

Behind Closed Doors

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Est. 1950

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Penguin
Random House
UK

First published by Michael Joseph, 2021

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Set in 13.5/16 pt Garamond MT Std

Typeset by Jouve (UK), Milton Keynes

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorized representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-0-241-38471-8

www.greenpenguin.co.uk



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Dedication TK

I

I arrived at my parents' house to find that, as usual, my sister had beaten me to it. As I crunched up the gravel drive to the crumbling red-brick farmhouse, I spotted Helena's shiny blue BMW already parked squarely outside the gabled porch. The front door to the house was wide open. As I drew up beside her, Hector, my parents' aged spaniel, came out to greet me, wagging his tail sheepishly. He turned to look apologetically at the rumpus coming from within. Voices were raised in anger. I could hear my mother's shrill tones complaining that she could hardly be to blame for smashing a bowl she didn't even know my father had won for school cricket seventy odd years ago if he insisted on cutting his toenails on her copy of the *Daily Mail* she hadn't even read yet.

'Always on the letters page,' I heard her cry as I got out and patted Hector. He cringed and took up position behind me, very much staying outside for this one. 'Which he knows is my favourite page. And then he trims his nasal hair on the arts reviews – and we all know the reason for that!'

'If you're implying I shed my personal detritus over Lucy's husband's column for unattractive reasons, I call that poor form,' my father's voice rejoined mildly. I stiffened at my name.

‘Why can’t you use your own paper? That’s what I want to know.’

‘I find a tabloid a more convenient size. And anyway, you don’t read it.’

I sighed and made my way towards the fray. Ducking under the low beam of the front door, I saw the parquet floor of the hall was strewn with umbrellas and walking sticks which had clearly been thrown in anger from the wooden hat stand, upended on its side. In the sitting room beyond, my parents were squaring up to one another either side of the inglenook fireplace. The Persian carpet was covered with bits of broken china. Helena, looking pompous, was positioned between them, arms outstretched, palms up, like an Italian traffic cop. All she needed was white gloves and a whistle. Hovering to one side, eyes shining delightedly, was Mrs Cummings, the neighbour who’d summoned us.

‘Thank you, Mrs Cummings, it was very kind of you to ring us, but I think we can handle this now,’ Helena was saying, glancing at, but not greeting me. I didn’t greet them either, there didn’t seem much point. It was business as usual at Pope’s Farm, and to express upset or astonishment at the scene would be ridiculous. My parents had had another fight. My mother was worse the wear for drink and my father not far behind, but managing to seize the moral high ground on account of being far more of a functioning alcoholic than my mother. He had an air of practised bewilderment as he faced my mother, which naturally only served to stir the pot. Mum, slight and elegant in heels, her face red, fists clenched and quivering

with rage, suddenly lunged at him. He ducked and she tottered and fell sideways – into a gleeful Mrs Cummings, who shrieked hysterically and sidestepped out of the way, rather unhelpfully, clutching her heart.

‘You see?’ seethed Helena, lowering Mum on to the sofa. ‘This *cannot* be ignored any longer, Lucy.’

‘Thank you, Mrs Cummings,’ I repeated more firmly, glaring at my sister in a must-we-do-this-in-front-of-the-neighbours way. ‘We’ve got this covered now, but thank you for your call.’

‘Well, I was only trying to help,’ she said rather huffily as I escorted her to the front door. ‘I wouldn’t want anyone to get hurt. And of course I *did* think of ringing social services when I heard the breaking glass, but you’ve always said—’

‘That we’ll deal with it, and so we will. And I think you’ll find it was a china bowl rather than a cupboard full of glass, but thank you.’

She glanced regretfully over her shoulder as she went down the drive; back to the barn conversion next door, where once we’d kept hay for the horses. Pity we still didn’t, I thought, as I shut the door on her.

‘Busybody,’ I muttered, going back into the sitting room. ‘She must have been listening in the garden, for crying out loud.’

‘We couldn’t do without her,’ Helena reminded me tersely, as if my parents weren’t there, or were senile, which they weren’t.

‘Oh, I disagree, I think we should do quite well,’ objected my father. ‘When a long-married couple can’t have the

most basic of conjugal rights, namely a flaming row, in the privacy of their own home, things have come to a pretty pass, as that wretched nosy parker would say.’

He began picking up pieces of his bowl, not looking at either of us, and although defiant, I could see he was embarrassed.

I went to the kitchen for a dustpan and brush with Helena on my heels. ‘They’re both so *pissed*,’ she whispered in urgent tones as I opened the broom cupboard. ‘It has to stop.’

It didn’t occur to me to wonder how Helena would go about achieving this, because I already knew. She wanted care: twenty-four-hour care, preferably, with my parents under close watch. All booze locked away, obviously, and presumably with some sort of armed guard. Sheltered Housing were words she used a lot, before getting out brochures for an over-seventies estate in Amersham, where residents had access to a pool, a spa, restaurants – and a range of bars, I’d pointed out last time she’d shown it to me.

‘Yes, but with like-minded people who would shame them into behaving, don’t you see? Peer pressure and all that. And there’d be a warden.’

‘Like being back at school. Which they’d both hate,’ I’d told her. ‘And which they’d resist with every fibre of their being.’

‘Well, they might hate it to begin with, but they’d pretty soon get used to it.’

Again, like boarding school: the first couple of terms utter misery, but thereafter, not too bad actually. And

the final years decidedly jolly as one gained seniority, which, in my parents' case, really would be the final term. The final curtain. As I gathered the dustpan and brush from the cupboard I wondered if she was right. My parents rattled around in this erstwhile farmhouse in leafy Buckinghamshire where Helena and I had grown up, and drank themselves to a standstill most nights. It could often end in tears, admittedly, but no bloodshed or genuine fisticuffs had occurred yet, and but for the noise of smashing china, was it really anyone's business what they did with their own property if no one got hurt in the process?

And nor were they alone. Mum and Dad still entertained on a regular basis, and many of their friends were in the same state. Nancy De Courcy, Mum's BF and a fearsome, pony club mother in my youth, had passed out in her soup the other day apparently, whereupon everyone had chortled and agreed it was lucky it was gazpacho. So what? She'd been cleaned up, laid out on a sofa like a stiff according to my father, while the rest of the guests pushed on through. She even came round to enjoy a glass of Château d'Yquem with pudding, before being driven home together with husband Archie by a *very* nice chap who'd come to collect them. As I pointed out to Helena, if that was our children we'd think they'd behaved terribly responsibly.

'Yes, but they're not children,' she'd objected. Helena wanted them to act their age: to play canasta and watch *My Fair Lady* with other 'moved on' folk, and, a tiny bit of my brain wondered, let her get her hands on the house.

I went back to the sitting room and found my father settling Mum in her favourite armchair, propping her feet on a footstool, adjusting her cushions. She was reaching out for his hand in thanks, her pale blue eyes watery as she squeezed it. Daddy brushed aside her apologies for breaking his cricketing bowl, and as I swept the small pieces he'd missed, he bustled off to the drinks cupboard, muttering about getting her a little pick-me-up, and one for him too. For the nerves. I knew it was hopeless to suggest this was not the most sensible option, and even Helena only got as far as opening her mouth – and shutting it again. We sat on the sofa opposite, watching dejectedly as my old dad, tall, rake-thin, still elegant and suave at eighty-six in his whipcord trousers and starched shirt, handed my mother, equally thin, and beautifully dressed in ancient Chloé, a few stains on the skirt perhaps, lipstick askew and too much eye shadow, what looked like a bucket of neat gin.

‘We had a marvellous time at the races the other day with the Montagues,’ he told us, settling into his own armchair, as if absolutely nothing had happened and Helena and I had just popped down for a social. ‘Didn’t we, darling?’

‘Oh, it was splendid,’ my mother agreed. ‘Quite the highlight of my week.’

‘Your mother’s got a new suitor,’ he told us confidentially, winking roguishly. ‘A retired endocrinologist, a professor, who’s moved to the village. He took us in his Bristol. Widowed, obviously, and of a rather earnest bent, but your mother worked her magic as usual.’

Helena and I forced tight smiles as Mum chortled, cheering up enormously. She patted her hair. ‘I can’t think what your father means.’

Helena and I could. Part of the fabric of my parents’ marriage involved spectacular flirtation on my mother’s part which always went absolutely nowhere but amused my father no end.

‘And then, blow me down,’ she’d say around the lunch table in our youth, about some poor besotted admirer, ‘he made a terribly improper suggestion, after I’d simply agreed to help him choose some cushion covers in Beaconsfield!’ Whereupon Dad would roar with laughter. Somehow it didn’t feel quite so funny, these days. Dad, too, would still regale us with his conquests, but they were tamer in nature: the girl in the chemist who, in her quest for the right knee bandage, had asked him to roll up his trouser leg, to which he’d retorted, ‘Only if you will!’

This charm offensive to anyone deserving enlivened their days, and no doubt reminded them of younger ones. And let’s face it, there’s precious little charm about these days. It’s hardly crime of the century. But it was about all there was left, now. Because the awful truth was that Mum’s eyesight was deteriorating to such an extent that she was practically disabled – although God help us, she still drove – and any help came in the form of my father, who shielded and protected her, but who faced his own disabilities, with what he dismissively referred to as his gammy legs. How long could this situation go on?

‘Have you eaten?’ I asked helplessly.

They looked at each other rather vaguely as if trying to remember. I got to my feet and went to the kitchen with Helena on my heels, hers much higher and sharper than mine. It occurred to me that she’d clearly just abandoned her desk in the City and headed straight down, believing I couldn’t be trusted to take control.

‘This time we have to at least insist on AA for Mum,’ she told me as I opened the fridge, more through hope than expectation. Sure enough, a lemon for the gin and a packet of curly ham greeted me. I retrieved the ham and, realizing the fridge was filthy, quickly shut the door.

I sighed as I turned and regarded my very professional sister, the one who’d made such a success of her life: an equity partner in a major accountancy firm – although, as my son Ned said when I mentioned Helena’s triumphs in envious tones, when had making a success of one’s life on those terms ever got anyone into the kingdom of heaven? If my daughter Imo was present she’d roll her eyes and disappear, but Ned’s simple faith, which exasperated me on many occasions, was a comfort to me where Helena was concerned. Not that I necessarily felt I had a free pass into the holy stratosphere, but some half-remembered parable about camels and eyes of needles helped.

‘You know as well as I do, AA’s a shock tactic,’ I told Helena, as the music accompanying the *Countdown* clock suddenly blared through. ‘Dad knows it too.’

In fact they’d regarded us in abject astonishment, eyes

wide like children, when Helena had broached it some time ago.

‘But we’re simply social drinkers!’ Mum had exclaimed, lifting her glass to her lips and getting most of it down her chin.

My father, who was more astute, hadn’t responded, but his frown and small headshake to his eldest child quashed even Helena, who tucked her pamphlet away. My father’s authority was still paramount and absolute. His years on the local bench as a magistrate after four decades in the City at a stockbroking firm and, before that, active military service as a young man, bringing with it a collection of medals, were not to be ignored. And he and his dear lady wife, erstwhile mannequin for Norman Hartnell and appearing in no less than three issues of *Vogue* in the fifties, were not to be treated as senile dribbling fools, whatever the circumstances.

‘Hels, there’s nothing more we can do,’ I told her gently as I cut the dry bits off the ham. I knew this was anathema to her. Helena thrived on control. ‘We’ve got Irene coming in once a week, and Dad isn’t totally incompetent. We can do no more.’

‘Except hotfoot it down here every time the alarm goes off.’

‘The false alarm, actually. From busybody Cummings. No, I suggest we don’t. I’ll speak to her later and ask her not to overreact again.’

‘Unless of course she sees a corpse in the garden.’

‘As long as it is a corpse, and not just Mum and Nance

coming round from mild comas on sun loungers like it was before.'

Her mouth twitched. 'Well quite.'

She buttered the toast I handed her, the bread being too stale to eat fresh, and then popped in some ham and mustard. We added two glasses of lemon barley water and went back to the sitting room to find them merrily competing over the quiz show.

'Sensibility!' roared Dad who could still do the *Telegraph* crossword before breakfast. 'Any fool can see that!'

They took their sandwiches, Mum oohing and aahing about them being cut into triangles, and then they ate them with relish, whilst Helena and I discussed who would do a major shop. She would, she decided, since she was here, there being no point going back to the office now. When we'd rustled them up a little fruit salad from a past-its-sell-by assortment in the fruit bowl, we prepared to go. As we got to our feet Mum declared it a 'very happy luncheon', reaching up from her chair to take our hands in girlish delight. Her wide, happy smile glowed, as if we'd just sprung a surprise party on her.

'Do let's do it again soon. We don't see nearly enough of you girls. And bring the children next time, don't you think, Henry?'

'Oh yes, let's make a party of Mrs Cummings' summonses. So much jollier,' he chuckled.

'Oh no, we don't want her,' frowned my mother. 'Dismal old witch. If I didn't dislike her so much I'd give her a voucher for Elizabeth Arden. If only she knew how a

little rouge would improve her.’ She attempted to get to her feet.

‘Don’t get up, Mum,’ Helena told her gently. ‘Dad will see us to the door.’

She demurred and sank back into her armchair, and my father did just that. Once we were outside in the drive, well out of earshot, he assured us quietly that all was well. And sweet though it was of us to worry, there was really no cause for alarm. And no, they absolutely didn’t need any more help. None at all. He wouldn’t meet my eye, though, when he kissed me goodbye, and he didn’t see us off as he usually would, smiling and waving in the drive. Instead, he hastened back inside, to Mum. Except it was more of a shuffle than a hasten.

Helena sighed as the door closed softly behind him. She opened her mouth to opine, then shut it again, defeated.

‘How’s everything with you anyway?’ I asked quickly, before she could get second wind.

‘Oh, fine,’ she said in surprise, wrong footed. ‘Non-stop as ever. I’ve got an associate director starring in a white-collar fraud trial on Monday and he hasn’t quite decided if he’s pleading guilty or not, which is a minor wrinkle. But other than that, yes, fine. Up to my eyes and single-handedly keeping the wheels on a highly expensive domestic bus. Business as usual.’

‘Ant’s ill?’ I asked sympathetically, managing not to add, ‘again’.

Helena’s husband, a delightfully shambolic, charming actor who of course didn’t get paid when not working,

suffered a bit from hypochondria, which sometimes meant even longer stretches of inactivity. It drove Helena insane.

‘He’s currently got a lump on his leg which naturally he thinks is bone cancer, even though every clinician tells him otherwise. He’s supposed to be auditioning for *Richard III* at the National, so I told him to bloody well get on with it and do it with a limp, as well as a hunchback. No director’s going to mind that. But of course, he won’t. Needs a fourth opinion. And how’s Michael?’

‘Oh yes.’ I made myself smile but delved quickly in my bag for my car keys. ‘He’s on good form.’

‘So I hear,’ she said lightly, but it was the lightness of steel. ‘The word is you’ll soon be cosy up to some Swedish woman called Ingrid in your own jaw-dropping, inimitable style.’ She eyed me beadily, but then saw something in my face: naked sorrow perhaps; fear even. She instantly regretted her jibe and instead, reached out and put her arms around me. We held on tight.

‘Don’t do it this time, Luce,’ she whispered into my hair. ‘Do something else. Something brave. Leave him, hm?’

I shut my eyes and tried hard not to cry. I nodded as I stepped back. She still had her hands on my shoulders as I retrieved my keys. I couldn’t look at her.

‘I’ll help,’ she promised earnestly. ‘I didn’t mean that about the expensive bus, we’ve got pots of money. I’ll help, OK?’

I managed a laugh as I got in the car, still avoiding her worried eyes. ‘No need,’ I told her, shoving on my sun-

glasses which were conveniently on the dashboard. I shut the door and buzzed the window down between us which gave me a moment. 'No need. I promise. All's well. But thank you,' I told her, meaning it. I stretched out my hand and squeezed hers. Still not looking at her, and knowing I was on the cusp of dissolving, I started the car. Then I performed an immaculate three-point turn in my parents' drive, gave her a cheery backward wave, and drove away.