

AULD ACQUAINTANCE by Pat Mosel

Scotland, 1951. Without Amy. For two hours Mildred had been bending over a glinting needle, grey cardigan buttoned up, shoes all but laced together, lost in seeing her task as the right thing to do. She sewed beneath a knobbly brass standing lamp, undisturbed by appetite or the black stare of the windows. The dusk had spread furtively through the passages of the country house, thickening over the dim carpet. The words she'd had with Amy - even as she was leaving - blurred into twisting satin petals on the linen cloth, which was traced blue with a fixed design of modest flowers and destined to cover the bare wood of the tea trolley. Above the mantelpiece, a carriage and pair careered along a sandy road, speeding from one side of a gilt frame to the other. The coachman's hat sat squarely on his head, although he spurred on the horses, back arched, hand held high to crack the whip. Inside the elegant carriage sat a lady and a gentleman, undergoing transportation. They were still seated on the first day of 1961.

Mildred was now entertaining Bunny, who had motored up from England to spend some weeks with her. Bunny was a school friend who had a habit of twitching her nose like a rabbit – hence the nickname.

Having recently been restored, the old clock on the mantel ticked and chimed with renewed vigour. Elbow trained to her side, Mildred raised the silver pot and a stream of tea descended into each china cup. The hunt that day had been abortive; the fox had got away. Bunny, who couldn't share Mildred's enthusiasm for hunting, had tried clumsily to console her, without success, and it didn't help matters when a splash of tea sent a brown stain seeping through Mildred's embroidered cloth.

“And does one mention your sister, nowadays?” Bunny’s whole face twitched. An owl hooted somewhere beyond the tightly drawn curtains.

“Not in polite society.”

There was a pause, during which Bunny tried to decide whether or not to probe any further. “You never told me what she did that was so awful...” she ventured.

“It’s too humiliating,” Mildred sniffed to relieve the indignation of years.

“Oh dear. I thought at least the quarrel must have been about money.” Bunny took up her tapestry, thinking the topic concluded. She was wrong, for Mildred’s feelings were stirring, rising from the core of her lean being.

“Amy has no idea of the price of unseemly behaviour. Immorality must be paid for, sooner or later. Duty, Bunny. Duty.”

“She might imagine she’s serving the Empire,” suggested Bunny. But Mildred would have none of it. She got up abruptly and stalked from the room, leaving her friend bewildered and disturbed. On her return, Mildred thrust an object between Bunny and her tapestry.

“What would you say this is?” Mildred asked.

“Did she send this? African carving...it must be...”

“A death mask. From what I choose to know of such things.” Mildred snatched it away again. “Just look at it.” The dark wood was throbbing with unexplained spirits.

“Perhaps she thought it different... Interesting art.”

“It’s an evil gift and I didn’t ask for it.” Before Bunny’s startled eyes, Mildred flung the carving into the fire where the flames danced over it, licked and devoured it.

“I wouldn’t be surprised if it snowed tonight,” said Bunny, ashen as stone under a full moon.

The following year, Bunny rebuked Mildred, by staying away. However, she subsequently returned and resumed annual visits after Christmas, in all weathers. Together they helped each other to contemplate each New Year; years filled with baking, fruit-picking, jam-making, raising money for good causes, visiting the sick; years bereft of adventure; years untroubled by men. They convinced each other that they wouldn't have had it any other way. Out of courtesy, Mildred and Bunny kept well away from the subject of Amy and also, refrained from discussing politics. As it was, the two were becoming entangled in their minds: Amy had settled in Rhodesia which had declared unilateral independence from Britain and was intent on provoking African reprisals for racial oppression. So, without a word being said, the unsuspecting Mildred was gaining more of Bunny's sympathy for her stand against her sister. At a distance of thousands of miles, Amy had become a symbol of rebellion and cruelty. And, on top of that, she went and...

"She's married you know." Mildred couldn't contain the news any longer.

"Such a sweet little robin on your bird table this morning." Bunny stubbornly refused to let on she'd heard.

"Someone with a frightfully common surname."

"Those bright eyes peering in through the window, saying thank you for crumbs..." Bunny continued.

"Doubtless, he has little money and fewer manners."

"Eventually it was chased away by a bullying blackbird. Just goes to show..."

"I would have thought she was past the age to marry," Mildred would not be deterred and Bunny was at last forced to concede an opinion.

"You never know. It might do her the world of good."

"Unlikely." But Mildred helped carry her friend's bags to the car.

Mildred was on her way to church when she first acknowledged herself as an old woman, sparing a moment to study her reflection in the mirror. Now, towards the end of the nineteen seventies, she was suffering silently from arthritis and had been forced to accept that she was no longer fit enough to hunt, although she still had her horse, Blackie, and with effort managed to exercise him herself. That Sunday she was ready to go out when the 'phone rang. Remotely, Mildred heard a stranger telling her that Bunny was dead.

It was to one of the rare occasions during her lifetime that Mildred did not attend a Sunday service. She drew off the hat. After a search for her sewing basket, she sat own stiffly under the standing lamp and, struggling, began to prick and pull at a lace handkerchief until drops of blood speckled her work. Then she prayed for relief from the pain in her arthritic fingers - and for Bunny's soul, that she might rest in peace.

1980. Without Bunny. The time of the year when Bunny used to visit. Mildred was alone and it was snowing in her dark garden. Her brave baking had been a success, the kitchen dotted with shortbread and fudge for the coffee morning to raise funds for impoverished gentlewomen. In remembrance of Bunny's visits, Mildred had cleaned and polished, dusted, and had even thoroughly tidied and cleaned the visitor's room. In the past, she had always made up the bed immediately after Bunny had gone, in readiness for the next visit. Everything was as it should be and now Mildred pored over a newspaper which had lain open on the kitchen table for two weeks. Yet again, she read the headline: *Heir to Title Killed by Land mine in Rhodesia*.

Such a common name. There was a picture of the dead man, with his Scottish-born wife, Amy. Apparently she was still alive, if narrowly missing becoming a

Countess. The shock of the news, which Mildred had sustained though Christmas, was wearing off and a reaction was working its way through her guarded system. If Bunny had been alive she would be arriving at any minute. But she wasn't. She was dead. Grabbing sheets of newsprint, Mildred screwed and pummelled them, then let them fall. Was that a car in the driveway? What nonsense. She stumbled upstairs to the visitor's bedroom, whisked away the towels and hurriedly turned off the light.

She scabbled about in a dark and musty, passageway cupboard and, in a corner, found the box she was looking for. Mildred took it through to the hall and put it on a cabinet in front of the hanging mirror. Shakily, she opened the box and wrenched from each meticulous individual wrapping - jewels. A sparkling pile lay before her on the polished surface: earrings, necklaces, rings that Amy had left in waiting; chains and bracelets that Mildred had disdained to wear. With sudden guilt, she started and swung round. No one was there. So Mildred began to pin and place upon herself the trappings of a young woman's beauty. With frenzied concentration, she struggled with clasps and catches until only the most swollen of her fingers was bare. From her ears hung diamonds and emeralds; at her throat were rubies, pearls. Mildred looked in the mirror. She stared at the sagging skin, the scrawny, laden neck. Then she began to hoot with laughter, a haunting sound that echoed through the hollows of the house. When, at last she stopped to take off her spectacles and wipe her eyes, she found that what she now saw in the mirror, with myopic pleasure, was the light and life, the glitter of beautiful jewels. Even at that moment, the thrill checked the outburst. She reminded herself that sensual gratification belonged to the Devil. Mildred pulled and tugged, wrapped and packed each item, putting away the box, restoring order.

Calm once more, she took the crumpled newspaper, carefully smoothed the relevant page, folded it and tucked it into a desk drawer. Placing her leather-bound Bible beside her chair, methodically, slowly, she began to lay a fire. She was about to strike a match when she noticed a movement outside the window. Now, she was not alone. Mildred stayed quite still, crouched beneath the valuable clock on the mantel, the porcelain, silver and golden ornaments, and that hastening carriage above. She was deadly controlled, although her throat was dry and her bony chest, heaving. She heard footsteps moving over new-fallen snow. Whoever it was went towards the door. Mildred pulled herself up and adjusted the collar of her blouse. There was a rapping at the door. The clock ticked on. The knocking began again, louder. Mildred braced herself.

“Bunny?” she called.

“It’s me,” came the reply. Mildred opened the door.

“What on earth are you doing here?” she rasped as Amy, coated with snow, strode into the room.

“That’s not much of a welcome for a sister you haven’t seen for God knows how long.” Amy’s tone was forceful and, with her hood thrown back, her skin showed brown.

“I hoped you might be someone else,” Mildred said frostily.

“You haven’t changed.” Amy defiantly flicked snow off her sleeve. “Haven’t you heard? You must have...”

“Heard what?” Mildred was looking at the clock, as if she had an urgent appointment to go to.

“My husband died in a landmine accident.”

“Not the man you stole from me, then?”

“I didn’t.”

“You did.”

“Didn’t.”

“Bunny is dead”

“I know. I was sorry to hear it.” Amy stood, with her coat still on and a concerned expression on her face.

“It’s all your fault. Sending that wretched voodoo to me.”

“That is an excellent example of African carving.”

“It also makes excellent firewood.”

“You didn’t?”

“I did. Threw it on the fire,” said Mildred, with a self-satisfied smile.

“I will go, then.” Amy thrust her hood back over her head. “I’ll send someone for my jewellery.”

“You do that,” said Mildred.

When her sister had gone, Mildred stoked the fire, as best she could, using arthritic fingers in a trembling grasp of the poker. ‘These things have to be said,’ she thought to herself and dismissed the concept of having a sister.

“I’m cold,” she said, to no-one there.