

WHAT TO SACRIFICE?

For Rupert and Lucinda, the journey ahead of them was never more sharply defined than on the day after their engagement party. They had slept until noon and she was the first up. They had been living together for a while already, a fact glossed over before those relatives who could be stuffy about such things. Direct sunlight did not reach Rupert's north-facing West Kensington bachelor digs and opening a window Lucinda leaned out for a moment to enjoy the spring air and the sun shining in the square opposite, where lime trees were in leaf and the tennis club gates open. Last night their two families, perfectly aligned socially, had mixed with great success at the Mayfair Arts Club, the men braying away, the women leaving clouds of their perfume in the corridors, their family clans equally ponderous, equally impossible. Dividing themselves, Lucinda and Rupert had moved from one conversation circle to the next. Of course she was fond of her side and glad to chat with relatives she had not seen for ages. Later in the party, when duties were accomplished, she re-united with Rupert and they gripped each other's hands tightly.

After taking a bath Lucinda began preparing brunch in the kitchenette. Rupert was up now too, sitting on the sofa with his legs crossed, wearing slippers and a Turkish gown. He was smoking a cigarette and reading a book while listening to an avant garde symphony on *Radio Three*.

It was at the Mayfair Arts Club that they had met. He was a member and she had a yearly show of paintings in the lobby. People said Rupert talked very well. Always he wore a tweed jacket – almost as a uniform – and, at 37, he was getting portly. When occasion demanded it, he and a few friends played in their own jazz band. He played clarinet and sometimes piano. 'I'm very heavy fingered,' he always said modestly, but he was in demand at the Old Street Ballet Studios when the regular pianist went sick. He also wrote short stories. Otherwise he went to work on weekdays and Saturday mornings at Zurich Gallery in New Bond Street, Mayfair, where he was a poorly-paid associate.

'Lucinda, you must read this,' he called across the flat.

'What is it?'

‘Something Anthony Powell writes, in the introduction to the Ronald Firbank anthology you gave to me.’

‘Read it to me, my fingers are covered in olive oil.’ She was standing in the narrowing between the kitchen and the living room tossing Nicoise salad in a glass bowl.

‘All right, here goes. . . this is Anthony Powell writing about Ronald Firbank.’ Rupert began to read aloud in a warm masculine voice. ‘He is the classic, the ultimate, version of the third generation type, that trio of descending individuals in which the grandfather makes the money, the son consolidates the social position, and the grandson practises the arts, or sometimes merely patronises them, in some decadent manner, thus expressing the still existent, yet by now failing and feverish, energy that suddenly, unexpectedly, welled up in the race.’

‘That does sound like you, if that’s what you’re thinking.’

‘Doesn’t it? You too.’

‘Third Generation? Yes and No. I always thought I was like my Aunt Clementine.’

Lucinda stood there lean and cheerful. She had been interested in Physics when young, graduated an engineer and later worked for a women’s fashion magazine. Then she discovered a love of landscape painting and tramped around Southern Europe on the small allowance her parents gave her, dressed like a boy, painting furiously.

‘You’re right, it does work, even for me,’ Lucinda conceded. ‘That man you met last night, my grandfather, manages his estates up in Scotland and hardly shows his face to civilisation from one year to the next. But my parents are pure Kensington and here I am a painter.’

‘Very much so. And think of my family, all those establishment grandees. My grandfather – God bless him – was a raving maniac who did nothing but work all his life. Then my father is completely opaque, married in mummy to what I think we must call a socialite. And there’s me. *Third generation. Failing and feverish. Decadent.* It all fits.’

‘We’re kindred souls. And we’re not snooty – that’s the main thing.’

‘But the third generation don’t make any money, that is Powell’s clear implication. They only spend it.’

‘We don’t need the trappings of the upper middle-class,’ Lucinda returned confidently. ‘Anyway, Aunt Clem will leave me all her money when she dies. She’s told me so. Open some wine for lunch, darling. Let’s get sloshed then go back to bed. We must never become stuffy. That’s the main thing.’

The wedding, at St Mary’s, Kensington High Street, was as romantic a day as could be wished. There were seedy artistic friends in lumpy suits and many extraordinary old ladies in hats, Aunt Clementine among them. Hers was an unmarried life, sad in a way but not lacking in colour, with plenty of love affairs along the way. She was getting old though. Really, she had done what she liked with her youth, an adventuress in the best sense of it, and she had probably imparted some of her courage to Lucinda, her godchild and favourite niece. She led the toasts, delighted in their love. Everybody could see it, they could not but get married, and they would be just in time to have children.

Now, ten years on, a paralysing gloom lay over the small cottage near Peterborough where Lucinda and Rupert had been living since the children were born. It was seven o’clock on a winter’s evening. They had just returned from the funeral of poor Aunt Clementine. Lucinda was giving the children a late supper, supermarket own-label baked beans on toast, which they (the children) were consuming quietly at the breakfast counter. Leaning on the Aga and watching them, Lucinda had not fully left the desolate cemetery, the black crows on the grass between the graves, the freezing clouds of West Midlands mist. When the girls finished eating they drank their glasses of water. They rarely made a clamour for expensive juices or fizzy drinks. Lucinda had made a cup of tea for herself and one for Rupert. Such a tiring, sad day.

With a screwdriver in one hand and a plug in the other, and wearing a cravat (to keep his throat warm, the central-heating dialled money-savingly low), Rupert had been striding in and out of the combo kitchen-living room before settling at the good end of the sofa. He did his best with changing fuses and general household DIY. ‘I am asinine. How the devil—! Damned this thing. I am really no use at all,’ he raged in a low voice to himself.

Simone was twelve years old and Joanna was eleven. Simone had already decided she was going to be a painter like her mother. She loved to ‘help’ mix the oil paints. With the unquestioning love of a child, she believed her mother to be a great painter, even though she knew the paintings rarely sold at full price. Joanna,

on the other hand, was a furious diary writer and precocious teller of stories. Whatever her father told her she absorbed like a sponge and shot back in childish form after an incubation period of a few days. They were unaware of being poor and no two children looked more set to emulate their parents. Among their friends at the local school the cottage was famous for the number of books in every room and for its 'loo-rary' – a downstairs lavatory lined in them. The girls were solemn now. It had been a big day. They hadn't been to a funeral before.

Lucinda cut a quiche in two (declined by the girls in favour of the beans), plated the halves hot from the oven and passed one to Rupert. An unaccustomed silence was on the family.

'It's been a ghastly day for you, hasn't it, Lucinda?' said Rupert, to give expression to what he suspected his wife was feeling. 'And thank you, girls, for being so good today.'

'Poor Clementine,' said Lucinda. 'At least they paid for nice flowers with her money.'

'What do you mean, mummy?' said Simone.

'Aunt Clementine changed her will. The home got everything. She was confused and they took advantage of her. We don't know all the details.'

The two children began to cry.

'You loved Aunt Clementine, didn't you girls?' said Lucinda. 'We should have seen her more but at the end it was so difficult without a car.'

'But there were a hundred friends and family at the funeral,' said Rupert. 'They are all equally responsible.'

It was already nine o'clock, time to send the children up, with a promise to come later and say goodnight. They listened to the feet of their children padding about upstairs – pyjamas, toothpaste, bed. As a rule the girls were allowed half an hour of reading before lights out.

Lucinda put on her Verbier ski jacket with its goose-down quilting and climbed into her Hunter boots – she couldn't afford such things now but she had a few old items still serviceable – then gloves, scarf and bobble hat, to become the winter monster who chased children in the garden. She crossed the vegetable patch behind the cottage and went into the potting shed which she had made her studio.

She clicked the light switch and the central naked bulb cast a harsh light on the interior. Her paintings were stacked against the walls, some hanging, the two she was working on at easels. They looked at her with a sort of complaint. *Why are we here, freezing, neglected?* they seemed to say. Still, the great thing about being an oil painter was that you could work below zero without freezing your paints or your turpentine.

It was a memory game capturing summer light under a Philips 100 watt. Lucinda always longed to show the beauty in landscape, her eye so responsive to it that on occasion she positively swooned.

A new set of Cote D'Azur landscapes was almost finished. Sketches had been done in the summer, when the whole family stayed as guests in the hills behind Cannes, in an old farm villa among vineyards. Proudly independent they might be, buried in their Cambridgeshire cottage, but they accepted this hospitality from family friends once a summer. Under that Southern sun they were a different family. Lucinda could be again the boyish scamp she had been in childhood, who sketched on the streets of Antibes. She would take Simone out painting, they would set their easels up on the beach and have a go at the late afternoon iridescence in mild competitiveness. They hiked about Aix all together, Rupert always the laggard but the one read-up on local history. They bathed nude on the coast, among rocky inlets where the French were ever keen to go *au naturel*.

Aunt Clementine had been another committed summer Mediterranean lizard, until she had become too ill for it. As she entered her dotage she had remained based in her pleasant old vicarage in Northampton, just an hour by bus from Peterborough. In her terminal decline, her brother, Lucinda's uncle, found her a home west of Coventry, off the bus routes, in the private sheltered housing concern which now seemed such a criminal one. Of course the matter could be put in the hands of lawyers, but didn't costs eat up everything, even supposing one did win?

Looking at her two paintings on easels, Lucinda saw the light and the azure sky of San Tropez and recalled all at once the parties of the summer, the terraces overlooking the bays, the olive trees. The Partridges, the Arbuthnots, they had both inherited their villas. How painful to think of remaining always the poor cousin at these gatherings. It was all sinking in very fast. Her dream of a house in

London was up in smoke. She knew Rupert, if he was to write anything good, needed London life, and she needed a house with a spare room to make into a proper studio. But no, it seemed they must go on living here in obscurity on their meagre income, she selling paintings when she could and doing a little teaching, he occasionally freelancing for a tight-fisted Middle-Eastern art collector, who sent him to plunder country house auctions. And they made up their income to a living wage with state help and credits. Rupert had only been able to pay back his debts with the money his parents left him on their deaths. Lucinda's trust paid for the cottage after marriage but that was the end of it.

Lucinda started to cry. It wasn't supposed to matter to a committed artist, but if she was honest she longed for the comforts of the life she had known as a child. Stupid pointless art! She began to scratch a canvas with the wooden end of her brush, ruining a straight rows of vines. Then she loaded paint and effaced sunshine with Raw Umber, a picnic with Burnt Sienna. Two paintings ruined. Only her freezing toes told her to stop. She wiped her face. The paintings could be rescued in the morning. She picked her way back to the cottage.

Rupert was just switching the television off after watching the ten o'clock news.

'So, we may lose our tax credit,' he said, 'and the other one, child tax credit. The government are hell bent on announcing something before Christmas.'

In the process of struggling off her outer layers, Lucinda said nothing.

'Will you have enough housekeeping?' said Rupert.

'I don't know, darling. Oh hell—and I thought we'd have an inheritance.'

Rupert rose and let Lucinda have his seat where the sofa was softest.

'I'm afraid I'm drinking. Same for you?' he said.

'Please.'

He poured her a whisky, from the cut-glass decanter someone had given them as a wedding gift.

'Warm you up,' said Rupert. 'The damp has got into my brain this week. And your potting shed is better called an igloo.'

She knew Rupert had grown disappointed with life. He rarely touched the piano. He was getting to be a rebarbative old stag, as men will, though his daughters kept him from becoming entirely uncivilized. Five years ago he had written an opera libretto but it hadn't been taken by anyone. Then he had begun to

collaborate with a friend on an art book, part entertainment part erudition. They shared a taste for long boozy London lunches. The project made them seem busy and that was its main purpose. The days of the job on New Bond Street were gone. And meanwhile, as comparators, his brother was growing ever richer in law and some friends had even made their names as writers. For Rupert, obscurity, in their cottage escaped only by foot or bus. Lucinda knew he did his best, poor git, to accept his lot. He tried to fraternise with the locals. He drank in the local pub. ‘Salt of the earth,’ he called them, returning home after a few pints, momentarily cheered up.

‘Can’t life grant me, at the very least, a clean and smart pair of underpants?’ Rupert had exclaimed the other day, as they both dressed in the morning, ‘one that passes the Persil Window Test. That, if not a best-selling book.’ Shocked into action she had gone to M&S the very next day and bought them both new underwear. It had meant she had to tell the girls to sit out the forthcoming school trip to the Fens, twenty pounds each, to go picking around the peaty site of an architectural dig.

Gradually they became quite drunk.

‘There’s some fundamental flaw in me,’ said Rupert. ‘I can’t decide if I’m a writer or a musician, perhaps that’s it. Or I’ve got myself born into the wrong age. Or am I just a dilettante, a third generation dilettante, because, you know what, I’m no bloody use to anybody.’

‘The girls adore and worship you. And so do I.’

‘You do and I’m very grateful. But you’ve a husband who has failed to amount to anything very substantial.’

‘Listen, Rupert, stop. There’s something I want to tell you. Our life needn’t be repeated by the girls. In fact, I don’t want them to be like us, not now. Why don’t we tell Simone she’s to be a banker and Joanna a lawyer? They’re bright, they’ve got brains to burn. Why shouldn’t they go after money as others do?’

‘But Simone’s set on painting, like you.’

‘I know. And Joanna’s already a little novelist.’

‘I won’t say I haven’t wondered sometimes, if they shouldn’t follow us headlong into the arts, as they seem set on doing.’

‘I’m thinking of you, darling, your happiness. A writer like you needs to be in London, if he’s going to write a social novel, not stuck out here. And if I’m honest, I’m sick of it. I thought I was above money, but I not.’

‘If that’s how you feel, darling, of course we must do something to change things.’

‘Well, this is it. Our girls love us. Why shouldn’t we have a say in their future? If the girls take City careers we could in time escape this rotten little cottage. We could all live together back in West Kensington, on Palmerston Road, I think. You could write and I could have an airy studio. Imagine the windows open, hearing tennis balls being knocked about in the square in the summer, the pavements gluey with lime tree sap – do you remember?’

‘You surprise me, after ten years of marriage.’

‘Are you ashamed of me?’

‘Of course not. I do remember, and regret.’

‘*We* won’t change of course. You will do your work, I will do mine, wherever we are living.’

For once they had forgotten to go up and give the girls their goodnight kisses. Remembering now, they put their drinks down and ascended the creaky staircase. The door of the girls’ bedroom was open: two beds under a sloping ceiling, a room with crooked corners. The light was on but the girls were asleep. Above Simone’s bed, a large poster of Caravaggio’s Bacchus, from the gift shop at the National Gallery. Joanna’s small fist clutching *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen.

The faces of the parents were ebullient. In turn they went forward and kissed the girls without waking them. Lucinda gently prised the volume of Jane Austen from Joanna’s hand. They stood at the threshold. Lucinda put her hand to the light switch, but, instead of turning it off she looked at her husband conspiratorially. He looked at her with a spirit of mischief. Was it the whisky or had something of enormous optimism just been decided for the future? Lucinda at this moment appeared thirty again to Rupert, so strong in her life force. They kissed for the first time in ages. They looked tenderly at the girls.

‘Darling,’ whispered Rupert towards Simone, ‘your mother wants you to be a wonderful banker now, and to earn a million as quickly as possible. You will do that for us, won’t you?’

‘And Joanna, darling,’ said Lucinda, ‘tell all your stories, publish your books, but first be a partner at Clifford Chance or Slaughter and May. My brother will get you in.’

In their own bedroom they lay down together.

‘We won’t let them be unhappy,’ said Lucinda. ‘They won’t lose their contact with the artistic life, we’ll be there every step of the way.’