

Reality Check

By Ina Disguise

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“Look at how fat she is. She’s spoilt and fat!” The sisters shrieked at their mother, pointing at the four year old on the scales. Olivia was also twice the height of an average four year old, but Olivia’s eldest sister had anorexia, and the other one had given up thinking for herself, since doing so always involved a shrieking rant from Lucy. Their mother sighed, tired. “She’s four years old. Go away until I put her to bed.”

“I’m going to Australia. I want money for the move.” Lucy’s voice was at a familiar pitch. Olivia prayed that Lucy would be given the money. Olivia was now eight. Alice, their sister, looked put out. “I want to move out too. I’m going to work in a liburrry.”

“You could try pronouncing it properly first.” Their father looked at them, shaking his head. He supposed that the house would be less crowded. Not much he could do about his son, who had just finished his mediocre performance at university and was working in a bank. Not very helpful with the house, but at least he would not need money for a place of his own, he thought. “Yes, you can both have some money for moving. When are you going?” George was not impressed, so far, by his children. It had been OK until this last one was born, but now the children were eating into his pension fund. Olivia took another piece of the remains of the pudding, since her input would not be required this evening. She was, by eight year old, aware that her sisters were both loud and extremely stupid, especially when together.

“Look, look she is eating. Look at how spoilt she is!” the sisters shrieked, as if this would detract from the demands for money. Making Olivia angry was a standard tactic in such situations. Olivia’s mother removed the pudding, and told Olivia off for taking it without asking. Olivia was not amused, and was sent to bed forthwith.

The queue for the bathroom was much improved after the departure of the ugly sisters, and the four remaining occupants of the house, being somewhat quieter, carried on with their fairly separate lives. Olivia became ill with glandular fever when she was ten, but her weight remained unchanged by her chosen diet of orange juice. She wrote her first book, and continued reading her way through the vast array of books in the house, whilst making doll’s clothes. Her mother was unsure about this last child. She was not like the others. Her husband was tired of children, perhaps she should not have had this one. She was so...patronising, which was odd for someone forty three years younger than you? Her teachers seemed to like her, however, and despite her year long illness, she did not have to repeat any school. Thank goodness she had been ill and they had not put her up a year, thought her mother. Clever people weren’t very... nice, somehow. Always asking such odd questions. Not interested in parties or clothes or nice, girly things. Not interested in being liked by her sisters. What could you do, with someone who made no effort to fit in? It wasn’t that in her day. You were told to fit in, whether you liked it or not.

When Lucy came back from Australia two years later, it was time for her to marry and buy a house. Money was duly provided, and shortly thereafter she started a business with her husband, also partially funded by dear old dad. Lucy and her husband moved to England, and peace reigned between her fractious visits. Alice, the middle sister, took pride in not having asked for much in comparison, and got her wedding money for buying a flat. Kevin also moved out, receiving some money

towards his flat deposit, easily finding a job with his poor degree due to the school he had attended, as his mother testified years later.

When the time came for Olivia to go to secondary school, it was decided that she would be sent to the local school, rather than the private school the others had attended, on the account of the pension issue. Although Olivia's father had been extremely careful with money, on the presumption of his dying first, and his needing to provide for his loyal but careless wife, he was aware that the house devoured a lot of their money, despite his constant maintenance and devotion to his work as a commercial artist. Olivia, therefore, spent her time with her father on maintenance work on the house, between books, and grew into a rebellious and rather angry teenager, spending time with the local rejects, who had formed a sullen teenage social group. It was not cool to be seen to do too well at school, and so she played pool instead of going to school during a couple of crucial years and moved out at sixteen, into a shared flat with her friends.

By seventeen Olivia was bored with rebelling, and took a job in a beautiful village in the highlands, working so many hours that her wages dwarfed the income of the owner of the business. She lived there for two years, despite being in a violent relationship with a local boy. She figured she must deserve it. She had always been a bit odd, after all. When she forgave him for his infidelity he did not understand it, and decided that the rules had changed. Olivia was left very much alone after he went off with an older and more brutal local woman, with whom he had two children.

Olivia found some solace in the local bars, drinking buddies taking the place that had been occupied by the teenage punks and hippies. She stayed for a few months, and returned home to dry out.

Her home town was a lonely place for someone who did not want to return to her former friends, and she soon moved on, taking her first cooking job in England, where she was referred to as a militant jock, since it was during the poll tax years, when Scotland was used as a testing ground for the unpopular tax. She missed many family events, preferring to work. Despite her obsession with work, she never did build up much in the way of savings. Catering was not particularly steady employment, due to the preferred practise of working one person until they were tired of being underpaid and housed in their place of employment.

After a few more years of moving every five months, to more places of over-employment, Olivia returned to the capital and finally made it to Head Chef in a mediocre yet popular restaurant. By this time she was supporting an unemployed Michelin starred chef, her boyfriend, who spent a considerable proportion of the money she earned. He told her that she was wasting her time taking the pill, because he was infertile.

He was not.

“You're not to have children. Mum can't handle that. You're to stay at home and look after mum and dad. We aren't doing it. You'd be selfish to have children. You're a burden to the family and you always will be.”

“How does that work? I haven’t lived at home for years. Mum and dad don’t need looking after?”

“They will though, and we aren’t doing it.”

Alice spent the rest of her inadequate life denying to everyone, including her boyfriend who witnessed the aftermath, that this conversation took place. She had even offered to ‘make sure’ Olivia did not have a child. Olivia did what she had been told was her duty and went home.

There was a hole in the roof. Nobody wanted to know.

“She’s selfish and a liar.” Nobody checked the roof.

“It’s not her house.” Nobody checked the roof.

“Who does she think she is, she has no right to point that out.” Nobody checked the roof.

Olivia went into the roofspace and protected the ornate Victorian ceilings as best she could with bubble wrap and plastic. Still, nobody checked the roof.

Five years later, a small dark patch appeared on the hall ceiling.

“There’s a hole in the roof.” Olivia’s brother tried to lie to the insurance company, but it was obviously not a new hole. It took another ten years before Olivia finally got sufficient control of the situation to fix the roof and ceilings, just because of the continuous bitching of her siblings.

Her father became ill just as Olivia finished university, and despite having a very good degree, it was clear to Olivia that her mother could not manage her father alone.

“You’re no carer. You don’t know anything about caring.” Her mother would say, as she swanned out of the door for her daily walk. Despite this attention to her health, it became clear that Olivia’s mother had a heart problem. Olivia would frequently find her, green in the face as she tried to struggle up and down the stairs attending to him. Olivia called Lucy, since her mother was inclined to indulge her every whim.

“Please will you invite mother down to yours, she is making herself ill.”

“No, it’s not my responsibility.”

“Can you please tell her to go to the doctor, she is green in the face.”

“No, I am not telling her anything. Go away.”

This went on, with all three siblings, by telephone for a couple of years before Olivia gave up speaking to them at all. In the meantime, Olivia made friends with a bright old lady across the road and started her local community council, in an effort to protect the shabby yet beautiful Victorian mansions. Then, the old lady contracted

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