

Notes to my
mother-in-law

For my daughters

PROLOGUE

Annie, my mother-in-law, lived with us for seventeen years and was picture-book perfect.

She washed on Monday, ironed on Tuesday. Wednesday was bedrooms, Thursday baking, Friday fish and floors, Saturday polishing, particularly the brass if it was ‘looking red’ at her. Sunday was God and sewing. She had a framed print of *The Light of the World* on her bedroom wall and her drawers were full of crochet hooks and knitting needles. She could turn the heel of a sock and the collar of a shirt. She made rock cakes, bread pudding and breast of lamb with barley, and she would open a tin of condensed milk and hide it at the back of the fridge with a spoon in it if things were going badly in our world. She came to us when things had stopped going well in hers.

The rented cottage she left had the rose ‘New Dawn’ curling over and around a front door she

never used. All of life flowed towards the back door and led into the kitchen and her cupboards full of jams and bottled fruit. Her little parlour was all table and dresser, with a fireplace full of wild flowers in a cracked china soup tureen. She wall-papered the front room every spring. Three walls with one pattern and the fourth to contrast. But what she loved most was her wood pile and her long, narrow garden where the hedges were full of old toys and rusty tricycles. Here, my children used to hide on fine summer nights, sitting straight-backed in their flannel pyjamas between rows of beans to eat furry red and gold gooseberries, rasps that weren't ripe and rhubarb dipped into an egg cup of sugar.

All she managed to bring with her to London were two white china oven dishes, half a dozen pocket editions of Shakespeare, her button box, her silver thimble, a wooden darning mushroom, a large bundle of knitting needles tied with tape and a tiny pewter pepper pot, which became a vital prop at our midday planning meetings.

LUNCH.

Three Mothers (and a camel)



I have never been able to take lunch seriously, but for Gran it was crucial. She never took anything more than two Rich Tea biscuits and one mug of tea for breakfast, so around noon, depending on her chores, she would say her stomach thought her throat had been cut and come downstairs. When I heard the tap of her wide wedding ring on the banister rail I would strain the potatoes.

The menu was a challenge. I'd learnt from her son that lettuce was 'rabbit food'. (Gran could skin a rabbit as if she was removing its cardigan.) Favourites were fried cheese, Yorkshire pudding, onion gravy, dumplings, stuffed heart and kidneys cooked pink – don't make the plates too hot.

I was nervous. I had discovered garlic. I called baby marrows 'courgettes' and pea pods 'mange-

tout'. I ate salad with French dressing, spread marmalade on toasted cheese, and there was no Bisto in the house. I often feel that food can be as big a stumbler as politics and thought Gran and I might be incompatible in the kitchen – but when lunch was up to scratch her appreciation was so utterly delightful that the meal became a game I loved to win. I planned sudden treats of stale cake – kept cake was more digestible – winkles eaten with a pin or fresh-boiled crab.

Curious about the pretty little pewter pepper pot, I discovered it had come from the Blue Coat School where her father had been a cobbler. Gran had been one of four children, and life couldn't have been easy for she learnt when she was very young how to pawn the candlesticks and bring her mother jugs of beer from the pub.

Her country life began when there was an epidemic of scarlet fever and the Blue Coat School moved out of London. There wasn't enough work so her father was made redundant and Gran went into service at the age of fourteen. She had a scar on one hand from when an irate employer had

Three Mothers (and a camel)

biffed her with the handle of a broom she had left standing on its bristles. I loved her stories of cruel cooks and horrid housekeepers. It was like having lunch with Catherine Cookson.

Between the juicy bits we organized our days, and it was some while before I realized she was just a bit, as she would say, ‘Mutt and Jeff’. It was quite a few years before we all grasped that shouting wasn’t enough. After some hilarious misunderstandings, and to avoid confusion, I stuck comprehensive lists on the fridge door beside a large calendar marked with coloured crayons. It still wasn’t enough. Gran always said she’d rather be blind than deaf, and aware at last that she was becoming increasingly isolated, I began to write out the day’s gossip at the kitchen table, putting my notes by her bed before I went to mine.

One night my husband wandered off to his, muttering darkly that I spent so much time each evening writing to Gran that I could have written a book – ‘And illustrated it!’ he shouted from the stairs.

Here it is.

Your suspenders were 50p. John Barnes only had pink ones. Got these up Post Office. Change on kitchen table.

The chiropodist is calling at 1.30 p.m. tomorrow (Tuesday). Inconvenient creature. We will have to lunch early and you can have a snooze when he's gone.

Dad is golfing tomorrow. Emma is going to spend the day at the library. I think Sophie and I should be home about teatime. Lamb stew on stove. Kettle on about quarter to five? Ta.

Dear, I honestly don't think they would make a mistake like that. They only took a wax impression of the deaf ear, and that must be the one you are meant to put it in I think. Why not try Vaseline? I don't think licking it is a good idea.

I'll get some pearl-barley tomorrow, Gran. Sorry about that, the kids hate it, you see. It's a bit slimy. I suppose it *is* very good for you. There was a woman in Ardentinnny who used to boil it and strain it and drink the water from it every day. I think she had something wrong with her kidneys.

The piano tuner is coming tomorrow at 3 p.m. so when you are dusting don't bother to put back the photos as such. He usually moves everything himself but I'm not sure if he can see terribly well. He seems never to look me straight in the eye and there is something odd about his glasses. It would

be awful if he dropped Churchill. Let's give him the last of the rock-cakes. I'll be home so there is no need to stay downstairs for the bell.



Dusters aren't all that expensive. Perhaps we could use that stockingette stuff the butcher sells? Don't sacrifice your bloomers in this rash manner. Heaven knows where we'll get interlocking cotton now Pontings is closed. I might try that haberdasher's next to Woolworths in Hampstead. She still keeps those skeins of plaited darning wool. Last time I was in she told me she was one of the first sales ladies in John Lewis. Apparently they lived over the shop in those days in some sort of hostel, which was very strictly run. She got something like 17/6 per week, I think. You probably got that for a year.



Listen, we must practise. That Mr Parnes said we must. Ten minutes every day in a carpeted room,

he said. Preferably with curtains. So I will come upstairs with your tea tomorrow and we will have ten minutes' practice in your room. The kitchen is far too noisy.

I have to sit *directly* opposite you and speak slowly. As soon as you get used to my voice I'll send someone else up with tea and we'll do a few minutes longer each day. It is essential that we go about this sensibly.

You may have to hold it in your ear for the moment and I'll ring Mr Parnes about other fitting arrangements. He agrees that the main disadvantage is the tiny switch. The tips of one's fingers do go dead after a certain age and how one is supposed to adjust the beastly thing when there is no feeling in one's fingers I can't think.

I'll mark the little wheel thing with a biro when you feel it's about right and we can adjust it before you put it in. That's settled. Practice will commence at 5 p.m. precisely tomorrow, Wednesday 9th inst., 1978.

Thank you very much, Gran. I will go round to Kingston's tomorrow as they close Thursday afternoon. Is it collar you want? Or is it slipper? Green or smoked? Middle gammon is something like 84p per lb. It'll be a great help to have something to cut cold on Saturday.

I found your splint in the hall drawer.



I tell you what I suggest. Just give up knitting for a while and see if that doesn't help. The physiotherapist I went to for my shoulders thought knitting was really bad for you. Especially with aluminium needles. Aluminium gets a very bad press these days. Mother has changed to enamel because she thinks Uncle Arthur is going potty. She says if you put cold water in a hot aluminium pan it pits the metal and you are swallowing chemicals with every mouthful. She says Aunt Avril used to put bicarbonate in with rhubarb and cabbage and an evil green slime used to rise to the top, which was poisonous. And that's what's the matter with Uncle Arthur. I could suggest a few other things.

Phyllida Law



I didn't know Aunt Min was deaf. I thought she just had diabetes. You must ask her how she gets on with the NHS box model. Maybe the knobs are bigger. Let me put a new battery in for you. They are such wretched fiddly little things and apparently it's only too easy to leave them switched on when not in use. Mr Parnes says one should last you six weeks, but you could have left it on overnight, and that would explain the difficulty. I had a deaf landlady when I was a student and she was forever leaving her apparatus on, when it would give piercing shrieks and she couldn't hear and we would all have to look for the box. It was nearly as big as a wireless.

If there was a thunderstorm she used to unplug herself, cover all the mirrors with dishcloths and shut herself in the larder under the stairs. Nice woman.

Now, don't forget to make a list of worries for Mr Parnes and we will sort them all out on Friday morning. I'm afraid your routine will be very much disturbed. Let's do the floors on Saturday and the brass before we go on Friday. Variety is the slice of life, as Aunt Avril used to say.