

It's Wednesday today, and that means only one thing. Angela is coming to see me, and I can't wait to talk to her. She's the only one who comes to see me now - my children don't bother, not since their father died. They were always his. Never mine.

But Angela, she comes for me. Well, she comes for the other residents too, but she spends the most time with me. She just sits there, all patient and intrigued, as I talk away. I've many a tale to tell, and today's the day for one of my favourites. I'm going to tell her about when I was young, and the woman who inspired me more than anyone.

I start with the usual pleasantries, of course, offering her a drink and a biscuit and getting us settled in my favourite spot by the window. Janice has gone off to play bridge, at my suggestion. She *will* interrupt, and I can't have that.

Angela gets her eager young mind comfortable in her chair. Her hair might be messy, but her brain is focused and alert. It's really important that I teach her all of this, so she can know where she came from and where she should go next. It's too late for me; but her, there's a lot she can do. I prepare to begin my tale, taking my memory back to the places which are clearest. I slip back into the mind of the 'young me' easily, like reconnecting with an old friend.

Today, I'm going to talk to her about Lilian Bilocca - the heroine of the headscarf revolutionaries. Everything she meant to me, and what I learnt, all those years ago...

I was about twenty when it all started; I tell Angela. It was 1968 - a different world. I was recently married and moved to the Hessle Road area, where I was to start a new life as a housewife. I knew my place, and I told myself to be content. My father was tired of me getting under his feet, and he'd found me a nice young man to take care of me. I was lucky really, compared to some.

I had a new name and a new start, and I wasn't quite sure of either, but I'd never say so out loud. My husband was a butcher, and didn't really have much to do with the fishing community. I was interested, of course, but my interest was... shall we say, discouraged.

That winter when it all happened, it was freezing cold. So cold you almost had icicles on your nose. The streets of Hull were carpeted in snow and slush, and it was a battle to get through. I didn't understand how those men could get on those trawlers and go up to the Arctic. How could they bear it?

I heard the women talking at the indoor market, huddled round in a gaggle of fear. I couldn't really join, but I caught their words about how terribly unsafe it all was. The trawlers lacked safety

equipment and radios, and there were many storms. Death seemed inevitable. Thousands had died already, and the women were terrified that their husbands would be next.

I told my husband what they had been saying, but he told me 'women shouldn't interfere in men's work' and that they were wrong to say such things. I felt pained by how much more fortunate than them I was - my husband was right there, safe and warm. He and I had years and years together, and I wasn't facing the prospect of becoming a young widow.

Widows were soon made, of course, the loss of husbands sweeping through the community in shock waves. 'Enough is enough' was the war-cry of the women as they began to protest in droves. Mrs Bilocca (or 'Lilian' I suppose I should say now - I won't call her 'Lily', it doesn't seem right, especially as I never could bear it when people called me 'Edie' instead of 'Edith'); anyway, Lilian, she led the cause - stood up and fought. Her message was clear - there must be safety measures and communication. She wouldn't see any more pointless deaths.

She was a force of nature - seventeen stone of pure determination. She strode with purpose and people took notice. She wasn't like me - she didn't apologise for herself and she never backed down. I admired her a lot, catching glimpses of her in the street, almost envying her her fight.

She came to the door once to ask if we would sign the petition for the safety measures. I was desperate to put my name to it, but my husband refused. He spoke for both of us, and that was the end of it.

Alan's attitude was typical, and he wasn't the only one to oppose them. The women were threatened for speaking up; one was even punched. Lilian received death threats, but I remember, she told the press, 'I ain't bothered. I threw them on the fire. It won't put me off.' Those words, they roused the lion inside of me, and I longed to let it loose. But I just sat there, and did nothing. I did nothing but watch.

I remember the night they all gathered in Victoria Hall. I imagined myself as one of them, tying my headscarf in front of the mirror, practising my Hesse Road accent. Mum and Dad had discouraged me from adopting the local accent, and somehow now I was caught between two worlds - the one I lived in and the one I could only view from the window.

The morning after, I awoke to the sound of Lilian causing some sort of commotion. My husband had already left for work, and I crept to the window, where I saw other women following her. I

threw a dress over my nightgown, grabbed my headscarf and coat and stole out of the house, the thrill of my secret mission steeling over me in shivers.

The women went to the docks, where police and reporters met them. For a time, things seemed fairly civil, and the disappointment of the journalists was palpable. The show they had been promised had not been performed.

I watched from a distance, trembling and out of sight, marvelling at the fishwives' bravery in going to the docks despite the superstitions about women.

(I pause and explain to Angela, how it was thought to be bad luck to have a woman on the docks when a ship launched. She is wide-eyed in wonder; she'll never know the sheer insidious nonsense we women had to put up with then...)

I return to the docks, where a younger me took in the shouts amid concerns about the absence of a radio onboard. Calamity ensued, the policemen wrestling a fearful yet brave woman as she tried to jump onto the ship. Lilian would likely have died had she managed the jump, and it took the strength and persistence of many to stop her. To stop one woman on her crusade.

My mouth dropped open as I took in the scene, and time seemed to stand still in the frenzy. I reached out a hand as though I could save her with the force of my hidden will. She was pulled back, and the trawler sailed away, leaving the women behind again to imagine and fear the worst.

This was just before the third trawler was lost, and that final piercing tragedy led to increased determination from the community. Opinion turned in favour of the women and animosity died down.

They were able to travel and present their list of safety measures to the government; Lilian threatening to picket the prime minister's house if she 'didn't get satisfaction'.

Every single measure was granted, and they saved thousands of lives.

I sigh as I remember it all - the cheers in the street, the happiness in my heart I could show to no-one. It all burned so brightly - this promise of tomorrow.

"And what happened to Lilian afterwards?" Angela cuts in as she takes a sip from her lukewarm cup of tea.

She lost her job; I tell her. She had been away for three weeks and was let go. There was an unfortunate incident where she referred to single fishermen and their 'tarts' on television. In her

culture, it just meant 'girlfriend', but that was not how it was taken by others. She was blacklisted and never worked in the fishing industry again.

"So after all that, she barely even got a 'thank you' or any recognition?"

I think saving future lives was all the recognition she wanted, I muse.

I pause and reflect then, thinking of what Lilian and all the other women had achieved in such a short space of time. Things politicians had failed to do in years.

My mouth goes dry as I consider my own life - my marriage and children. *What had it all really meant in the end? What would people remember me for?* My children, after all, had drifted away. Alan had always found a way to keep them anchored to him somehow; and now he's gone, I don't know how to sail after them.

*Have I actually learnt from her at all?*

Angela seems to read my mind and raises that very point. She always asks these direct questions, never mistrusting her right to pose them.

I suppose, I tell her; I learnt that you must never ever give up... especially when there is so much at stake. You can't rely on others to do what you're best placed to do yourself...

"So, how did she leave a lasting impression on you?" Angela asks.

I meet her gaze, my cheeks burning. "I suppose I never forgot," I reply. "Though I spent my life waiting for my own 'revolutionary' moment, and it never came. Or I never let it come." I know it's the latter, and my voice shrinks as I say it out loud.

Angela doesn't seem to know how to respond, and my discomfort hangs between us, thick in the air. "Well, thank you for that amazing story, Edith," she says, brushing off crumbs on her uniform as though she is brushing off the awkwardness. "I look forward to hearing another one next week."

She gets up and I grasp her hand, knowing I must say something of note - something she can take with her and use. She is all I have now, and I must make up for my inaction by inspiring the next generation of women in *some* way.

"Angela," I say, rehearsed words racing back to my brain. "There are three things I would have you do. The three Rs. *Remember* the women who came before you, *recognise* what you can do now, and *reach* for a better future. Remember. Recognise. Reach. You won't forget, will you?"

Angela smiles and immediately takes out her notepad and a pen. "I won't forget." She kisses my cheek, turns back to smile and is gone through the door in a breeze.

I exhale and lean back in the chair, looking out the window to watch her leave, the pain of separation hitting me once again.

I wonder if I've done the right thing, if Lilian would be proud of me. It seems more likely she'd tell me that I'm daft, in that inimitable way of hers.

I still feel as though I knew her, even though I was only really a shadow in her brave light.

I've left it late to make my mark, but I hope that if she were here now... whatever she'd say, whatever she'd do... deep down, she'd secretly approve.