

SHAKEN

The thing was, none of them had expected Hilary to get married, let alone have a baby, at her age. But then she'd started going out with Ian, from her church. They were both converts, as it turned out, so they had that in common. Not that this was a recommendation to Hilary's mother. As she said to Linda, with a sniff of displeasure, 'They always stick together, don't they? As if they've seen the light and the rest of us haven't. I should never have sent her to that convent school.'

'Oh come on, Mum. I think it's lovely that Hilary's found someone at last. You've always said she was too bound up in her work, and now her life's taking a new direction.'

'Trust you to see the bright side. It's all hearts and flowers with you. Marriage is no bed of roses, let me tell you, and to take the plunge at forty-one, to a man she hardly knows – well, it's asking for trouble.'

Linda's father looked up briefly from his paper, seemed to consider saying something, met Linda's eye, and thought better of it.

'She *does* know him. He's been going to St. Anthony's for nearly a year, apparently –'

'Oh yes, and sharing the same pew every Sunday is the foundation for a life together, is it?'

'I can think of worse.'

But her mother didn't rise to that. 'And why hasn't she brought him home to meet us until recently? Ashamed of us, I expect.' She looked at her husband and

daughter defiantly. 'It's no good you denying it. His parents have got money, that's obvious, Derek, and he thinks he's a cut above. You saw the way he looked at our china. Trust him to get the plate with the chip in it.'

'Now you're just being paranoid.' Mistake.

'Paranoid, am I? Well, let's just see who's right, shall we, Miss Clever Clogs? Let's see how things pan out.'

'Alright, Ann, give it a rest. We've got the message.'

And that was how it was left – for then, at least.

When the wedding album arrived it was pored over, naturally. Linda flicked quickly past the photos featuring herself – the floral crinoline she'd worn as bridesmaid really hadn't done her any favours – and found that the one she liked best was a full-length shot of Hilary and Ian by the Rolls. It had been a sunny day, with a playful light wind, so Hilary was holding her veil down with one hand, her other resting in Ian's. She was gazing at him, with a smile of – what? contentment? triumph? True, her mouth was closed, almost pursed, where you might have expected parted lips, but then she always had been a bit self-conscious about her teeth. Not so Ian, who was grinning straight to camera with his limpid dark-fringed eyes, hair raffishly ruffled by the breeze. The happy couple.

Looking at the only group photograph in the collection, Linda could read the tension in the angle of her mother's head, adorned by its improbable hat, and in her father's awkward stance, unaccustomed as he was to morning dress. Ian's parents, Annabel and Henry, on the other hand, had the confident proprietorial air of the

people who had paid for this show and knew how things should be done. Or that was how her mother saw it, she knew.

'I didn't know where to put myself when your father agreed to it. They could give them a better send-off than we could afford, was his argument to me afterwards. But it didn't feel right, Linda.'

'Well, it was a lovely send-off, Mum, and that's the main thing, isn't it?'

'Oh don't get me wrong, it was all done very nicely, though why we had to have five courses for lunch. And I know it wasn't down to them, but I thought the service would never end. Talk about bells and smells. But no, I've got to hand it to them, it was all very tasteful. And Hilary did look lovely, didn't she?'

Safer ground here. 'Oh yes. That dress was an inspired choice, so elegant and understated. Just right for a bride of a certain age.'

'Well, we couldn't have her mutton dressed as lamb, now could we?'

And just for a moment they shared a conspiratorial giggle.

When Linda was at home for Christmas, all the talk was of Hilary's pregnancy, of course.

'Well, they didn't waste much time, did they? What were they thinking of? She's more than getting on, to be having a first baby.'

'I shouldn't worry, Mum. I'm sure she'll be well looked after. The system's geared up for older women these days.'

‘Yes, but what does she know about bringing up a baby? I wish she lived closer, so we could keep an eye. She’ll need plenty of help when the time comes.’

So when the time came it had all been arranged: Linda’s exams would be over by then, so she was to go and stay the first week, and then her mother would take over ‘for as long as I’m needed.’

It was a glorious late June day when Linda had her first sight of Marie-Claire, asleep in her Silver Cross pram under the apple tree. What struck her immediately was the baby’s translucence, the sense of her blood just beneath the surface and below that, her tiny organs toiling away – captivating, but terrifying at the same time.

‘She’s gorgeous, Hils, you clever thing, you.’

‘I can’t quite believe she’s mine yet. Annabel says she’s the image of Ian when he was new-born.’

‘Oh I don’t know. I can never see it when people say babies take after Aunt Lil or whoever. She’s just her own lovely self.’

Hilary shot her a grateful look. ‘Let’s have a cup of tea before she wakes up and wants another feed.’

‘You sit still. I’ll do it. That’s what I’m here for.’

When Linda came out with the tray, Hilary had dozed off. She looked done in, grey half-moons under her eyes, hair in a straggling bun, and a thrown-on look to her

maternity dress, bulging with her still-round belly. Although Linda put the tray down quietly, Hilary startled awake.

'What time is it?'

'Nearly five.'

'Ian'll be in soon. He always gets home early on a Friday. Could you keep an eye on her while I go and make myself presentable?'

'OK. I'll make a start on the salad and watch out through the kitchen window.'

Which is what she was doing when Ian bounded in, Tiggerish as usual, and gave her an unabashed hug.

'How's my favourite sister-in-law? Ravishing as always. And what's this we're having? Salade niçoise? Yum. This is so good of you, you know.'

'My pleasure.'

'Oh, and here's Mummy. How are you, darling? Had a good day? Come and sit down. How about a nice glass of wine? I'm going to.'

'I'd better not. Don't want it coming out in the milk.'

'Oh don't be silly, darling. A little drop won't do any harm, will it, Lindy-Lou?'

'Really, Ian, no.'

'Please yourself. But Lindy will, won't you?' with a knowing wink.

But just then Linda noticed the pram begin to shake and went out, Hilary beside her, to pick up her niece for the first time.

The rest of the week was something of a blur, a dizzying round for them both of cleaning, cooking, feeding and nappy-changing, interspersed with the occasional interval of peace when Marie-Claire slumbered and the sisters slumped on the sofa, listening out half-guiltily for the baby's next announcement of her presence. Not that she was a difficult baby, just unpredictable. So far she hadn't settled into any reassuring pattern of behaviour, so it did rather feel as if they were at the beck and call of a tiny incomprehensible tyrant. And for Hilary, of course, the demands didn't stop at night.

'Ian does offer to help, but I don't like to get him up. He's got work in the morning so he needs his sleep. Like a bear with a sore head without it.' She smiled ruefully. 'This is my job really, isn't it?'

'You could always wake me.'

'Oh no, you're doing enough already. And there really wouldn't be anything for you to do anyway. It's a one-woman job, breast-feeding.'

'I'm getting to be a dab hand at changing her.' But Linda didn't press the point, and when her parents arrived on the Saturday to pick her up and drop her mother off, she wasn't entirely sorry.

'Well, love, she's a bobby-dazzler,' her father said, peering into the pram.

'But you look absolutely bushed, Hilary. Are you getting enough rest?'

'Linda's been brilliant, Mum. She's taken all the cooking and cleaning off me so I can concentrate on the baby.'

'So I should hope. We can't have you worn to a frazzle. It isn't easy, I know, but I'm here now so we'll see what we can do to get you into a nice routine, young lady,' swooping down to pick up her granddaughter.

'Steady on there, Ann. I'd just got her settled. She loves her old Dad, don't you, precious?' And Ian moved as if to reclaim her.

'Oh a Daddy's girl, is she? But she's not going to rule the roost. Make a rod for your own back if you let her.'

Before Ian could reply, Linda's father said, 'Any chance of a cup of tea before we head off back? Mustn't leave it too late.'

'Of course, Derek, what am I thinking of?'

'I'll do it.' And Linda's mother made to hand the baby over.

But Ian was already heading off inside, pausing only to turn and say, 'No, Ann, you'd better carry on getting acquainted with our little monster, hadn't you? I can at least make a cup of tea,' flashing his teeth at her.

As she and her father were about to leave an hour or so later, Linda hugged her sister tightly and wasn't entirely surprised to see her eyes glittering with tears.

'We did alright for a couple of novices, didn't we?'

'Of course, Hils. You're doing great. All of you. They always say the first few weeks are the hardest. You take care now.'

One final parting squeeze and they were off.

It must have been about nine o'clock on the Monday evening that the phone went.

'Linda?' *Sotto voce*. 'Oh, Linda. Thank God.'

'Mum? Whatever's the matter?'

'You've got to come and get me. Please come and get me. Right now.'

'Why, what's happened?'

'It's Ian. He – he – *shook* me, Linda. He got hold of my arms and manhandled me and *shook* me. Please come and get me or I don't know –'

'OK, slow down. I'm having a job getting my head round this. Whatever would make Ian do a thing like that?'

'I can't, I can't go into it all now. Just, please, Linda, get in the car and come.'

'Look, Mum, I can't. I had some wine with my supper and I'm well over the limit.'

'Oh well, that's just typical.' Getting louder now. 'Why does your dad have to be away? He'd have come like a shot.'

'I'm sorry, Mum. I'll come really early tomorrow morning, I promise. Can I talk to Hilary?'

'No you can't. You want their version of the story, I suppose. Don't you start trying to blame me. I might have known you'd be on their side.'

Deep breath. 'I'm not on anyone's side, Mum. I'll talk to Hils tomorrow when I come. What are you going to do now?'

'I don't have much choice, do I? I'll stay in my bedroom and wait for you to come. No sleep for me tonight. Oh God.' And she started to sob.

It was Hilary who opened the door the following morning.

'Hils, what on earth is going on?'

'Sssh. Come into the kitchen.'

Marie-Claire lay there in her carrycot on the floor, snuffling in that way she had when she was starting to wake up.

'Has Ian gone to work?'

'He didn't want to, but I said it would be better for him to be out of the way, and he didn't argue.'

'But what happened? I know Mum can be a pain in the backside sometimes, but surely –'

'Linda? Is that you?'

Hilary blanched at her mother's querulous voice from upstairs.

'Look, I'd better go to her. You stay here.'

When Linda got into the hall, her mother was halfway down the stairs, struggling with her case.

'Give that to me, Mum.' As she took it she registered, with a jolt, how shrunken her mother suddenly seemed, and how greasy-pale her skin. 'Are there any other bags to come?'

Wordlessly her mother gestured to a holdall and her handbag at the top of the stairs. As Linda brought them down she said, 'I'll just put these in the car, and then how about we sit down quietly with Hils and talk this over?'

Her mother looked at her wearily. 'I just want to get home, Linda. There's no point.'

Just at that moment, Hilary appeared.

'Mum, please, don't go like this.' Her voice was ragged, fluttering, with the effort to keep it under control.

'Don't you go turning on the waterworks,' with a flash of her usual spirit. 'This is how I'm going. What did you expect? And you can tell that husband of yours –'

'I don't want to hear it,' her voice beginning to rise. 'I don't want to hear it. I just want some peace and quiet.' And as if on cue the baby started to cry, her voice and Hilary's merging into one indistinguishable wail.

The journey home seemed interminable. There'd been an accident on the motorway so they sat and broiled in traffic for nigh-on two hours before they could get moving again. Mercifully Linda's mother dozed most of the way, waking only when Linda stopped for a loo break. She was persuaded to get out and accompany her, complaining half-heartedly about the state of the toilets and refusing the offer of a drink. 'They don't know how to make a decent brew in these places.'

Linda had never been so glad to round the corner of Spencer Avenue and open the front door of her parents' semi. It felt cool inside and she shivered as her

mother went straight into the living room, lay down on the day bed and closed her eyes.

‘Shall I make some tea, Mum?’

‘That would be nice. Thank you.’

And when she sat up to drink it, some of her usual colour had returned.

‘Do you want to talk about it? Don’t feel you have to, but it might help.’

‘I didn’t like leaving them there, Linda, but what else could we do?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Well, he’s dangerous, isn’t he? Lashing out like that. I only said –’. But then she stopped, bit her lip.

‘Said what?’

‘I can’t remember. I’ve had a shock.’

‘Of course you have. Let’s wait until Dad gets home tomorrow. Why don’t you go upstairs and have a proper lie-down? I’ll make us some scrambled eggs later, shall I?’

‘You’re a good girl, Linda. What would I do without you?’

After her mother had gone up, Linda sat quietly, leaning back and letting her eyes drift around the familiar room. The wedding album lay on the shelf under the TV. She pulled it out and started turning the laminated pages, stopping at the one of Hilary and Ian by the car, and touching it gently with her finger. Outside, the leaves on the rowan tree in the front garden trembled and brushed against the window with a faint insidious scratch.

Suddenly, on an impulse, she was up, opening the door of the cupboard under the bookshelves, shoving the album inside and turning the key on it. She paused for a moment, shaking her head as if to dislodge something, and then went through into the kitchen to see if there were enough eggs for supper.

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