. Bunch of table tappers. My mam says to keep away.'

The others turned at this.

"Your mam?" Gerald sniggered blowing a ribbon of snot from his nose.

"It's dabbling in the occult. Steer clear. They'll have you stripped naked and sacrificed to virgins..."

Recommendation enough to Sidney and Gerald.

Inside the church was cold and damp. A huge patch of mildew marked the wall between the two tall leaded windows at the front end. It looked like a map of some distant country. The country of the Dead. A continent strewn with black mildew forests and long, silver rivulets of effervescence. On the dais, against a backdrop of folded chairs and a collapsible ping-pong table a man in a dark blue suit appeared to be

asleep in a hard backed chair. The rest of the hard chairs had been set out in the hall. A handful of people were parked across them. At least that's what everyone else saw.

"Jim" the man onstage, that evening's medium, seemed to jolt awake, "I've a Jim here, or possibly he's looking for a Jim?" he looked to his audience for answers. There was a nervous tensing of shoulders but no definite response. The medium onstage pushed on, determined, "Might be a Tim. I've got a crackly line tonight...it must be the weather...Tim or a Jim?"

The man in the chocolate brown suit beside Sidney tapped him on the shoulder then.

"Why don't you help the bugger out?" he said gesturing wearily at the medium. Sidney was mellow with pale ale. Happy to oblige.

"How can I help?"

Another brown clad man with a frustrated expression stood up at the front and looked back at Sidney.

"Well for a start it isn't Jim. It's Viv. I want to speak to Viv and I've been waiting hours and not getting anywhere. He isn't bloody listening." The brown clad man at the front was getting very irate.

"Who's Viv then? This one?" Sidney moved down a couple of rows and pointed at the woman, touched her shoulder. She stiffened as if her blood had suddenly turned to quick setting concrete. Everyone else was holding their breath although Sidney did not notice. The brown clad man at the front nodded.

"At last. Tell her I knew all along..."

"Why don't you tell her?" Sidney asked, not wanting to interfere in a marital tiff.

"You do it...You tell her. I knew and if she wants him she's to have him and never mind what your mother says Viv. Get away from your Ma Viv. Get away. Let him take you."

Hugh and Gerald sobered up sharpish as they watched my Great Uncle Sidney talk to the air. Everyone got their message that night. Everyone.

The blowsy woman beside him did not mind when Uncle Sidney reeled sideways and vomited into her lap. The blowsy woman was Kitty. She was never officially my great aunt Kitty because my great uncle Sidney never officially married her. He was still officially married to my great aunt Edna. But you don't get a ceremony and a certificate for being the true love of someone's life.

Kitty convinced him when he sobered up. Sidney woke up next morning to the fizzing of Andrews Liver Salts and the sight of Kitty in a Japanese kimono that had actually come from Japan. It was celadon green with a golden dragon embroidered onto the back. His tail trailed down one sleeve and he breathed silverwire and gold leaf fire down the other. Sidney drank the liver salts and ate bacon and eggs as Kitty laughed at him. Sidney had no idea what fairy story he might have to concoct to cover this absence from home. He was not in love with his wife but he had never stayed away or been with another woman. Sidney was a man of promises. You keep them.

"You haven't a clue have you, what we did last night?"

Sidney shook his head, put his knife and fork neatly together on the empty plate.

"Good" she said leaning into him, "I'll always be able to hold it against you." Her bosom seemed to inflate before him like a lifejacket. He never wanted to let go.

"Call in sick" Kitty told him.

She took him to the museum after he called in sick to work. He was against calling in sick. He was an honest, hardworking bloke of a man. Kitty simply laughed. Sidney didn't think it would be very funny when he got the sack but Kitty just

laughed again. 'I'm going to show you the way' she said and for the bus journey into town Great Uncle Sidney thought he'd been kidnapped by a Jesus freak.

She took him into the upper gallery of the museum building so he could look down on the main concourse. It was a grand Gothic building, a gift to the city from local boy made millionaire Sir Charles Whitworth. It was called the Alice Museum after his wife. Kitty simply stood there with Sidney and asked him who he could see. Sidney looked down on a party of schoolkids drawing on worksheets as they sat and sprawled on the Victorian tiled flooring. Then he saw the brown clad Sir Charles bustling about in and out of the offices and up and down the stairwells. Sir Charles never fulfilled his plans. The museum was never finished to the drawings. He was doomed now to spend his eternity trying to finish it his way. There was a brown clad workman who had died whilst fitting the roof bosses in the vaulted ceiling. He was up a ladder still. Sir Charles chided him from the bottom of it, left a bit, right a bit...you're going to chip it doing that.

Not that Sidney believed this until Kitty sat him down in the library with some documentary evidence. Photographs of Sir Charles, his obituary in the local paper.

Sidney got the sack from the inkworks. But he made his million as Sidney Colville, the Extra Large Medium.

STOP.

Hail fellow well met on the highway to madness. Madness is a small town not very far away. Most of us, at some point, find we could probably walk there. Others have the road cave in and dump them there.

Sidney was a grown up when he first tuned in. He had to make the effort and alcohol let him do that. He could tune out. He had to ask them. Me, I had an open frequency right from the start. No one believes in magic anymore. If you hear voices in your head then it is simply cost effective to address

the imbalances in your brain with a concoction from the chemical companies. I learnt that voices are not in your head if what they say leads you into real life. If what they tell you is a true story. If what they tell you is the ending to their true story. If they send you messages that match up you are not mad. You are a messenger.

I didn't tell my mother about the chocolate brown brigade after Mrs Berry. I , like all children, did not want to worry her. I loved her, I did not want her to be afraid. I did not want her to be afraid of me. I could dream in nightmares but I wouldn't tell. I learnt quickly to adjust responses so that I wasn't ever caught out talking to someone who effectively wasn't there. School became a safer haven after I helped Miss Whitemarsh. She and Albert disappeared , said their goodbye. The everyday streets were more of a problem. We lived in a town that had been begun by the Romans. A walk to McNab's to buy shoes was a living history experiment. I longed to live in a purpose built town where I imagined there would be no history. No unfinished business.

History. Be interested. It is where we come from, it is where we are, it is where we are going. I learnt latin from a Roman soldier.

Aunt Mag and her encouragement nearly finished me before I had begun.