

Turning the Tables

When the last of the aunts died there was a house full of treasures to be split between Trish and her brother Bob, an inheritance long postponed as the aunts lived on to a great age.

Bob travelled down from Edinburgh for the division of the contents, spending the night with Trish at her house in Tunbridge Wells. This morning she would drive them both to Wadhurst, a journey she had been making often as the old ladies became more and more dependant.

The phone rang as they were about to leave. Bob went outside while Trish stopped to take the call. She guessed it would be her daughter on the line.

'Hi Mum. How's it going?'

'Alice, we're just setting off. Bob's outside at the car. He wants me to drop him at the station as soon as we've finished over there.

'A flying visit, then.'

'Of course. What did you expect? Look, I've got to go now. I'll ring you as soon as I can.'

'OK, Mum. Good luck.'

Trish parked on the unmade road that ran alongside the aunts' house. Bob got out, eased the narrow iron gate open and made straight for the house. Trish followed slowly, keeping to the uneven brick path that wound its way through the garden, reminding her of childhood and the secret places where she used to play.

Over there, behind the laurel hedge was the apple store, with its heady aroma and tempting fruit spaced out in neat rows. She used to reach up, steal a nice ripe one from the shelf and then move its neighbours to disguise the gap. Young Tom Killick's bike was always leaning back there; he was just a boy when he came to work in this garden. Trish remembered how she used to pester him with her chatter and her questions. As she grew beyond childhood she teased him. He could have been her first lover – she cornered him once in the apple store - but he was much too proper and respectful. Or maybe he just didn't fancy her. Young Tom, as he was always called, had retired last autumn, a few months before Aunt Meg died.

Now the lawn was overgrown, carpeted with the rotting crop from the big old apple tree. Trish's earliest memory was of that tree in blossom on the day she first came to live in this house. By the time a year had passed she was able to climb into its branches and defend it against her young brother. Bob was never a match for her in daring.

It was early in the war when they came. Their father, rear gunner in a Wellington bomber, was killed on a raid over Germany and their mother 'was never herself' after that. The bereaved family was taken in by the aunts, both single, Meg a schoolteacher and Lottie employed by a publishing company. It seemed as though their rambling old house, with its big, mysterious garden, had been waiting for the arrival of these children.

Aunt Meg was the dominant presence, the organiser of the household. Today her scent, 'L'Heure Bleue' by Guerlain – always a birthday present she welcomed – was still in the air when Trish entered the hall. Aunt Lottie never wore perfume.

Bob looked to his sister for guidance, as he had always done. 'I've brought these stickers,' she said, 'blue for you, red for me. When we've decided who's having what, we can mark them - for the removal people.'

'Or maybe we could go round on our own and label the items we would like. Then come to a decision at the end on anything we've both marked.'

'OK, we'll do that if you want,' she said. Work separately and avoid discussion unless absolutely necessary. Typical of him. He never used to contact her when he came south to see the aunts. But how eagerly they waited for his visits. Brother Bob, always favoured, even in the share-out of the family genes - tall and slim with square shoulders like Mum, while their father's

heaviness had come her way.

The aunts filled the house with pictures, furniture and ornaments and it was this passion of theirs that encouraged the young Trish to find work, first with the local auctioneers, later with Christies in London. She was experienced in valuing goods and chattels, but here it was her childhood that was being disposed of, something you couldn't estimate in cash. I hate this, she said to herself as she faced the task.

The most valuable item by far was the Jacobean dining table, a rare and perfect example, deeply carved along the sides, set on three stout pairs of legs. Bob wouldn't have room for it in his flat, but Trish could see it gracing her dining room. She didn't have dinner parties, lacking a circle of friends, but the table would provide an impressive setting for her committee meetings.

'I'll start in here,' she said, going off to the drawing room and leaving Bob in the hall. She put her first red sticker on the burr walnut Davenport – a woman's item, she reasoned; there shouldn't be any disagreement about that. Her next choice was a 'Biscuit' figure of a boy in a straw hat that stirred memories of the young Tom Killick.

She wandered into the hall, Bob's footsteps audible on the landing above. She pushed open the door to the dining room. The sight of his blue stickers on the table and every one of the eight chairs struck her like a blow to the stomach. The sneaky bugger, she thought. He knew what he was after.

She had resolved that there would be no dispute today – the aunts deserved that respect - and she wouldn't put her red stickers next to his blue ones. She looked quickly above the mantelpiece. No sticker on the Dutch painting – seventeenth century she believed - of a girl at a window. She slapped a red one on and quickened her progress through the rooms, picking out and claiming every piece that would fetch a price. Two could play at that game.

After a while she noticed how few items Bob had marked. And his choices were quite eccentric – a set of fire irons that were not even brass; a flimsy little upright chair, its tapestry seat worn through; an unpolished wooden box with the playing card suits cut out in copper and fastened to the lid, not inlaid. There was no sticker on the roll-top desk – she had presumed he would want that.

When she had finished on the upper floors she came down slowly, feeling the hand-worn bannister for the last time. Her brother was sitting in the high-backed hall chair that was like a throne. He doesn't look at home in it, Trish thought.

'We can't make coffee or anything I'm afraid, there's nothing connected,' she said.

'That's OK. What happens now?'

'I'll organise for the removers to ship us what we've chosen. Then I'll get a man I know in the trade to come in and give us a price for what's left.'

'Sounds good. I'll leave it to you. Shall we go? I don't think I can take this place much longer.' Bob got up and Trish slipped a sticker on the hall chair.

At the station she said a curt 'Bye, Bob.' He leaned down to her window and said, 'I do know how much you did for them, Sis.'

She watched him walk across the forecourt. At fifty two he looked youthful, his hair long but well cut. A small rucksack hung from one shoulder. A young woman passed him and turned to have a second look.

'Hi Alice. He's gone.'

'How was it?'

'Horrible. But it's done.'

'Did you get the table?'

'No.'

'I don't believe it!'

'He made a beeline for it. It'll fetch well into five figures at auction in Edinburgh.'

'You think he's going to sell it?'

'Where would it fit in that flat of his? You know, I feel for Fiona, growing up with him for a father. Mind you, she probably doesn't see much of him, since the divorce. And whose fault was that anyway? Who could live with a man who never speaks?'

Trish took it on herself to keep the branches of the family in contact, making an annual trip round the country, staying with relations and circulating news. Edinburgh was not on her itinerary.

She phoned her daughter three or four times every day and she was soon getting through to her again. Alice cut in straight away. 'I've got some news, Mum. I'm going to Edinburgh, of all places. Jason's hoping to find a venue for his act at the festival. I'm going with him.'

'How odd,' Trish said, 'I was just thinking, it's not right that you and Fiona don't know each other - first cousins, the same age exactly.' There was no comment from Alice so she continued, 'What prompted the thought was this - I brought home a couple of needlework panels, done by the aunts when they were about ten or twelve years old. They're really lovely. I think you and Fiona should have one each. The aunts would have wanted that. You could take hers to Edinburgh with you.'

'Oh God, if I'm not mistaken that's him - my uncle!' Alice and Jason were at a café in Rose Street, the Edinburgh meeting place arranged with Fiona,

'Alice! I'd have recognised you anywhere. Let me introduce you to your cousin - this is Fiona.'

Alice kissed them both and introduced Jason. Fiona sat next to her. They were both in jeans, Alice a little the taller, Fiona darker in colouring. Their eyes were the same shade of grey-blue. Bob sat across the table.

'So, tell me, how long are you here?' he asked. 'What are your plans?'

'Well, Jason's going back at the weekend, he's got a booking in Guildford.' She explained that her boyfriend had a solo mime act. 'They loved him in Brighton - booked him for extra shows. He's looking for a venue here, on the festival fringe. I'm in between contracts at the moment. I might stay longer.' Alice was a Systems Analyst, highly paid, working freelance.

'Why not, now you've made it here? Listen, I'm going to leave you three together, but I'd really like you to come to the flat for a drink. Maybe this evening?'

Fiona and Alice spent the day sightseeing while Jason went to begin his research for the festival. At six o'clock Fiona led them to her father's flat in Colinton.

Alice unwrapped the cross-stitch panel that her mother had carefully packaged and spread it on the dining table to its full width, nearly two feet. It was a scene of children playing games, embroidered by Aunt Lottie with a daring choice of colours.

'How beautiful is that?' Fiona said. Trish had kept Aunt Meg's meticulously-worked piece - her favourite - for her daughter.

Bob noticed Alice running her fingers over the surface of the table. 'My pride and joy,' he said. Alice made no reply.

'I was so relieved when Trish didn't seem to want it. Shall I tell you about it? What it means to me?' Alice nodded. He looked it over, feeling the thickness of the single huge plank of elm. 'It must be hard to imagine how it was to be a small, rather timid kid, living in the South of England during the war, with the air raid sirens, the planes droning overhead, the sound of explosions, no one talking about anything else. I think Trish felt immortal, but I couldn't. For most of those years I lived under this table, played all my games there. Aunt Lottie told me it was indestructible and I believed her. She used to tell me stories - the dramas the table had witnessed over the centuries. Sounds silly I know, but this piece of furniture still gives me a

sense of safety.' He looked up and pointed, 'See that little chair? Tilted onto its back it could be a car, or an aeroplane, sometimes even an anti-aircraft gun.'

'Seems to me you were the one with the imagination,' Alice said, 'you knew the danger. I don't think Mum knows why you wanted this table so much.'

'I gather she spent the war in her apple tree,' Fiona chipped in. 'Dad's told me - that was her refuge, where she felt safe. Or maybe it was just that it would take more than the Luftwaffe to scare Aunt Trish.'

Bob laughed. 'You're probably right,' he said. 'I remember once, when she was away somewhere, I started to climb her tree. I went up and up, got higher than she ever managed. I never dared to tell her.'

'There it is, Alice – over there, between the Bella Italia and the Edinburgh Fudge Kitchen, like he said.' Alice and Jason had followed the Royal Mile, downhill from just below the castle. Bob had suggested that they start the day at his art gallery; he could help them work out a programme. The premises were spacious, with two large windows, spotlights illuminating the pictures. They sat round a desk at the back of the room and Bob asked Jason about his act.

'It's hard to describe,' Alice said. 'Best to see it – needs the element of surprise.'

Two couples came in to look around. Jason went off to visit the Fringe Society, whose office they had passed on the way down. Bob looked after the customers and Alice examined the desk where she was sitting. There was a computer, three or four ledgers, one of them open showing columns of handwriting, and a rotating card index. When the customers had gone she asked Bob, 'What's all this? You don't mean to say this is your recording system?'

'Guilty,' Bob said, holding up his hands.

'And the computer?'

'I've had it for six months, all connected up, but the truth is I'm scared of it. Spreadsheets, folders and such – I'm worse than a novice. That's your line isn't it?'

'Well, yes. Kind of.' She questioned him about the ledgers and was soon outlining the system she would put in – if she were in his place.

He looked at her with a smile. 'Feel like making it a working holiday Alice?'

'D'you know what? I'd love to. It's such a beautiful place you've got here.'

Alice spent the morning at the gallery. Customers came and went, browsing the exhibition of Border landscapes. Sometimes Bob approached them – he seemed to have an instinct for the ones who liked to talk and those who preferred to be left alone. Every time the gallery was empty he and Alice were chatting again.

'You're in your element here, Bob, I can see that.'

'I am. But you know what I like best? It's the contact with the painters. I travel to wherever they are and we spend some hours going through their work. There's the surprise at each new piece, and the way it reveals itself, little by little. There's the discussion, the intensity as they tell you about it, how it arrived at its final state. Then, when I leave to drive home, I'm seeing the world through that painter's eyes. It's magic.'

'You're an artist yourself, aren't you?'

'Well, I could knock you out a fair imitation of anything from a Holbein to a Hockney. That was my trouble – too much facility. Not enough of a driving vision.'

He went to answer a visitor's questions, talking enthusiastically about the artist. The customer reserved a painting. Bob came and looked down at her, over the computer screen.

'You know, Alice, you're not a bit like your mother.'

'People say I am.'

'To look at, yes - I knew you straight away yesterday. No, what I mean is something else. If you were like her I wouldn't be babbling on like I have been. With Trish I go silent - always

did, can't help myself. She seems to have that power.' He thought for a moment. 'I was a bit like that with Aunt Meg too.'

Trish stood up to ease her back. A herbaceous border was nice to look at in the summer months, but was it really worth the endless task of weeding it, she wondered. Apart from Alice and one or two of the committee members, there was no one to appreciate it. Judy Penrose had passed a comment, in her patronising way, when she came for the school governors' meeting. Her own estate, tended by a team of gardeners, was opened to the public for a weekend every year in aid of charity. Trish was among the large crowd invited to the cocktail party Judy always hosted at that time but she was never asked to the dinner parties that she heard others mention during meetings. She was giving way to feelings of resentment when the telephone rang.

'Mum, it's me. I'm going to stay on for a bit after Jason goes back. I love it here.' Trish could sense excitement in her daughter's voice.

'That's good, darling.'

'Bob's offered to put me up.'

'It's Bob now, is it?'

'Yeah, well, he doesn't feel like an uncle. He's commissioned me to do an analysis of his business – the art gallery?' No sound came from Trish.

'I tell you, Mum, he's so different from the man you know. You should see him at the gallery - he's brilliant with the customers. Not so good on the organisation, but that's where I come in.'

'What about Fiona, is there room for you both at the flat?'

'She's staying at her mum's. Comes over to her dad's every day, though.'

Brother Bob, thought Trish. Has them all eating out of his hand. It was always so – I made the effort and he got the rewards. She sank down in her chair. Now he was stealing her daughter, a girl who had grown up fatherless from the age of nine.

Three boxes of papers, brought from the aunts' house, were waiting for her attention. Meg had died before Lottie's estate was wound up and Trish was executor to both of them. She picked up a bundle and untied the string. These were from Aunt Meg's desk, all filed with a sense of order that Trish admired. It was Thursday morning and she had nothing in her diary until the Library committee on Monday evening.

At four o'clock on Friday she was settling down with a pot of tea for another stint on the papers, Aunt Lottie's this time – untidy piles that she had scooped up from the floor of her bedroom. She quickly disposed of old receipts and then, as she lifted a bookseller's invoice, she was confronted with a drawing of the aunts' dining table. There was no mistaking it. Her eye darted over the paper – to the heading: "Maker of Fine Period Furniture," then down past a list of measurements to the last line: "The table, in construction and finish, to represent a fine example of its period."

Trish poured another cup of tea. She took a Rich Tea biscuit from the tin and settled back to savour the knowledge she had come upon.

'Hello Bob, it's Trish.' She was trying not to sound too pleased.

'Oh. Hi Sis.'

'Listen, you know I've been sorting out the aunts' papers? Well - I've turned up something odd. That table you've got. Aunt Lottie commissioned a craftsman to make it. There's correspondence about it. It's a reproduction.'

Bob burst out laughing. 'It's a fake, you mean? How wonderful! Good old Aunt Lottie, she had us all fooled.'

'I don't understand you, Bob. I thought you ought to know, in case you were planning to

sell it.'

'Sell it? Good Lord no, I would never part with it. Now it's even more precious. I'm looking at it as I'm talking to you, the way they've simulated four hundred years of wear. That makes it a fake, not a reproduction. Aunt Lottie did have a passion for secrets, of course.'

In his quiet way Bob could always deflate her. She had seen Meg as the smart, practical one and Lottie, well, she was a bit of a dreamer. Bob seemed to have known a different Lottie.

'If I'm not mistaken she was the one who acquired that Dutch masterpiece you've got,' he continued. 'Better have a look - it could be dodgy too.' He chuckled as he said this. Trish gripped the phone to stop her hand shaking. Art was a subject Bob knew about. The painting was already in the saleroom with an estimated value that would pay for her new conservatory. It was coming up for auction in two week's time.

'I think you've got it.' Alice had taken Bob, step by step, through everything she had set up on the computer. She had been in Edinburgh for a week, the days spent at the gallery and the evenings with Fiona, exploring the city and its eating places, swapping their life stories and their passions.

'Ready to go solo, you reckon?' Bob said. 'Just as long as you're at the end of a phone line, Alice. You've done a great job, I'm really grateful.'

A dozen large canvases stood against the back wall of the gallery. 'Your next exhibition?' Alice asked.

'Yes. I'm quite excited about it. Coastal scenes – harbours, cottages, boats. Reminiscent of the St Ives painters. It's her first show with us.' He went to close the gallery and draw the blinds. 'I'll move these into the store, then we can go.'

'Let me help you.'

She carried them, one by one, to the door of the storage room. Bob took them from her and slotted them into the racks. She handed him the last canvas and watched him put it away; watched the movement of his hands, holding the edges of the stretcher, then opening gracefully to slide it into place.

Bob fetched glasses and a half-full bottle of wine. They sat at the table. Alice looked round the gallery, the lights now dimmed. Neither spoke for a while. Then Alice said, suddenly, 'I'm going to take the train home tomorrow.'

'You have to?'

'I think I do. But this evening I'm going to buy you and Fiona a meal somewhere.'

'I shall accept your kind invitation.'

'Mum thinks you're cold and calculating, kind of withdrawn. And you're definitely not.' They were in a traffic jam on Princes Street, Bob driving Alice to Waverley Station. 'You think she's a bit of an ogre, don't you – you freeze up with her. But she isn't an ogre.' She paused for a moment. 'I've been hoping that someone would come along and kind of soften her, allow the real person to come out. But d'you know what she told me the other day? She said that no man had invited her for so much as a cup of coffee in all the years since Dad left. Sad isn't it?'

'You want us to start again, don't you? Work out where it all went wrong. You're like Aunt Lottie – she saw how we brought out the worst in each other.'

Neither spoke for a while. The traffic started to move and Bob said, 'I see you and Fiona, so easy with each other. It can be a lovely relationship – cousins. I never had that.'

'But you did have a sister.'

'Yes.' He thumped the steering wheel a couple of times and then said, 'Alice, I want you to speak to your mother for me. Suggest she comes up, maybe in August, for the festival.'

'No Bob, you speak to her.'

'OK, OK. You're right. I'll phone her this evening. But you must be here if she comes.'

Bob was waiting for the phone to connect, pacing round the dining table. Aunt Lottie could create living pictures in his mind and now he saw Bonnie Prince Charlie, flanked by the chiefs of the Scottish clans, plotting against the King, their voices low and urgent. His sister's voice cut across this reverie.

'Tunbridge Wells four double-seven two.'

'Trish, it's Bob.'

'Oh, hello. I hear Alice is on her way home. She's got you organised, I gather.'

'She certainly has. She's amazing. Actually I'm ringing to say – why don't you come up too? Come during the festival, when Alice and Jason are here. It might be fun.' This didn't sound at all like her brother. What magic had Alice worked on him, she wondered.

'Another thing, Sis, would you want two of the dining chairs? I haven't room for more than six.'

'Oh.' She was taken aback by this generosity. 'Well - thanks for the offer. I think I might...they're nice reproductions, aren't they?'

'Yes and no. Two are originals – Sheraton. I guess that Aunt Lottie bought them to go with the table and then had the other six made to match them. Skilfully done, I can tell you. I had a good look when they arrived here and it was a while before it dawned on me. Here's a challenge for you, Trish. Pick out the originals and you can have them.' That should do something to make up for the debacle over the Dutch painting, he thought. Poor Trish, she didn't deserve that. Aunt Lottie had done it again, another fake.

'OK Brother, you're on,' Trish said. 'You'll be losing those Sheratons, you know that, don't you?' Antique furniture had been her speciality at Christies.

Trish was sitting at the roll-top desk. She had gone back to the aunts' house to claim it, after Bob left. Somehow space had to be made for it. As a child she used to sneak into the study, climb on the chair and play at being Aunt Meg, dealing with imaginary bits of paper, all brisk efficiency.

In front of her now was a stack of folders, a different colour for each of her committees. Less-willing members were always glad to leave the tedious tasks to Trish. But today she couldn't make a start. She rose and went into the garden. As she wandered about, picking off a dead flower here and there, she was daring to imagine her life without its public-spirited activity, without people who had a need of her.

Her daughter's visit to Edinburgh had shaken the certainties she held to. She was trying to adjust to the idea of an outgoing and affectionate brother and also, from the stories Alice brought back, to an Aunt Lottie who could fill a boy's imagination with exciting tales and secrets. Trish had always judged those two through the eyes of Aunt Meg; she saw that now.

She straightened up from a bed of alstroemerias and walked towards the house. She strode through the French window and picked up the phone. She would accept the invitation. She would open herself to this newly-revealed brother and to the magic of the Edinburgh Festival.