

Like most people I lived for a long time with my mother and father. My father liked to watch the wrestling, my mother liked to wrestle; it didn't matter what. She was in the white corner and that was that.

She hung out the largest sheets on the windiest days. She wanted the Mormons to knock on the door. At election time in a Labour mill town she put a picture of the Conservative candidate in the window.

She had never heard of mixed feelings. There were friends and there were enemies.

Enemies were:

The Devil (in his many forms)

Next Door

Sex (in its many forms)

Slugs

Friends were:

God

Our dog

Auntie Madge

The Novels of Charlotte Brontë

Slug pellets

and me, at first, I had been brought in to join her in a tag match against the Rest of the World. She had a mysterious attitude towards the begetting of children; it wasn't that she couldn't do it, more that she didn't want to do it. She was very bitter about the Virgin Mary getting there first. So she did the next best thing and arranged for a foundling. That was me.

I cannot recall a time when I did not know that I was special. We had no Wise Men because she didn't believe there were any wise men, but we had sheep. One of my earliest memories is me sitting on a sheep at Easter while she told me the story of the Sacrificial Lamb. We had it on Sundays with potato.

Sunday was the Lord's day, the most vigorous days of the whole week; we had a radiogram at home with an imposing mahogany front and a fat Bakelite knob to twiddle for the stations. Usually we listened to the Light Programme, but on Sundays always the World Service, so that my mother could record the progress of our missionaries. Our Missionary map was very fine. On the front were all the countries and on the back a number chart that told you about Tribes and their Peculiarities. My favourite was Number 16, The Buzule of Carpathian. They believed that if a mouse found your hair clippings and built a nest with them you got a headache. If the nest was big enough, you might go mad. As far as I knew no missionary had yet visited them.

My mother got up early on Sundays and allowed no one into the parlour until ten o'clock. It was her place of prayer and meditation. She always prayed standing up, because of her knees, just as Bonaparte always gave orders from his horse, because of his size. I do think that the relationship my mother enjoyed with God had a lot to do with positioning. She was Old Testament through and through. Not for her the meek and paschal Lamb, she was out there, up front with the prophets, and much given to sulking under trees when the appropriate destruction didn't materialise. Quite often it did, her will of the Lord's I can't say.

She always prayed in exactly the same way. First of all she thanked God that she had lived to see another day, and then she thanked God for sparing the world another day. Then she spoke of her enemies, which was the nearest thing she had to a catechism.

As soon as 'Vengeance is mine saith the Lord' boomed through the wall into the kitchen, I put the kettle on. The time it took to boil the water and brew the tea was just about the length of her final item, the sick list. She was very regular. I put the milk in, in she came, and taking a great gulp of tea said one of three things.

'The Lord is good' (steely-eyed into the back yard).

'What sort of tea is this?' (steely-eyed at me).

'Who was the oldest man in the Bible?'

No. 3 of course, had a number of variations, but it was always a Bible quiz question. We had a lot of Bible quizzes at church and my mother liked me to win. If I knew the answer she asked me another, if I didn't she got cross, but luckily not for long, because we had to listen to the World Service. It was always the same; we sat down on either side of the radiogram, she with her tea, me with a pad and pencil; in front of us, the Missionary Map. The faraway voice in the middle of the set gave news of activities, converts and problems. At the end there was an appeal for YOUR PRAYERS. I had to write it all down so that my mother could deliver her church report that night. She was the Missionary Secretary. The Missionary Report was a great trial to me because our mid-day meal depended upon it. If it went well, no deaths and lots of converts, my mother cooked a joint. If the Godless had proved not only stubborn, but murderous, my mother spent the rest of the morning listening to the Jim Reeves Devotional Selection, and we had to have boiled eggs and toast soldiers. Her husband was an easy-going man, but I knew it depressed him. He would have cooked it himself but for my mother's complete conviction that she was the only person in our house who would tell a saucepan from a piano. She was wrong, as far as we were concerned, but right as far as she was concerned, and really, that's what mattered.

Somehow we got through those mornings, and in the afternoon she and I took the dog for a walk, while my father cleaned all the shoes. 'You can tell someone by their shoes.' My mother said. 'Look at Next Door.'

'Drink,' said my mother grimly as we stepped out past the house. 'That's why they buy everything from Maxi Ball's Catalogue Seconds. The Devil himself is a drunk' (sometimes my mother invented theology).

Maxi Ball owned a warehouse, his clothes were cheap but they didn't last, and they smelt of industrial glue. The desperate, the careless, the poorest, vied with one another on a Saturday morning to pick up what they could, and haggle over the price. My mother would rather not eat than be seen at Maxi Ball's. She had filled me with a horror of the place. Since so many people we knew went there, it was hardly fair of her but she never was particularly fair; she loved and she hated, and she hated Maxi Ball. Once, in winter, she had been forced to go there to buy a corset and in the middle of communion, that very Sunday, a piece of whalebone slipped out and stabbed her right in the stomach. There was nothing she could do for an hour. When we got home she tore up the corset and used the whalebone as supports for our geraniums, except for one piece that she gave to me. I still have it, and whenever I'm tempted to cut corners I think about that whalebone and I know better.

My mother and I walked on towards the hill that stood at the top of our street. We lived in a town stolen from the valleys, a huddled place full of chimneys and little shops and back-to-back houses with no gardens, The hills surrounded us, and out own swept out into the Pennines, broken now and again with a farm or a relic from the war. There used to be a lot of old tanks but the council took them away. The town was a fat blot and the streets spread back from it into the green, steadily upwards. Our house was almost at the

top of a long, stretchy street. A flagged street with a cobbly road. When you climb to the top of the hill and look down you can see everything, just like Jesus on the pinnacle except it's not very tempting. Over to the right was the viaduct and behind the viaduct Ellison's tenement, where we had the fair once a year. I was allowed to go there on condition I brought back a tub of black peas for my mother. Black peas look like rabbit droppings and they come in a thin gravy made of stock and gypsy mush. They taste wonderful. The gypsies made a mess and stayed up all night and my mother called them fornicators but on the whole we got on very well. They turned a blind eye to toffee apples going missing, and sometimes, if it was quiet and you didn't have enough money, they still let you have a ride on the dodgems. We used to have fights round the caravans, the ones like me, from the street, against the posh ones from the Avenue. The posh ones went to Brownies and didn't stay for school dinners.

Once, when I was collecting the black peas, about to go home, the old woman got hold of my hand. I thought she was going to bite me. She looked at my palm and laughed a bit. 'You'll never marry,' she said, 'not you, and you'll never be still.' She didn't take any money for the peas, and she told me to run home fast. I ran and ran, trying to understand what she meant. I hadn't thought about getting married anyway. There were two women I knew who didn't have any husbands at all; they were old though, as old as my mother. They ran the paper shop and sometimes, on a Wednesday, they gave me a banana bar with my comic. I liked them a lot, and talked about them a lot to my mother. One day they asked me if I'd like to go to the seaside with them. I ran home, gabbled it out, and was busy emptying my money box to buy a new spade, when my mother said firmly and forever, no. I couldn't understand why not, and she wouldn't explain. She didn't even let me go back to say I couldn't. Then she cancelled my comic and told me to collect it from another shop, further away. I was sorry about that. I never got a banana bar from Grimsby's. A couple of weeks later I heard her telling Mrs White about it. She said they dealt in unnatural passions. I thought she meant they put chemicals in their sweets.