

The Next In Line

"Catherine!"

"Yes, Mother."

"The pan!"

"Coming."

In the bathroom, Catherine Holden hurriedly swallowed the two aspirin (the second dose in two hours) and replaced the bottle and the glass in the cupboard. Bending down to pick up the bedpan from beside the toilet bowl, she caught sight of her fifty years in the mirror and grimaced, grimaced from pain, distaste, disgust, though even disgust had become too tame a definition for the antipathy she felt towards the whole situation.

"And none too soon," her mother, Bessie Richardson, said vexatiously from her bed when Catherine entered. "If you're such a sluggard now, how will you be in five years' time? Or ten? Or. . . Thank God I shan't live to see it. . ."

"Well, if I'd been born with wings. . ."

"Then they'd be clipped like an emu's," the older woman snorted, tossing her head, itself starkly bird-like with its salient beaked nose and hard black beady eyes blinking like a camera shutter in sharply osseous sockets too large for them. She pushed down the covers and manoeuvred herself into position.

Her daughter crouched on the bed behind her.

"All right, now, lift!"

The patient rocked gracelessly from side to side as her daughter, tugging, raised the back of her nightgown and forced an arm under the jagged buttocks whose flesh had turned to autumn. With the other hand, Catherine Holden pushed the bedpan forward, holding her breath as a spasm of pain splinted her lower back.

"Have mercy!" Bessie Richardson yelled. "Not so rough! Are you after gloves for your birthday? Next thing you'll know I'll have bedsores like your Uncle Albert after he broke his hip. . ."

"Uncle Mick. . ."

"Albert, Mick. In any case, they were the end of him. What with his sores, and bronichal pneumonia. Lord, they

were foul, those sores — you could put your fist in them. . . I can still smell them. Flesh rotting like a carcass in the desert. . .”

Bessie Richardson sniffed and twitched her nose.

Catherine Holden, duty done, pressed her dress to her bosom and backed away. She heard the flush of water hissing, then tingling against aluminium arising from the bed. Then, perched on the pan, her thin clawed hands drawing up the covers, Bessie Richardson farted.

“Mount Vesuvius,” Catherine Holden said, less amused than trying to thwart revulsion with humour.

“A speech from the Prime Minister,” her mother said — her standard jest which the ninety-first time around, had worn thin.

Catherine tightened her lips, yielding birth to deep dimples of annoyance at the corners of her mouth. She pressed her back against the door, the better to relieve her pain and to maintain distance.

“Well, he’s better off where he is now,” Bessie Richardson announced from her throne. “Uncle Mick, timid soul. Never a day’s happiness in his life. A churchmouse, so poor, working in that airless toolshop all his years, from fourteen to sixty-four, a cough like a consumptive’s, his wife a battle-axe, his sons bleeding him of every penny, dead a year before retirement, his tombstone scarcely standing a week and already scribbled on and chipped by vandals. No rest even in death. . .”

“That was Uncle Albert’s. . .”

“Uncle Mick’s!”

“Have it your way.”

Her mother did not answer immediately. Catherine saw her draw her shoulders inwards and grit her dentures as she strained on the pan. She half-expected her mother, in consummation of her labour, to murmur “Ahh” with relief.

Instead, the old woman’s shoulders relaxed, her cheeks, chin and brow ebbed from the high tide of gathered tension, and she fixed her gaze upon a wart on her arm at which she began to scratch. Catherine, herself infected with the inclination to scratch, raised a hand to her breast but selected an innocuous spot around her navel.

“Though I must admit,” her mother resumed, “it could just as easily have been Albert. A ne’er do well, if ever there was one. Plays football as a kid, breaks his toe; lands a job in

a timberyard, loses his finger in a saw; climbs a scaffold to clean some windows — first day there, trips over the bucket, topples down like a sack of onions, cracks his skull. He was all of forty-eight when we put him underground.”

The vapours of Bessie Richardson’s anal exertions were now becoming manifest. Custom and tact and the awareness that, at a different age, her mother had had to endure her own ordure, held Catherine back from blunt action. She sniffed once, twice, tightened her jaw, then held her breath. She had too easily, too unseeingly, she now cursed herself, let herself be trapped by her mother’s adopted invalidism, and from duties once assumed she could not now renege. Her stomach in her throat, she looked to left and right seeking diversion.

“You may open a window if it’ll make you feel better,” she heard her mother say coldly regally, and under her breath Catherine cursed the old woman more vehemently for so bluntly highlighting her discomfiture.

Nonetheless, she complied, none too reluctantly, moving to the window as briskly as decency and the drawing in her back would allow, training the mesh curtains to the sides, unclasping the metal latch and easing up the window that grated unpleasantly with a brassy rasp. Leaning out, she took deep breaths of the Spring-moistened hydrangeas that grew outside but they reminded her too poignantly of evanescence and she turned away.

Her mother’s voice had grown more strident.

“Mary didn’t even cry. Went to poor Albert’s funeral, all dressed in black. She looked the part all right — dress, shoes, stockings, veil — but not a tear. Then inside three months, she moved in with that union bloke of hers. ‘Got to live, you know’, she used to say, ‘Ask Bill. He’ll tell you’. Like a parrot. It became a regular chorus. ‘Got to live, you know, got to live, you know’. As if she were dying and clutching at a straw. And she died all right. Barely eight months later. Rat poison. In her garden. Accident, Bill said. Misadventure, said the coroner. While I reckon her Bill just up and knocked her off.”

“You’re fantasising,” Catherine Holden said testily. “You always have.”

“Fantasising?! Then what, pray tell me, was the meaning of the note on the table when Bill was found with his head in

the oven: 'Some goes with poison, others with gas. Forgive me, Lord?'

"Proves nothing. Could have been suicide on Mary's part, too."

"Not she! 'You got to live, you go to live'. Remember?"

Despite herself, Catherine turned her head for another breath of garden air.

"Then why. . .?" she said.

"He got tired of her, I guess. Like . . . like your dad got tired of me and. . ."

Bessie Richardson flicked her tongue across her lips.

". . . and made off with that stripper."

"Mother! He went into the navy!"

Her mother shook her head as if with pity.

"*That* was fantasising. He made off with a stripper."

Within Catherine, turmoil and resentment flared.

"But you always told me. . ."

Bessie Richardson flourished a wasted hand in the air.

"But he came back, your dad."

"Enough!" Catherine wanted to cry out. "I don't want to hear any more! Shut your face!" But transfixed, she could not deny her whetted curiosity.

"He came back?"

Bessie Richardson's voice leapt up ten decibels.

"Beating his breast, crying, 'I'm sorry, Bess, I'm sorry, Bess, I love you after all', drunk to his eyeballs, his breath a brewery, the gutter in his cuffs, and full of syphilis. . ."

"And you threw him out?!"

"Last I heard of him, he was found cold in his bed at the People's Palace. . ."

"You're inventing all this! You're nuts!"

Bessie Richardson on her perch contracted again. She pressed her hands into her belly, bit her lips, shut her eyes tightly and quivered. For all her effort, her gain was a blast of wind.

"The Prime Minister's at it again."

She scratched at a sunken cheek.

"But if it suits you to go on believing he went into the navy and drowned in the Pacific, that's all right by me."

Catherine Holden became aware of intensified pressure on her chest. Speech came with difficulty.

"Then why, why, for heaven's sake, are you telling me all this? So long, so long after?"

"For peace sake. To leave this world without a lie on my conscience. May the Lord forgive me my other sins."

"Liar! Hypocrite! Witch!" Rancour rankled within Catherine. The image of a man, in this instance her father lying dead — cold, blue, oblivious and unbreathing — unnerved her.

She sought release, but the walls, the foetor, her mother's venom hemmed her in.

"Finished with the pan?", she said desperately.

Bessie Richardson ignored the question.

"Don't grieve for him now. He wasn't worth your tears. He wasn't much of a father. Anyways, if it was a father you wanted, you ended up getting one."

"Jack was not my father. He was my husband."

"He was old enough. Twenty seven years between you. . ."

"He was a good man."

"So long as you licked his arse."

"You ought to talk."

"I'm your mother."

"*He* was my husband."

"Ha. Your best years wasted. Living with a man getting more cantankerous with the years and jealous and suspicious. No children. . ."

"The child was stillborn. . ."

"And then his sickness. . . Slow, slow wasting away, his muscles useless so that you had to feed him, wash him, wipe him. Bedridden three years. No life of your own. . . Remember?"

"So what's different now?"

"I'm your mother."

"And this is living?"

"I'll die soon enough. Then you'll be free. I'm next in line. Albert's gone. And Mick. And Mary. And Bill and your dad and your hero Jack. I'm next in line. You heard Dr. Kelly. The heart's irregular, the blood's anaemic, the arteries are hardened, the kidneys are brittle. Living is just one regular journey towards dying. That's all it is and on the way full of misery and drunkenness and accident and waste and death and. . ."

Catherine, supporting her back with a hand, burst out, flame in her cheeks.

"^kFor God's sake, for my sake, stop, stop this confounded incessant talk of death, of dying, of . . . of. . ."

Bessie Richardson reached under her pillow for the toilet roll. Her bird's head bobbed up and down.

"My, my. You suddenly been stung by a bee or something?"

"Mother! I'm suffocating, stifling! Remember Mary — you got to live, you got to live!? Remember Mick, the flesh rotting? That's not his rotting flesh that you're still smelling. It's mine, mine! While I'm looking after you, selling myself to you. . . While. . . Here, Mother, look! Look!"

Winning, Catherine moved towards her mother, her fingers tearing frenziedly at the buttons of her dress.

"Look!"

She pulled down the shoulder straps of her dress, her petticoat, her brassiere to expose a breast, large, misshapen, rigid and festering, weeping into a towel that had been draped about it.

"I denied myself for Jack, denied myself for you. . . Never lived. . . Truly lived. . . And now, it's beyond cure. It's in the bone, in the spine, in. . . No, not you Mother, but I, I am next in line and . . . and, Mother!, I haven't lived, I, I. . ."

Bessie Richardson looked at her daughter's breast, then at her face in which for the first time she recognised a certain leanness, then through the window where a draught was rummaging through the curtains. She turned the toilet roll between her hands.

"Catherine," she said, drawing herself upright, her voice hard, remote, colourless. "Take the pan away. Living. Dying. What's it matter? It all stinks. It's all a sewer. It's all sheer sheer shit."