

A CHILD'S VIEW OF CARE IN THE COMMUNITY

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Mama was rummaging about in what we called the Bike Shed, one of two small outhouses at the end of our backyard, the other outhouse being our toilet. We'd never had a bike between us, unless you counted my three-wheeler tricycle which was one of a number of play items discarded amongst the old newspapers, gardening tools, and bulk-bought tins of tomatoes and Cresta fizzy drinks. Of course, this shed should have really been called the bathroom, because it was where we filled an old yellow-plastic tub with pans of hot water from the kitchen and had a hurried scrub before frostbite set in, but my mother would have cut out her tongue rather than give it its real, shameful name.

'Found it, Mrs Worrall!' she shouted from inside the shed. Mrs Worrall, with whom she shared adjoining, undivided backyards, stood in her uniform of flowery dress and pinny on her step. She had a face like a friendly potato with a sparse tuft of grey hair on top, and round John Lennon glasses, way before they became fashionable, obviously. She moved like she was underwater, slow, deliberate yet curiously graceful steps, and frightened most of the neighbours off with her rasping voice and deadpan, unimpressed face. She did not smile often, and when she did you wished she hadn't bothered as she revealed tombstone teeth stained bright yellow with nicotine. But she loved me, I knew it; she'd only have to hear my voice and she'd lumber out into the yard to catch me, often not speaking, but would just nod, satisfied I was alive and functioning, her eyes impassive behind her thick lenses.

She would listen, apparently enthralled, to my mother's occasional reports on my progress at school, take my homework books carefully in her huge slabs of hands and turn the pages slowly, nodding wisely at the cack-handed drawings and uneven writing. Every evening, when she came to pick up our copy of the *Express and Star* once my papa had finished reading it (an arrangement devised by my mother, 'Why should the poor lady have to spend her pension when she can read ours?'), she'd always check up on me, what I was doing, whether I was in my pyjamas yet, whether I was mentally and physically prepared to retire for the night. At least, that's what I read in her eyes, for she never spoke. Just that quick glance up and down, a slight incline of the head, a satisfied exhalation.

I wondered if she was like Mrs Christmas, childless, and maybe that was why she was so protective of me. But mama told me, with a snort of disgust, that she had three grown-up sons and a few grandchildren also. 'But I've never seen them! Do they live far away?' I persisted.

'Oh yes, very far. Wolverhampton!' she quipped back.

It had seemed quite a long way to me when we had driven there for my birthday treat, but I guessed by my mother's flaring nostrils and exaggerated eyebrow movements that she was being ironic, the way Indians are ironic, signposting the joke with a map and compass to the punchline.

'But why don't they come and see her then?'

My mother sighed and ruffled my hair. 'I will never understand this about the English, all this puffing up about being civilised with their cucumber sandwiches and cradle of democracy big talk, and then they turn round and kick their elders in the backside, all this It's My Life, I Want My Space stupidity. You Can't Tell Me What To Do cheekiness, I Have To Go To Bingo selfishness and You Kids Eat Crisps Instead Of Hot Food nonsense. What is this My Life business, anyway? We all have obligations, no one is born on their own, are they?'

She was into one of her Capital Letter speeches, the subtext of which was listen, learn and don't you dare do any of this when you grow up, missy. I quite enjoyed them. They made me feel special, as if our destiny, our legacy, was a much more interesting journey than the apparent dead ends facing our neighbours. I just wished whatever my destiny was would hurry up and introduce itself to me so I could take it by its jewelled hand and fly.

She paused for oxygen. 'I mean, Mrs Worrall is their mother, the woman who gave them life. And she on her own with Mr Worrall, too. I tell you, if my mother was so close, I would walk in my bare feet to see her every day. Every day.'

She turned away then, not trusting herself to say anything more. There was still something else I wanted to ask but I knew it would have to wait. I had grown up with Mrs Worrall, I had seen her every day of my life, but I had never seen or heard Mr Worrall. Ever.

My mother emerged from the shed holding aloft an old dusty glass vase

which she blew on, and then scuffed with the sleeve of her shirt before handing it to Mrs Worrall who took it with a pleased grunt. 'Please, Mrs Worrall, have it. We never use it.'

Mrs Worrall nodded again and cleared her throat. 'He knocked mine over. I was in the way, in front of the telly. *Crossroads*. He likes that Amy Turtle. So he got a bit upset, see.'

Mama nodded sympathetically. 'How is he nowadays?'

Mrs Worrall shrugged, she did not need to say, same as always, and went back inside her kitchen.

'Mum, I'm starved, I am,' I wheedled. 'Give me something now.'

She busied herself with shutting the shed door, not looking at me, her face drawn tight like a cat's arse. 'There's rice and daal inside. Go and wash your hands.'

'I don't want that ... that stuff! I want fishfingers! Fried! And chips! Why can't I eat what I want to eat?'

Mama turned to me, she had her teacher's face on, long suffering, beseeching, but still immovable. She said gently, 'Why did you take money for sweets? Why did you lie to papa?'

'I didn't,' I said automatically, blind to logic, to the inevitable fact that my crime had already been fretfully discussed while I'd been having the best day of my life being Anita flutter's new friend.

'So now you are saying papa is a liar also? Is that it?'

I pretended to take a great interest in a mossy crack in the yard concrete, running my sandal along it, deliberately scuffing the leather. I knew how I looked, pouring, defiant in the face of defeat, sad and silly, but I could not apologise. I have still never been able to say sorry without wanting to swallow the words as they sit on my tongue.

Mama knelt down on the hard floor and cupped my face in her hands, forcing me to look into her eyes. Those eyes, those endless mud brown pools of sticky, bottomless love. I shook with how powerful I suddenly felt; I knew that with a few simple words I could wipe away every trace of guilt and concern ebbing across her face, that if I could admit what I had done, I could banish my parents' looming unspoken fear that their only child was turning out to be a social deviant. 'I did not lie,' I said evenly, embracing my newly-born status as a deeply disturbed fantasist with a frisson that felt like pride.

After my mother had retreated back into the kitchen, Mrs Worrall came out and stood in her doorway, wiping her large floury hands on her front, watching me kick mossy scabs across the yard. 'Come and give us a hand, Meena,' she said finally. I hesitated at the back door; I'd seen glimpses of her kitchen practically every day, I knew the cupboards on the wall were faded yellow, the lino was blue with black squares on it and the sink was under the window, like in our house. But I'd never actually been inside, and as I stepped in, I had a weird feeling that I was entering Dr Who's Tardis. It was much bigger than I had imagined, or it seemed so because

there was none of the clutter that took up every available inch of space in our kitchen.

My mother would right now be standing in a haze of spicy steam, crowded by huge bubbling saucepans where onions and tomatoes simmered and spat, molehills of chopped vegetables and fresh herbs jostling for space with bitter, bright heaps of turmeric, masala, cumin and coarse black pepper whilst a softly breathing mound of dough would be waiting in a china bowl, ready to be divided and flattened into round, grainy chapatti. And she, sweaty and absorbed, would move from one chaotic work surface to another, preparing the fresh, home-made meal that my father expected, needed like air, after a day at the office about which he never talked.

From the moment mama stepped in from her teaching job, swapping saris for M & S separates, she was in that kitchen; it would never occur to her, at least not for many years, to suggest instant or take-away food which would give her a precious few hours to sit, think, smell the roses - that would be tantamount to spouse abuse. This food was not just something to fill a hole, it was soul food, it was the food their far-away mothers made and came seasoned with memory and longing, this was the nearest they would get for many years, to home.

So far, I had resisted all my mother's attempts to teach me the rudiments of Indian cuisine; she'd often pull me in from the yard and ask me to stand with her while she prepared a simple *sabzi* or rolled out a chapatti before making it dance and blow out over a naked gas flame. 'Just watch, it is so easy, beti,' she'd say encouragingly. I did not see what was easy about peeling, grinding, kneading and burning your fingers in this culinary Turkish bath, only to present your masterpiece and have my father wolf it down in ten minutes flat in front of the nine o'clock news whilst sitting cross-legged on the floor surrounded by spread sheets from yesterday's *Daily Telegraph*.

Once, she made the fatal mistake of saying, 'You are going to have to learn to cook if you want to get married, aren't you?'

I reeled back, horrified, and vowed if I ended up with someone who made me go through all that, I would poison the bastard immediately. My mother must have cottoned on; she would not mention marriage again for another fifteen years.

'Shut the door then,' said Mrs Worrall, who swayed over to the only bit of work surface that was occupied, where a lump of pastry dough sat in a small well of white flour. Otherwise, all was bare and neat, no visible evidence of food activity here save a half-packet of lemon puffs sitting on the window sill.

'What you making?' I asked, peering under her massive arm.

'Jam tarts. Mr Worrall loves a good tart. Mind out.'

She bent down with difficulty and opened the oven door, a blast of warm air hit my legs and I jumped back.

'What's that?'

'What yow on about? It's the oven.'

I'd never seen my mother use our oven, I thought it was a storage space for pans and her griddle on which she made chapatti. Punjabis and baking don't go together, I've since discovered. It's too easy, I suppose, not enough angst and sweat in putting a cake in the oven and taking it out half an hour later.

'Yow ever made pastry?' I shook my head. I'd always wondered what the crispy stuff on the bottom of jam tarts was, and here was Mrs Worrall making it in her own home. I was well impressed. 'Hee-y'aar,' said Mrs Worrall, putting a small bowl in front of me in which she poured a little flour and placed a knob of lemony butter. 'Always keep your fingers cold. That's the secret. Now rub your fingers together ... slowly. You wanna end up with breadcrumbs...' I squeezed the butter, feeling it squash then break against my fingers, and started to press and pummel it into the flour like I'd seen mama do with the chapatti dough.

'No! Too hard! It'll stick! Gently, dead gentle...' I slowed down, tried to concentrate on feeling each grain of flour, made my fingers move like clouds, and saw a tiny pile of breadcrumbs begin forming at the bottom of the bowl.

'I'm doing it! Look! Pastry!'

Mrs Worrall grunted. 'Not yet, it ain't...'

She left me to it whilst she quickly rolled out the large lump of pastry into an oval and pressed a cutter over its surface, slipping the tart cases into a large tin tray. Her fingers moved swiftly and lightly, as if they did not belong to those flapping meaty arms. She then took my bowl off me and stared at the contents critically. 'Not bad. Now binding. Use warm water, not cold. But the fork has to be like ice, see...'

She poured in a little liquid from a steel, flame-blackened kettle and handed me a fork from a pan of cold water in the sink. I pressed the crumbs together, watching them swell and cling to each other, until they gradually became a doughy mass.

'It's like magic, innit?'

'No. Your mum does that,' she said. 'This is your one. Alright?'

I nodded, and she quickly rolled out my dough, which I noticed stuck to the rolling pin much more than hers, cut out a small shape and placed it onto the tray before shoving the whole thing in the oven.

[...]

'Can I have lemon curd in my one, Mrs Worrall?' I jabbered, eager to distract her. She did not answer but wiped her hands on her pinafore and said, 'Come and say hello to Mr Worrall.' She opened the door leading into the sitting room and I blinked rapidly, trying to adjust my eyes to the gloom. The curtains were drawn, split by a bar of red sunset light where they did not quite meet, and the small black and white television set sitting

on the dining table was on full volume. *Opportunity Knocks* was on, one of my very favourite programmes where ordinary people who felt they had a great untapped talent could try their luck at singing, impressions, unicycling whilst juggling hatchets, whatever, and if the great British public voted them the best of the acts, could return again and again every week, gathering more acclaim, accolades and possibly bookings at dizzying venues like the Wolverhampton Grand until they were finally knocked off first place by the new young pretender to the variety throne. The unicyclist is dead, long live the fat man from Barnet doing Harold Wilson impressions!

From the first time I watched that show, I knew that this could be my most realistic escape route from Tollington, from ordinary girl to major personality in one easy step. But I'd never seen anyone who wasn't white on the show, not so far, and was worried that might count against me. Hughie Green was doing his famous one-eye-open, one-eyebrow-cocked look right down the camera and he announced, 'Let's see how our musical muscle man, Tony Holland, does on our clapometer!' An oiled, bulging bloke in micro swimming trunks appeared briefly and rippled his belly muscles into animal shapes as the audience whooped and hollered and the clapometer began at fifty and rose and rose, climbing slowly along until it nudged ninety and there were beads of sweat forming on Tony's undulating diaphragm.

Mrs Worrall suddenly switched the TV off and another wail of protest came from a far dark corner. 'Later. Say hello to Mrs K's littl'un first, eh?' She pushed me forward and I suddenly became aware of the smell of the room which seemed to be at one with the gloom, the smell of a sick room, unaired and lonely, of damp pyjamas steaming, sticky-sided medicine bottles, spilled tinned soup and disinfectant under which there hovered the clinging tang of old, dried-in pee. A shape took form before me, thin useless legs in clean striped pyjamas, the toes curled and turned inwards, passive hands with fingers rigid and frozen as claws, a sunken chest making a bowed tent of the pyjama top, and finally Mr Worrall's face, wide blue-blue staring eyes and a mouth permanently open, asking for something, wanting to talk, with the bewildered, demanding expression of an unjustly punished child.

Mr Worrall moaned loudly again, nodding his head vigorously, a few drops of spit fell onto his chin which Mrs Worrall expertly wiped away with her pinafore hem. She took up his hand and placed it on mine, his fingers seemed to rustle like dry twigs but, amazingly, I could feel the pump and surge of his heartbeat throbbing through his palm. I wanted to pull my hand away but I looked up to see Mrs Worrall's eyes glittering behind their bottle bottom frames. 'Hello Mr Worrall,' I said faintly. Mr Worrall jerked his head back violently and gave a yelp. 'He likes you,' Mrs Worrall said, the glimmer of a smile playing round her mouth, 'It was the shells. In the war. He got too close. He was always a nosey bugger.'

I felt it was maybe alright to pull my hand away now, and I carefully

replaced his back onto his lap, like replacing a brittle ornament after dusting. Mr Worrall jerked forward, I felt his breath on my face, it was surprisingly sweet-smelling, like aniseed, like Misty's warm steamy mouth used to smell. 'That's enough now,' said Mrs Worrall, pushing him back into his chair and gathering his blanket around his knees. 'It's nearly time for your wash. You want a wash, eh?' Mr Worrall seemed tall, even sitting down. He must have been over six foot before the shells got him. Now I knew two war veterans, him and Anita's dad. I felt annoyed that my papa had not done anything as remotely exciting or dangerous in his youth, or if he had he'd kept it quiet.

'How do you get Mr Worrall upstairs? Have you got a lift or something?' I asked as she busied herself with removing his socks. 'Ooh, we never use the upstairs, do we? No. Not been up there for twenty-two years.' My gaze travelled to the small door leading onto the stairs, the same as in our house, which fooled people into thinking there was another bigger room leading off from the lounge. It was padlocked from the outside, its hinges rusted.

All this time when I had run up and down our landing and imagined the Worralls ambling about on the other side of the wall, tutting about the noise, our adjoining bookends, I had never realised that next door were empty rooms, cobweb-filled, echoing, unused rooms. I felt queasy, my hunger had become nausea; Mrs Worrall was attempting to kneel, her fat knees cracking, and I suddenly saw what the last twenty-two years of her life must have been, this endless uncomplaining attendance of a broken, unresponsive body, the wiping of spittle and shit, the back-breaking tugging and loading and pulling and carrying, all the nights in front of the television whilst the Deirdre Rutters and the Gilenys Lowbridges were putting on lipstick and waltzing off to pubs and bingo and dances and Mrs Worrell's big treat was an extra lemon puff in front of *Crossroads*, whilst her husband dozed off.

Not all the English were selfish, like mama sometimes said, but then again, I did not think of Mrs Worrall as English. She was a symbol of something I'd noticed in some of the Tollington women, a stoic muscular resistance which made them ask for nothing and expect less, the same resignation I heard in the voices of my Aunties when they spoke of back home or their children's bad manners or the wearying monotony of their jobs. My Aunties did not rage against fate or England when they swapped misery tales, they put everything down to the will of Bhagwan, their karma, their just desserts inherited from their last reincarnation which they had to live through and solve with grace and dignity. In the end, they knew God was on their side; I got the feeling that most of the Tollington women assumed that He had simply forgotten them.

'I've got to go,' I mumbled, backing away on Bambi legs, 'Mum's waiting...'

Mrs Worrall wordlessly helped me into the kitchen which now smelt

like a bakery, yeasty and welcoming and warm. She retrieved the metal tray from the oven on which stood ten perfect tartlets and one which resembled a relief map of Africa. Nevertheless, she filled it with lemon curd from a twist-top jar, and threw in another two tarts for mama and papa, warning me, 'Wait a minute, or that curd'll tek the skin off yer tongue.'

I carried the three trophies on a napkin carefully to the door, and then paused to call out, 'Bye Mr Worrall!!' as cheerily as I could manage. I did not expect an answer but I felt Mrs Worrall's eyes gently guide me to my back door.