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## Aunt Elizabeth

by Victoria Watson

Aunt Elizabeth had eyebrows that lived just below her hairline. It gave her a permanent expression of surprise; but due to heavy pencilling they also gave a look of severity and deep foreboding. Even as a young child I noticed how other adults said her name differently to others.

“Aunt Elizabeth is coming round,” they would say and their stare would remain longer than normal. Nobody would start talking about the weather or what the neighbour’s cat had done in the garden. They would just look at each other meaningfully.

Aunt Elizabeth volunteered in the library, which was a disadvantage to me. I longed to get lost there, to spend hours running my fingers along book after book. I wanted to sit in the muted hum and enjoy the dusty enforced silence. My mother rarely took me to the library, mainly because she thought the “great unwashed” had somehow imprinted onto each and every page filth and unpleasantness, and that once touched no amount of scrubbing could remove. But the main reason my mother never took me to the library was purely to avoid the possibility of meeting Aunt Elizabeth.

I can count the number of times I went on one hand. Each time trembling with excitement I would instinctively know the way to the childrens’ section, years before the rainbow colours and squashy bean bags were installed. My mother would follow behind, and just at the point when I could almost reach out and touch the entire Malory Towers collection a dark shadow would appear and like Voldemort, Aunt Elizabeth, eyebrows arched, hair pinned back in a tight serious bun would materialise between the almanacs and the dictionaries.

My mother would slink behind me, clearly thinking it was best to throw the child to the wolves, or maybe in the vague hope Aunt Elizabeth would not see us. She always did. Clutching a pile of glossy hardbacks to her bony chest, Aunt Elizabeth would open a tiny red mouth and call to us. We had no choice but to move towards this small woman with eyebrows stuck on her forehead. Her smile always arrived last, and her pink rouged cheeks would puff out at the pleasure of catching us.

Then for quite a few days afterwards my mother would tell everyone with a knowing look, that we had seen Aunt Elizabeth in the library, and that she had not known that Tuesdays were her volunteer days. The response was usually grave and sympathetic and some secret language that I was not privy to would go on between their eyes. Sometimes there was even a giggle or a nudge but mostly a hard Paddington type stare.

In my eyes, Aunt Elizabeth was probably 300 years old. She wore knee length skirts and pussy-bow blouses in various shades of bruise. Her grey eyes were small and birdlike and central to a large egg-shaped head with thin legs and arms held carefully below, which gave the idea that her head was much too big for her puny body. She rarely walked anywhere but glided along the High Street, back erect and monarchic, which always forced my parents to slide down low in their seats, in order not to be spotted on drives past. I knew my parents were pretty old as they did not play and they liked to plan things. Aunt Elizabeth was even older than this, much older, so old that I looked for cobwebs in her hair.

So, when at the age of 13 I discovered that Aunt Elizabeth had got pregnant during the war and run off with a Canadian GI to have the baby, it shocked me to my very Sidney Sheldon core. That Aunt Elizabeth could run at all was shocking, to prise her spindly legs apart and run or anything else that I imagined was monstrous; but to have been capable of love, lust or desire was to me utterly fascinating, totally unbelievable and downright disgusting. By 14 years old I had read my Carries War and Goodnight Mr Toms to know how women drew lines down the backs of the legs during the war or made knickers from airmen's parachutes. I was very savvy to air raid romances and hairnet dramas during the Blitz.

Aunt Elizabeth just did not fit any of these characters. She was too prim, too bolt upright and just too old. The thought of her having a passionate embrace and clearly more than that then running away into the night for Ottawa was simply inconceivable. Aunt Elizabeth was the least passionate, most terrifying person I knew apart from the PE teacher so I struggled with this new vision of her the next time I saw her approach in the library.

Alone this time I slid into the New Fiction section like a ninja, hoping and praying to be inconspicuous and left alone. My back to the warm stifled room I stood lost in alphabetical browsing, flipping over dustjackets and thumbing yellowed pages contentedly.

Then, suddenly like a silent assassin I felt a bony hand on my shoulder and turning round I faced my high cheek-boned aunt with dread in my heart and horror on my face. Her eyebrows practically dancing before me she said my name like a cat making a mouse-belch and I stood rooted to the spot. I tried hard not to think about those dry lips puckering up or her puffy chiffon blouse being unbuttoned with abandon, but all the time my head was exploding with the good time harmonies of the Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy of Company B.

In that moment I knew I was incapable of speech, so teen-mumbled something incomprehensively and cowardly abandoning the reserved copy of Lady Chatterley's Lover I swiftly exited out into the rain.

Aunt Elizabeth died a few years later after this meeting, and when I heard the sad news, apart from the dancing eyebrows and the incongruity of her steamy past, I felt quite disappointed that I had never had the courage to ask her about her impossibly unbelievable maybe romantic, but incredibly old, secret life.