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All Sorts

by MaryPat Campbell

Vi's urgent whisperings were made with great seriousness. Whenever I was able to be patient and sit with her quietly, they sounded like the sea going in and out across the shingle on a cool Spring day.

Other times she would grip both my hands in hers as if she would never let me go. Her long and previously elegant fingers were knotted with blue veins that stood up like ploughed ridges in a field. They wrapped themselves around mine like a vice so I felt roped in and bound.

Sometimes when I spoke to Aunty Vi she would stop suddenly, turn her eyes to face mine with delight, as if she suddenly recognised the sound of my voice.

"Joe, have you brought me something nice today?" Vi would enquire eagerly, mistaking me for my father, her favourite brother. But then her eyes glazed over again as she returned to her whisperings and looked out at the world and didn't see it, or me, anymore.

To ease my guilt at the dread I felt visiting her in that place, I would bring some of her favourite treats, liquorice all-sorts, or a few slices of poppy seed cake. We all remembered how she loved them, and how she used to bring them to our house as a treat for us children long ago.

I soon learned. She liked to squeeze the all-sorts between her still strong fingers and hurl them across the room at the other residents dozing in their chairs, like throwing pebbles at seagulls.

"Ow! What's...Stop that! Vi is at it again."

This was usually followed by a few quiet or not so quiet curses aimed in our direction.

Or she would grab handfuls of the cake and either stuff them into her mouth all at once, making a terrible mess and shaming me, or try to stuff them into her pockets, the crumbs spilling out onto her lap, the chair and the carpet.

If I tried to get her to take one piece at a time, or wipe her mouth for her when she'd swallowed, she would push me away and screech at me to leave her alone.

"Fuck off and leave me alone," Aunty Vi would shout loudly so everyone could hear.

How could Aunty Vi, this lively, educated, interesting woman who was my favourite aunty do this to me? She managed to turn me into a prim adult horrified at her messy primitive habits. One seldom was able to do her a good turn without some thoughts of strangulation, as my patience regularly left me. Her cackles and her efforts to make me into her unwilling accomplice angered and embarrassed me more than I thought possible.

I envied her freedom though, to do just as she pleased, with no worry about what I or others thought about her. Aunty Vi would curse and swear and throw her food around, eat like a famished dog, shout obscenities and nonsense at people passing by. She mortified and saddened me until I couldn't wait to leave and get away, back to the civilised world of people who still had their minds more or less intact out in the familiar so called real world.