

Unintentional Hermits- Double Exposure

by verity healey

Don't stand so close she thought.

She could sense her proximity, the bottom edge of the newspaper scratching her skin like pin pricks on her conscience. Oh yes her conscience.

Why won't you sit down? her voice hitting the room like triangles and immediately felt sorry. She was angry, she'd intended to be gentle and kind but she was the opposite.

No, I'm fine here Isis, thank you.

Because she couldn't stand it, Isis moved to the end of the table. The mother spoke in that voice she used when she sensed disapproval - if Isis had to draw it, it would be a straight line and then climb at a steep angle, like a fighter pilot testing a new jet. Isis was jealous-how had her mother, who taken the brunt of so much violence, anger and aggression, managed to keep her integrity so intact, whilst she, Isis, younger, stronger, had none? Even so Isis detested the hint of self pity in her mother's voice.. it exasperated her, she hated that kind of emotional manipulation, she thought it small minded, weak, snidey...and she used these reasons as an excuse to not practise it herself, she didn't want to admit she didn't quite possess the intelligence or was too lazy to...

The mother continued to stand, marooned in her isolation and Isis' hostility in between table and bed and under the overhead which cast a blue tinge, she held the newspaper- The Daily Mail- which embarrassed Isis- aloft and at an angle, one leg positioned behind the other (to support the intellectual weight of the tabloid Isis supposed) assuming the Quatrieme Derriere as though she might

spring into an Arabesque or invite Isis to join in a Pas de deux. A Pirouette, Isis decided, would serve as an appropriate metaphor now. How was it that Isis, the one who felt cast upon, Isis whose heart had slowly contracted to resemble an old and shrivelled up fig at the verbal vomiting spewing out of her mother's mouth, was now suffering even more after venting - not even her own anger!- but only slight irritability, whereas the mother, whom she saw as the perpetrator of it all, stood aplomb and rock solid in herself, towering above Isis like a confident mountain with Isis crawling around at the bottom like a scrawny little ant?

I'm getting my shower, Said Isis.

She needed to break the mother's concentration, it annoyed her.

Right, Said the mother, not raising her eyes.

Look you've not touched any of your food!

The old woman's salty eyes took in the paltry spread which was a meagre salad, bread which Isis never bought and was the expensive kind and filled with sunflower seeds, chocolate cake - Isis wanted to please the mother. She had done her best, Isis could not normally afford an abundance of food but had rammed the fridge with different food stuffs for her mother's visit, she did not want to let on. She tried it now,

I've got eggs and bacon if you want, or I can rustle up a pasta.. Isis marvelled herself, she did rustle..

No, no, this will be fine thank you, the mother looking questioningly at Isis wondering what she was being accused of. The old woman was alone.

Isis felt it wasn't fine, she wanted to display her talents, she wanted to cook for her, she wanted approval in spite of her earlier sentiments. And the mother was denying her the opportunity.

She had sat down at last, sadly folding away the newspaper, throwing Isis a puzzled look- Why are you angry with me? but Isis escaped to the shower, of which she was also ashamed and dreaded her mother seeing. So many things to make her ashamed she thought! Like she was secretly ashamed of the front of the falling down house, the weeds and ankle deep rubbish which the mother commented on with a sniff.

This is how it always went... the anticipation of the mother's visit, the premeditated sense of excitement, relief (for Isis was lonely because she was silent and her mother was the only person who accepted her) and the hope- oh the glorious hope that the two would spend a couple of peaceful and satisfactory days roaming London's art galleries, its street markets, visiting the old cathedrals for Evensong, drinking in the pubs at midday (the mother did not drink but Isis did and more these days to help her deal with the demands made by the company of others). She imagined, dreamily in bed the night before, revealing one by one London's exquisite jewels as if unveiling My Last Duchess, as if she were somehow their sole curator, of dining in expensive restaurants, dressing in fine clothes and of long familiar talks over Irish Coffees in front of a blazing fire somewhere.

These delusions were dispelled first by the weather- the day dawned and coughed up snow and lots of it, and by the mother herself, who got off the train white and withdrawn, answering questions from the daughter in monosyllables and in a monotone, her energy slinking through her feet like a sly cat shimmying apologetically down a wall, she looked angrily at Isis, refused or could not return the expected hug... Isis thought again she was not wanted.

Soon the two sat in a dismal cafe in silence- when Isis' mother said coffee she meant a quick 10 minutes in which she could ask the daughter how things were- get it over with thought the daughter meanly- then a brief chat about how the day will pan out and then that was it, knocking back the caffeine, the cups always half finished, there was no time and into the humdrum of life and civvy street. Isis was feeling short changed already, still she walked

on the streets with a swagger, she felt the need to protect this little provincial woman whose eyes, ears and mouth gawped at London life. But on the way home- it was only 30 minutes but the journey elongated into a long grey slushy drawl after the snow cancelled train after train and Isis, wanting to do well, made several judgemental errors about which bus or station to trawl her mother through (Isis was sure she was laughing at her- I thought you knew London)- there was the torrential expected outpouring of words slipping from the mother's mouth, burning Isis and spearing her heart as if she were self harming with the end of a cigarette butt or piece of hot coal so that Isis wanted to cry out, stop, stop..

He won't Isis, Said the mother, It's getting me down I think I'm feeling a bit depressed. The other day he was like a dog with a bone..Have you re potted the tomato plants like I told you Yes I re potted them the other day Mike, you saw me... I didn't see you You did, I did not well come and look if you don't believe me then... Well I never saw you, when did you do that you sly little cow... that's what he called me. Well he'd been drinking and back from the pub, he was in a funny mood. Or even last night it was, where's my spectacles, you've moved them somewhere haven't you and I said I haven't Mike, they're on the kitchen table, no they're not, where are they, you've done this on purpose I haven't Mike, they are on the kitchen table Don't shout, why are you shouting Well you're shouting at me Mike, go and look on the kitchen table and were they there, yes they were and blow me, if he didn't come back and say I'd still done it on purpose and then he slammed out and went off in the car somewhere for 2 hours and he was supposed to meet Reverend- what's his name over Mass and anyway he was ringing because he hadn't turned up and of course he hadn't taken his mobile with him. I mean I thought is he going to kill himself, are the police going to come knocking on the door or what? I can't do anything right can I? I'm sick of it sick of it.

Yes, Was all that Isis felt she could mutter (she was sight reading this little monologue) but she wanted to scream, to stand on the street and scream.

Isis badly wanted to be like her Egyptian Goddess namesake but found herself consistently failing throughout her life. She wouldn't even make a reasonable magician. She felt pity for her mother but it was hugely disproportionate to the anger and exasperation gushing up in her -for the mother repeated the same old story year after year and Isis was drowning in its ugliness, its cynicism, it made her want to kill herself. Isis walked faster, too fast for the mother, it gave her satisfaction to see her left behind and stumbling to catch up, she ignored the fleeting look of sadness imprinted on her face, and the garbled repetitive question,

Are we going the right way Isis, are we right now?

This isn't how I want to be Mother! She wanted to shout, It isn't!

How had the day turned so suddenly. The water was hot at least, Isis wondered if it could warm up her heart. The look on her mother's face as she walked too fast. What was it? Confusion, puzzlement, hurt, especially when the mother understood Isis was angry. Then she was vulnerable but only for a second. So the day went from bad to worse. They visited the street market only to find it had been cancelled (if Isis had bothered to check the website she would have known this) they stood forlorn and wet under trembling umbrellas whilst Isis thought desperately where to go- her brain turned to mush when put on the spot and anyway she didn't really know London as well as she could. The snow abating and the mother wanting to walk meant they ended up wandering through Southwark, pausing at the cathedral, stopping at a drafty pub filled with cockney builders perfumed with the sharp stale vinegary smell of alcohol which Isis so detested (it made one cold somehow, even in summer), before ending up at the Tate Modern in yet another coffee shop. Isis was calmer, her mother's rant was long ago and she had

had a drink to help her along- she allowed herself to look at her mother, as she habitually did now, for any outward signs of dementia or other illnesses- other than Mike there was no one else to notice the old woman. But apart from the slight trembling in one hand and the lower lip- which still upset Isis even though she was used to it now, there was nothing, her mother seemed the picture of health, she wasn't losing her hair, she had flesh, she dressed well, she was satisfied.

With a shock which burned cold her stomach, she realised the mother's eyes were on her, she saw the quick look and disappointed turn of the head and knew..

I wish you'd tidy yourself up more.

Ah the familiar words again, familiarity makes for love.

What's wrong with me? Trying to be bold.

I mean I'm not surprised you can't get a boyfriend or a good job when you dress like that. And you need your hair cutting.

Once Isis would have offered resistance, but not now. Partly to spare her mother her own violence, partly to avoid feeling unloved and partly to try and snuff out the sense of embarrassment and failure because her mother still talked to her in this way. It was as though there was nothing womanly in Isis that the mother could respect and be afraid of. Back came the screams in her mind, oh if only the mother, watching nice families out for tea in the Tate, could hear the expletives levelled against her in her daughter's heart! Isis' reaction, caught between her anger and the need to protect her mother from that anger forced her into a deep and hostile silence but which did not prevent her from slamming doors when they got home, or wordlessly banging down the dinner plates, talking to the mother only when she was forced to and then in curt short replies. She knew the mother was hurt and wondering but couldn't stop herself.

Serves her right, Isis was unrepentant as she dried herself roughly, I don't care, she shouldn't go on at me like that.

But when Isis opened the door, entering nervously the presence of the mother so hugely filling the daughter's private space they caught each other at the same moment and Isis saw sadness deepening the mother's wrinkles, the eyes narrow with fear- it was the fear that got her- and yet at the same time, love- there was love in the way the mother looked at Isis nervously, hopefully yet with terror. .

Alright then?

Alright.

Isis found herself kneeling at her mother's feet and hugged her.

Come on, it's just been a hard day that's all.

Yes OK Isis, Said the mother

but Isis felt her arms around her shoulders and she knew actions spoke louder than words and that everything was alright. There was still the next day to get through, but it would be better.

