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Worldwide Adventures in Love

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Extract

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I

Edith's house interested us from the beginning; there was never any sunlight inside it. Every window and doorframe was heavy with fabric, greyed chenille curtains so darkened by time they may very well once have been red. When we visited as children my sister, Margaret, and I would dare one another to go upstairs. Beyond the safety of the kitchen the house tightened then spread, careering off in all directions like a maze. Rooms split into one another, doors led to more doors, cupboards turned into flights of stairs and four storeys up, as close to the sky as we could imagine, sat an attic room populated by ghosts.

'Listen,' Margaret used to say. 'I can hear something.'

'What do you hear?'

'People's lives.'

We became friends with Edith by accident. It was a Sunday in June and like all Sundays in the seventies there was nothing whatsoever going on. My father was pottering, my mother was washing clothes, and everything good was closed on account of God. Margaret and I were playing in the street, daring one another to climb on the neighbours' cars.

'Come on,' I said to Margaret. 'Climb up here on the boot. You can see Mrs Dunn making gravy.'

'Who cares?'

'Looks like she burnt it. Mr Dunn looks like he might be about to wallop her.'

'Is she going to throw his plate out of the window again?'

'Quick. Get up here or you'll miss it.'

This was good stuff. The row was in full flow but we couldn't quite see into the window. We advanced to the roof of a car parked on the opposite side of the street.

'Come on,' I told my sister. 'Give me your hand. Put your foot up here on the windscreen.'

My sister wasn't sure, she was bothered by heights. I egged her on just for the sake of it.

'I'm going to fall,' she said, suddenly. 'Jessie, don't make me. I'm slipping . . .'

My sister lay on the ground in an odd shape. She'd fallen face down on the kerb and the cut on her forehead was bleeding so hard it turned my skin cold to look at it. She had her eyes closed. She wasn't crying. I had killed her.

Edith just happened to be there. She picked my dead sister from the pavement in her bony arms and carried her inside without asking. In her kitchen, a room brash with tiles and echoes, she bathed my sister's cut with salt water until the blood stopped running and the cut beneath looked reasonable. After that she waved a glass bottle under my sister's nose, which woke her from her faint like a magic spell and made her gag so hard I thought she might be sick.

'What were you thinking, child?' Edith asked her. 'Climbing up over a car like that.'

'Jessie made me,' said my sister, still woozy. 'Have I died, are you an angel? Is this heaven?'

'Idiot girl. There's no such thing.'

* * *

After Edith saved my sister's life Mum made each of us write her a thank-you letter. I used the new Parker ballpoint I'd got for my birthday and worked closely with my sister on her opening lines. She wrote:

> Dear Mrs Edith,
>
> Your house smells of mouldy biscuits and dogs and is very much dirtier than ours is. It reminds me of the house on the drama serial *Upstairs Downstairs* except not nearly as nice. Thank you for saving my life. My mum could lend you some Mr Sheen polish if you'd like.
>
> Very sincerely yours,
>
> Margaret

Mum asked us to deliver the letters in person but our plan was to drop them through the letter box without knocking and run away. Edith had other ideas. Her door opened just as we reached it and she told us we had better come in. She didn't thank us for our notes or bother to open them and I felt tongue-tied, which was unusual for me. The only thing I could think of to say was something my mother might have said.

'What a nice street we all live on,' I told her. 'Very good standard of people.'

'Philistines,' Edith said quickly. 'Philanderers, hypocrites and cuckolds. I ought to take a bull whip to the lot of them.'

I didn't know the meaning of the words but I knew they weren't complimentary. I tried again.

'It's the Queen's Silver Jubilee next year, of course,' I said. 'I hope you'll be coming to the street party. My mother is responsible for cups.'

'I'll be helping with the bunting,' Margaret said.

Edith coughed and said, 'Parasites.' From this I surmised she was a Communist.

There was a lull after that while Edith looked at us with

something approaching pity. When the silence became too much she relented and asked if we'd like to explore the house. Margaret said we very much would.

I'd walked past Edith's house twice a day, every day, in the three years since I'd started at senior school. Hers was one of the few Victorian houses in our suburb that hadn't been flattened during the blitz or bulldozed when the new estates were put up in the fifties. It was ramshackle and unkempt and the front garden was large and overgrown. Most of the neighbours, including my mother, referred to it as the dirty house. Margaret and I had talked about it often, in between discussing our horoscopes and arguing about which Charlie's Angel we'd rather be, and had inflated ideas of what it might be like inside.

It was more fantastic than we'd imagined, larger and darker and wilder. The building had old bones that creaked and ached with every step, and layers of dust that got deep into our noses. We spent an hour in a room with no furniture, just books, and another in a room filled with leather trunks. I found an empty box labelled *Bullets* and Margaret found a collection of jewellery stuffed inside the portion of a violin case where the cloth and the resin might usually go. There were necklaces inside, tangled gold and silver chains, loose pearls, single earrings and a golden bracelet wrapped in tissue paper and etched with strange letters, only big enough to fit a child's wrist. It had red stones in it that I thought were probably rubies. It killed Margaret not to take some of it home.

After that we visited Edith once or twice a month. We took her chocolate, which she liked, and she sometimes baked us a sponge cake that tasted of violets. We grew used to the smell and the mess; I'd even say we came to appreciate it. Our own house was tidy and regular and small, and everything in it

was beige or brown. Being with Edith was like stepping into a parallel universe. Each time her front door clicked shut behind us there seemed the real possibility that the outside world might be gone for good.

There were notes and papers strewn everywhere, the kind of things most people throw away: bills, train tickets, timetables, theatre programmes and newspapers that dated back years. The walls were a mass of patterns and delights, a background of pastel-coloured paper the texture of velvet, lined with bookshelves, portraits and maps. There were strange ornaments on every table and shelf: statuettes of black, naked people; pieces of seal fur and a whale bone; hunting knives in cases; perfume bottles with crystal tops so intricate and brightly coloured they might have been out of *The Arabian Nights*.

Some things we struggled to identify. The wooden paddles in the bathroom that looked like tennis rackets turned out to be snow shoes. The carving behind the dresser with faces that gaped open like they were hungry or screaming turned out to be a totem pole. When we asked Edith where she found all these things she simply replied, 'On my travels.'

There were no photographs of people in Edith's house and we wondered if she had any family. Margaret once asked her if she had children and Edith said children were noisy, thoughtless, ungracious and cruel and that she'd never had any time for them. That's when my sister began calling her Aunty Edith. My sister was clever like that.

We knew her less than a year. We visited her two dozen times at most. We got on with our lives and she featured in them both significantly and insignificantly, like postcards from Antarctica or the moon. We were too young then to realize how exceptional she was or how little use we had made of her. She was Edith. She was old. She was the lady at the end of the street.

One spring day Edith had a visitor. He arrived in a beautiful car. He wore a silk coat and polished shoes and carried a bunch of lilies in his hand. He left an hour later with his head held down, the flowers still carried in his hand. It was somewhere around this time that my mother started laughing about things that weren't funny and Edith's house burnt to the ground.