

Creativity

There was something different about me, I just knew there was. But what, I didn't know. I could often see furtive looks pass between my parents, so quick they probably didn't even know that anyone had seen them. I saw them. I knew.

We weren't big on conversations in my family. It was hard to see what might have triggered such glances, anything to give me a clue. I was always trying to unravel things. Never could accept things as they were. My parents were firmly of the opinion I asked too many questions. Maybe I was just asking the questions they didn't want to answer.

Despite being an only child, I was curious about my family, maybe because I was an only child. I often wondered why I didn't have any brothers or sisters. Yet, common sense told me that my parents were on the older side of life, especially for having children.

Most of my hobbies centred about myself, things I could do on my own. There were a few I could call friends, but I never felt I could bring them back to the house. I loved drawing and artwork at school, not that I ever got any praise for it at home.

One day my father announced he and my mother were heading into town for an important appointment, and I wasn't allowed to go with them.

'You stay here, Isabella. Behave and do not answer the door to anyone. Do you understand?'

It was more an order than a request.

'Yes, father,' I replied. It was always father never dad, on mother's instructions.

My natural curiosity was beginning to get the better of me. Although I didn't know how long they would be. But it took about half an hour into town, so that gave me at least an hour, perhaps more. I waited until I saw the car backing out of the drive.

Rushing upstairs I had to think quickly, deciding on the best place to start looking. Having never been in my parent's bedroom, that seemed like a good starting point. Slowly, I opened the heavy wooden door, to be met by the scent of mustiness. My nose wrinkled, I almost started coughing as the aroma grabbed the back of my throat.

I gasped at the ancient décor, when was this room last decorated, I wondered. Where was everything, no clothes thrown on a chair, no shoes on the floor as I might have expected. Bland and empty. Maybe I shouldn't have expected anything else of them. It made me wonder even more where my creativity came from.

A large dressing table dominated one side of the room. As a piece of furniture, it was an amazing example, even if it was old. One thing it did have was lots of drawers. Taking a deep breath, I knew I had to get on, time was not on my side.

The first drawer was locked, as was the second and the third. They were all locked. Somehow, I wasn't surprised. There had to be a key somewhere, I just hoped she didn't keep it with her. What were they hiding.

I looked under little glass bowls, under a box of Kleenex. Something in the box moved. I shook it. Delving into the box. There it was. A key! Not very original, Mother.

My hands shook as I tried to get the key in one of the locks. Nothing but tights. Then the next drawer. A hairbrush and some curlers and that. Maybe I needed to look more closely. Back to the tights.

Well-hidden at the bottom of the drawer. A big brown envelope. One name handwritten on the outside. Isabella.

My still shaking hands weren't sure what to do with the find. Was this the answer to all my questions? How could I just put it back and forget about it. I couldn't, simple as that.

Suddenly I had the dangerous idea of taking the envelope back to my bedroom and reading it during the night, remembering I did have a torch.

I managed to lock the drawer and returned the key to the Kleenex box. The next problem was where to hide it. Mother wasn't big on cleaning my room, so I stuffed it at the back of my wardrobe. I'd just about calmed down and lowered my heartrate when I heard the front door open and raised voices.

Sitting at my desk I pretended to be doing some homework. It worked. Mother opened the door, glared at me, said nothing and vanished. No knocking, greeting or anything. I breathed an enormous sigh of relief. Bedtime could not come soon enough!

Dinner time was a tense prolonged affair. My appetite was lacking, and it was so obvious my parents had had words. Food was consumed in silence; I did not dare utter a word. The urge to be a million miles away was overwhelming.

I excused myself on the grounds of having a lot of homework. The envelope was burning a hole in my mind. What did it hold about me?

It must have been gone eleven by the time my parents retired, although I did hear the other door on the landing, distinctive by the creaky door hinge. I guessed they must be sleeping in

separate bedrooms tonight. Whatever had happened was clearly significant. Was it to do with me?

I opened the envelope. There were various letters from solicitors, all mentioning someone called Theodora. Most of it went over my head. Then a smaller envelope, labelled birth certificate. This was the one, the one that would answer my questions, I hoped.

Back to the hand shaking, praying the torch battery would last.

Mother – Theodora Fothersgill. Father – unknown.

I couldn't keep the torch shining on the names. Fothersgill is our surname, but that's not mother's name, she's Eleanor. Father unknown. But where did that leave my father, my real father?

Did I dare confront them. There was no one else to ask. Who was Theodora? I finally fell into an uneasy sleep, clutching my birth certificate.

Saturday morning came, all too soon.

I walked into the dining room, they were both eating, silently.

'Good morning, Isabella.'

I took a deep breath. 'Who is Theodora Fothersgill?'

An iciness descended over the room.

I held up my birth certificate.

'You wicked girl. You should never have gone in our room, snooping, like a common criminal.'

'I needed to know who I was, who I am.'

'Rubbish. Never satisfied with everything that we gave you.'

'But she's my mother.' I paused, needing a moment. 'And my sister...'

'She was a little hussy.'

'How can you say that about your own daughter.'

I wasn't sure where my confidence was coming from, but long may it continue.

An uneasy silence fell over the living room. Mother's face was a picture. My father, up until now, hadn't spoken a word. He sat staring at the ceiling, waiting for inspiration. Waiting for my mother.

'That girl was about to bring shame on this household. She could not be allowed to stay here.'

‘Then why did you keep me?’

‘Because we didn’t want the baby to go to a stranger. That’s why.’ My father finally spoke.

‘You mean you didn’t. I never wanted anything to do with it.’ That maybe explained my mother’s undisguised hostility towards me.

I waited a moment. ‘Where is she now?’

My mother glared at me, ‘I don’t know, and I don’t care.’

‘She’s in Edinburgh.’

We both turned to look at my father. The look on my mother’s face was murderous.

‘You’re in touch with her. All those business meetings in Edinburgh. You dreadful man.’

‘She’s my daughter.’ He said simply.

‘And my mother,’ I added. ‘I want to meet her.’

‘Well, you can’t, she isn’t part of this family, and if you do, you won’t be either.’

‘The girl has a right to meet her.’

My mother walked out of the room, without a backwards glance. Father seemed to have aged visibly in the last ten minutes.

He looked at me with sympathy. ‘Your sister is a very good artist, she works for a publisher, designing the illustrations.’

My creativity.

Two weeks later I met my mother for the first time.

Looking back, it never occurred to me why there were never any family photos scattered around the house. On the odd occasion I had been to a friend’s house, they were always full of pictures. One offspring winning this, another offspring winning that or performing at various shows or concerts. We never had anything like that; it was like the house was stuck in time. When my parents died, I found lots of framed pictures hidden in the loft.

At least my father had tried. But I do often wonder what life would have been like if things had been very different in the early days.