

## Case History No. 1 1970

## Family Plot

HOW LUCKY WERE THEY? A HEAT WAVE IN THE MIDDLE of the school holidays, exactly where it belonged. Every morning the sun was up long before they were, making a mockery of the flimsy summer curtains that hung limply at their bedroom windows, a sun already hot and sticky with promise before Olivia even opened her eyes. Olivia, as reliable as a rooster, always the first to wake, so that no one in the house had bothered with an alarm clock since she was born three years ago.

Olivia, the youngest and therefore the one currently sleeping in the small back bedroom with the nursery-rhyme wallpaper, a room that all of them had occupied and been ousted from in turn. Olivia, as cute as a button, they were all agreed, even Julia who had taken a long time to get over being displaced as the baby of the family, a position she had occupied for five satisfying years before Olivia came along.

Rosemary, their mother, said that she wished Olivia could stay at this age for ever because she was so lovable. They had never heard her use that word to describe any of them. They had not even realized that such a word existed in her vocabulary, which was usually restricted to tedious commands – come here, go away, be quiet, and – most frequent of all – stop that. Sometimes she would walk into a room or appear in the garden, glare at them and say, whatever it is you're doing, don't, and then simply walk away again, leaving them feeling aggrieved and badly done by, even when caught red-handed in the middle of some piece of mischief – devised by Sylvia usually.

Their capacity for wrongdoing, especially under Sylvia's reckless leadership, was apparently limitless. The eldest three were (everyone agreed) 'a handful', too close together in age to be distinguishable to their mother so that they had evolved into a collective child to which she found it hard to attribute individual details and which she addressed at random – Julia-Sylvia-Amelia-whoever you are – said in an exasperated tone as if it was their fault there were so many of them. Olivia was usually excluded from this weary litany; Rosemary never seemed to get her mixed up with the rest of them.

They had supposed Olivia would be the last to occupy the small back bedroom and that one day the nursery-rhyme wallpaper would finally be scraped off (by their harassed mother because their father said hiring a professional decorator was a waste of money) and be replaced by something more grown-up – flowers or perhaps ponies, although anything would be better than the Elastoplast pink adorning the room that Julia and Amelia shared, a colour that had looked so promising to the two of them on the paint chart and proved so alarming on the walls and which their mother said she didn't have the time or money (or energy) to replace.

Now it transpired that Olivia was going to be undertaking the same rite of passage as her older sisters, leaving behind the – rather badly aligned – Humpty-Dumpty and Little

Miss Muffets to make way for an afterthought whose advent had been announced, in a rather offhand way, by Rosemary the previous day as she dished out a makeshift lunch of corned-beef sandwiches and orange squash on the lawn.

'Wasn't Olivia the afterthought?' Sylvia said to no one in particular, and Rosemary frowned at her eldest daughter as if she had just noticed her for the first time. Sylvia, thirteen and until recently an enthusiastic child (many people would have said overenthusiastic), promised to be a mordant cynic in her teenage years. Gawky, bespectacled Sylvia, her teeth recently caged in ugly orthodontic braces, had greasy hair, a hooting laugh and the long, thin fingers and toes of a creature from outer space. Well-meaning people called her an 'ugly duckling' (said to her face, as if it was a compliment, which was certainly not how it was taken by Sylvia), imagining a future Sylvia casting off her braces, acquiring contact lenses and a bosom, and blossoming into a swan. Rosemary did not see the swan in Sylvia, especially when she had a shred of corned beef stuck in her braces. Sylvia had recently developed an unhealthy obsession with religion, claiming that God had spoken to her. Rosemary wondered if it was a normal phase that adolescent girls went through, if God was merely an alternative to pop stars or ponies. Rosemary decided it was best to ignore Sylvia's tête-à-têtes with the Almighty. And at least conversations with God were free, whereas the upkeep on a pony would have cost a fortune.

And the peculiar fainting fits that their GP said were on account of Sylvia 'outgrowing her strength' – a medically dubious explanation if ever there was one (in Rosemary's opinion). Rosemary decided to ignore the fainting fits as well. They were probably just Sylvia's way of getting attention.

Rosemary married their father Victor when she was eighteen years old – only five years older than Sylvia was now. The idea that Sylvia might be grown-up enough in five years' time to marry anyone struck Rosemary as ridiculous and reinforced her belief that her own parents should have stepped in and stopped her marrying Victor, should have pointed out that she was a mere child and he was a thirty-six-year-old man. She often found herself wanting to remonstrate with her mother and father about their lack of parental care, but her mother had succumbed to stomach cancer not long after Amelia was born and her father had remarried and moved to Ipswich, where he spent most of his days in the bookies and all of his evenings in the pub.

If, in five years' time, Sylvia brought home a thirty-six-year-old, cradle-snatching fiancé (particularly if he claimed to be a great mathematician) then Rosemary thought she would probably cut his heart out with the carving knife. This thought was so agreeable that the afterthought's annunciation was temporarily forgotten and Rosemary allowed them all to run out to the ice-cream van when it declared its own melodic arrival in the street.

The Sylvia-Amelia-Julia trio knew that there was no such thing as an afterthought and the 'foetus', as Sylvia insisted on calling it (she was keen on science subjects), that was making their mother so irritable and lethargic was probably their father's last-ditch attempt to acquire a son. He was not a father who doted on daughters, he showed no real fondness for any of them, only Sylvia occasionally winning his respect because she was 'good at maths'. Victor was a mathematician and lived a rarefied life of the mind where his family were allowed no trespass. This was made easy by the fact that he spent hardly any time with them: he was either in the department or in his rooms in college and when he was home he shut himself in his study, occasionally with his students but usually on his own. Their father had never taken them to the open-air pool on Jesus Green, played rousing games of Snap or Donkey, never tossed them in the air

and caught them or pushed them on a swing, had never taken them punting on the river or walking on the Fens or on educational trips to the Fitzwilliam. More like an absence than a presence, everything he was – and was not – was represented by the sacrosanct space of his study.

They would have been surprised to know that the study had once been a bright parlour with a view of the back garden, a room where previous occupants of the house had enjoyed pleasant breakfasts, where women had whiled away the afternoons with sewing and romantic novels, and where in the evenings the family had gathered to play cribbage or Scrabble while listening to a radio play. All of these activities had been envisaged by a newly married Rosemary when the house was first bought – in 1956, at a price way beyond their budget – but Victor immediately claimed the room as his own and somehow managed to transform it into a sunless place, crammed with heavy bookshelves and ugly oak filing cabinets, and reeking of the untipped Capstans that he smoked. The loss of the room was as nothing to the loss of the way of life that Rosemary had planned to fill it with.

What he actually did in there was a mystery to all of them. Something so important, apparently, that his home life was trifling in comparison. Their mother said he was a great mathematician, at work on a piece of research that would one day make him famous, yet on the rare occasions when the study door was left open and they caught a glimpse of their father at work, all he seemed to be doing was sitting at his desk, scowling into empty space.

He was not to be disturbed when he was working, especially not by shrieking, screaming, savage little girls. The complete inability of those same savage little girls to abstain from the shrieking and the screaming (not to mention the yelling, the blubbing, and the strange howling like a pack of wolves that Victor had never managed to fathom) made for a fragile relationship between father and daughters.

Rosemary's chastisements may have washed over them like water but the sight of Victor lumbering out of his study, roused like a bear from hibernation, was strangely terrifying and although they spent their lives challenging all that was outlawed by their mother, they never once thought of exploring the forbidden interior of the study. The only time they were ushered into the gloomy depths of Victor's den was for help with their maths homework. This wasn't so bad for Sylvia, who had a fighting chance of understanding the greasy pencil marks with which an impatient Victor covered endless pages of ruled paper, but as far as Julia and Amelia were concerned Victor's signs and symbols were as mysterious as ancient hieroglyphs. If they thought of the study at all, which they tried not to, they thought of it as a torture chamber. Victor blamed Rosemary for their innumeracy – it was clearly their mother's deficient female brain they had inherited.

Victor's own mother, Ellen, had lent a sweet and balmy presence to his early infancy before being taken off to a lunatic asylum in 1924. Victor was only four at the time and it was judged better for him not to visit his mother in such disturbing quarters, with the result that he grew up imagining her as a raving madwoman of the Victorian variety – long white nightdress and wild hair, roaming the corridors of the asylum at night, prattling nonsense like a child – and it was only much later in his life that he discovered that his mother had not 'gone insane' (the family's term for it) but had suffered a severe post-partum depression after giving birth to a stillborn baby and neither raved nor prattled but lived sadly and solitarily in a room decorated with photographs of Victor, until she died of tuberculosis when Victor was ten.

Oswald, Victor's father, had packed his son off to boarding school by then and when

Oswald himself died, accidentally falling into the freezing waters of the Southern Ocean, Victor received the news calmly and returned to the particularly difficult mathematical puzzle he had been working on.

Before the war, Victor's father had been that most arcane and useless of English creatures, a polar explorer, and Victor was rather glad that he would no longer have to live up to the heroic image of Oswald Land and could become great in his own, less valiant, field.

Victor met Rosemary when he had to go to the casualty department at Addenbrooke's, where she was a student nurse. He had tripped down some steps and fallen awkwardly on his wrist but he told Rosemary that he'd been on his bike when he was 'cut up' by a car on the Newmarket Road. 'Cut up' sounded good to his ears, it was a phrase from a masculine world he'd never managed to inhabit successfully (the world of his father), and 'the Newmarket Road' implied (untruthfully) that he didn't spend his whole life cloistered in the limited area between St John's and the maths department.

If it hadn't been for this chance hospital encounter, accidental in all senses, Victor might never have courted a girl. He already felt well on his way to middle age and his social life was still limited to the chess club. Victor didn't really feel the need for another person in his life, in fact he found the concept of 'sharing' a life bizarre. He had mathematics, which filled up his time almost completely, so he wasn't entirely sure what he wanted with a wife. Women seemed to him to be in possession of all kinds of undesirable properties, chiefly madness, but also a multiplicity of physical drawbacks – blood, sex, children – which were unsettling and other. Yet something in him yearned to be surrounded by the kind of activity and warmth so missing in his own childhood, which was how, before he even knew what had happened, like opening the door to the wrong room, he found himself taking tea in a cottage in rural Norfolk while Rosemary shyly displayed a (rather cheap) diamond-chip engagement ring to her parents.

Apart from her father's whiskey bedtime benedictions, Victor was the first man Rosemary had ever been kissed by (albeit awkwardly, lunging at her like an elephant seal). Rosemary's father, a railway signalman, and her mother, a housewife, were startled when she brought Victor home to meet them. They were awed by his undoubted intellectual credentials (the black-rimmed spectacles, the shabby sports jacket, the air of permanent distraction), and the possibility that he might even be a bona fide genius (a possibility not exactly refuted by Victor), not to mention the fact that he had chosen their daughter – a quiet and easily influenced girl, hitherto overlooked by almost everyone – to be his helpmeet.

The fact that he was twice Rosemary's age didn't seem to worry them at all, although later, when the happy couple had departed, Rosemary's father, a manly type of man, did point out to his wife that Victor was not 'a great physical specimen'. Rosemary's mother's only reservation, however, was that although Victor was a doctor he seemed to have trouble giving her any advice about the stomach pains that she was a martyr to. Cornered at a tea table covered with a Maltese lace cloth and loaded with macaroons, Devon scones and seed cake, Victor finally confirmed, 'Indigestion, I expect, Mrs Vane,' a misdiagnosis that she accepted with relief.

Olivia opened her eyes and stared contentedly at the nursery-rhyme wallpaper. Jack and Jill toiled endlessly up the hill, Jill carrying a wooden bucket for the well she was destined never to reach, while elsewhere on the same hillside Little Bo-Peep was searching for her lost sheep. Olivia wasn't too worried about the fate of the flock because

she could see a pretty lamb with a blue ribbon round its neck, hiding behind a hedge. Olivia didn't really understand the afterthought but she would have welcomed a baby. She liked babies and animals better than anything. She could feel the weight of Rascal, the family terrier, near her feet. It was absolutely forbidden for Rascal to sleep in the bedrooms but every night one or other of them smuggled him into their room, although by morning he had usually found his own way to Olivia.

Olivia shook Blue Mouse gently to wake him up. Blue Mouse was a limp and lanky animal made from towelling. He was Olivia's oracle and she consulted him at all times on all subjects.

A bright slice of sunlight moved slowly across the wall and when it reached the lamb hiding behind the hedge Olivia climbed out of bed and pushed her feet obediently into her small slippers, pink with rabbit faces and rabbit ears, and much coveted by Julia. None of the others bothered with their slippers and now it was so hot Rosemary couldn't even get them to wear shoes, but Olivia was a biddable child.

Rosemary, lying in her own bed, awake, but with limbs that she could barely move, as if the marrow in her bones had turned to lead piping, was at that very moment trying to devise a plan that would stop the other three corrupting Olivia's good behaviour. The new baby was making Rosemary feel sick and she thought how wonderful it would be if Victor suddenly woke from his snore-laden sleep and said to her, 'Can I get you something, dear?' and she would say, 'Oh, yes, please, I would like some tea – no milk – and a slice of toast, lightly buttered, thank you, Victor.' And pigs would fly.

If only she weren't so fertile. She couldn't take the pill because it gave her high blood pressure, she had tried a coil but it dislodged itself, and Victor saw using condoms as some kind of assault on his manhood. She was just his brood mare. The only good thing about being pregnant was that she didn't have to endure sex with Victor. She told him it was bad for the baby and he believed her because he knew nothing – nothing about babies or women or children, nothing about life. She had been a virgin when she married him and had returned from their one-week honeymoon in Wales in a state of shock. She should have walked away right there and then, of course, but Victor had already begun to drain her. Sometimes it felt as if he was feeding on her.

If she had had the energy she would have got up and crept through to the spare bedroom, the 'guest' bedroom, and lain down on the hard single bed with its daisy-fresh white sheets anchored fast by tight hospital corners. The guest bedroom was like an air pocket in the house, its atmosphere not breathed by anyone else, its carpet not worn by careless feet. It didn't matter how many babies she had, she could go on dropping them like a cow, year after year (although she would kill herself if she did), but not one of them would ever occupy the pristine space of the guest bedroom. It was clean, it was untouched, it was hers.

The attic would be even better. She could have it floored and painted white and put in a trapdoor, then she could climb up there, pull up the trapdoor like a drawbridge and no one would be able to find her. Rosemary imagined her family wandering from room to room, calling her name, and laughed. Victor grunted in his sleep. But then she thought of Olivia, roaming the house, unable to find her, and she felt fear, like a blow to her chest. She would have to take Olivia up to the attic with her.

Victor himself was in that kind place between waking and sleeping, a place untainted by the sour feelings of his everyday life where he lived in a houseful of women who felt like strangers.

Olivia, thumb plugged snugly into her mouth and Blue Mouse clenched in the crook of her elbow, padded across the hallway to Julia and Amelia's bedroom and clambered in beside Julia. Julia was dreaming furiously. Her savage hair, plastered to her head, was wet with sweat and her lips moved constantly, muttering gibberish as she battled with some unseen monster. Julia was a heavy sleeper: she talked and walked in her sleep, she wrestled the bedclothes and woke up dramatically, staring wild-eyed at some fancy that had gone before she could remember it. Sometimes her sleep was so operatic that she brought on an asthma attack and woke in a state of mortal terror. Julia could be a very annoying person, Amelia and Sylvia agreed; she had a bewilderingly mercurial personality – punching and kicking one minute, a sham of cooing and kissing the next. When she was smaller Julia had been subject to the most profligate tantrums and even now a day rarely went by without her having an hysterical fit over something or other and flouncing out of a room. It was Olivia who usually tagged after her and tried to console her when no one else cared. Olivia seemed to understand that all Julia wanted was some attention (although she did seem to want an awful lot of it).

Olivia tugged at the sleeve of Julia's nightdress to wake her, a process that always took some time. Amelia, in the next bed, was already awake but kept her eyes closed to savour the last drop of sleep. And besides, if she pretended to be asleep she knew that Olivia would climb into bed with her, hanging on to one of her limbs like a monkey, her sun-browned skin hot and dry against hers, the spongy body of Blue Mouse squashed between them.

Until Olivia was born, Amelia had shared a room with Sylvia, which although it held many drawbacks was definitely preferable to sharing with Julia. Amelia felt stranded, vague and insubstantial, between the acutely defined polar opposites of Sylvia and Julia. It didn't matter how many afterthoughts there were, she sensed she would always be lost somewhere in the middle. Amelia was a more thoughtful, bookish girl than Sylvia. Sylvia preferred excitement to order (which was why, Victor said, she could never be a great mathematician, merely adequate). Sylvia was nuts, of course. She'd told Amelia that God (not to mention Joan of Arc) had spoken to her. In the unlikely event of God speaking to anyone, Sylvia did not seem the obvious choice.

Sylvia loved secrets and even if she didn't have any secrets she made sure that you thought she did. Amelia had no secrets, Amelia knew nothing. When she grew up she planned to know everything and to keep it all a secret.

Would the arrival of the afterthought mean that their mother would juggle them around again in another arbitrary permutation? Who would Olivia move in with? They used to fight over who had the dog in bed with them, now they argued over Olivia's affections. There were five bedrooms in all but one was always kept as a guest bedroom even though none of them could remember a guest ever staying in the house. Now their mother had begun talking about doing out the attic. Amelia liked the idea of having a room in the attic, away from everyone else. She imagined a spiral staircase and walls painted white, and there would be a white sofa and a white carpet and gauzy white curtains would hang at the window. When she grew up and married she planned to have a single child, a single perfect child (who would be exactly like Olivia), and live in a white house. When she tried to imagine the husband who would live with her in this white house all she could conjure up was a blur, a shadow of a man who passed her on stairs and in hallways, and murmured polite greetings.

By the time Olivia had roused them all it was nearly half-past seven. They got their own breakfast, except for Olivia, who was hoisted on to a cushion and served cereal and milk by Amelia and fingers of toast by Julia. Olivia was theirs, their very own pet lamb,

because their mother was worn out by the afterthought and their father was a great mathematician.

Julia, stuffing herself with food (Rosemary swore that Julia had a Labrador hiding inside her), managed to slice herself with the bread knife but was dissuaded from wailing and waking their parents by Sylvia clamping her hand over her mouth, like a surgical mask. At least one incident a day involving blood was the norm. They were the most accident-prone children in the world according to their mother, who suffered endless trips to Addenbrooke's with them – Amelia cartwheeling her way to a broken arm, a scalded foot for Sylvia (trying to fill a hot-water bottle), a split lip for Julia (jumping off the garage roof), Julia, again, walking through a glass door – watched by Amelia and Sylvia in dumbfounded disbelief (how could she not see it?) and Sylvia's strange fainting episodes, of course – vertical to horizontal with no warning, her skin drained of blood, her lips dry – a rehearsal for death, betrayed only by a slight vibration of the eyelid.

The only one who was immune to this communal clumsiness was Olivia, who in her whole three years had sustained nothing much worse than a few bruises. As for the others, their mother said she might as well have finished her nurse training, the amount of time she spent at the hospital.

Most thrilling of all, of course, was the day that Julia cut off her finger (Julia did seem strangely attracted to sharp objects). Julia, five years old at the time, wandered into the kitchen unnoticed by their mother and the first Rosemary knew about the amputated finger was when she turned round from aggressively chopping carrots and noticed a shocked Julia holding her hand aloft in mute astonishment, exhibiting her wound, like a martyred child saint. Rosemary threw a tea towel over the bloody hand, scooped up Julia and ran to a neighbour who drove them in a screech of overexcited brakes to the hospital, leaving Sylvia and Amelia with the problem of what to do with the tiny, pale finger, abandoned on the kitchen linoleum.

(An ever-resourceful Sylvia thrust the finger into a bag of frozen peas and Sylvia and Amelia caught a bus to the hospital, Sylvia clutching the defrosting peas all the way as if Julia's life depended on them.)

Their first plan for the day was to walk along the river to Grantchester. They had gone on this expedition at least twice a week since the holidays began, giving Olivia a piggyback when she grew tired. It was an adventure that took them most of the day because there were so many distractions to explore – on the river bank, in the fields, even in other people's back gardens. Rosemary's only admonition was don't go in the river but they invariably set off with their swimming costumes concealed under their dresses and shorts and hardly a trip went by without them stripping off and plunging into the river. They felt grateful to the afterthought for transforming their normally prudent mother into such a careless guardian. No other child of their acquaintance was enjoying such a hazardous existence that summer.

On one or two occasions Rosemary had given them money to buy afternoon tea at the Orchard Tea Rooms (where they were not the most welcome of guests), but mostly they took a hastily put together picnic that was usually eaten before they were even past Newnham. But not today, today the sun had travelled even closer to Cambridge and had them trapped in the garden. They tried to be energetic, playing a half-hearted game of hide-and-seek, but no one found a good hiding place. Even Sylvia settled for nothing more creative than the nest of dry timothy grass behind the blackcurrant bushes at the bottom of the garden – Sylvia who had once stayed hidden and undiscovered for a record three hours (stretched like a sloth along a high, smooth branch of the beech tree

in Mrs Rain's garden opposite), found only after she fell asleep and plummeted from the tree, acquiring a greenstick fracture to her arm when she hit the ground. Their mother had a tremendous argument with Mrs Rain, who wanted to have Sylvia arrested for trespass (stupid woman). They were always sneaking into Mrs Rain's garden, stealing the sour apples from her orchard and playing tricks on her because she was a witch and therefore deserved to be maltreated.

After an apathetic lunch of tuna salad they began a game of rounders but Amelia tripped and had a nosebleed and then Sylvia and Julia had a fight that ended in Sylvia slapping Julia and after that they contented themselves making daisy chains to plait into Olivia's hair and to collar Rascal with. Soon even this was too much effort and Julia crawled into the shade under the hydrangea bushes and fell asleep, curled up with the dog, while Sylvia took Olivia and Blue Mouse into the tent and read to them. The tent, an ancient thing that had been left in the shed by the previous owners of the house, had been pitched on the lawn since the beginning of the good weather and they vied with each other for space inside its mildewed canvas walls where it was even hotter and more airless than in the garden. Within minutes, Sylvia and Olivia had fallen asleep, the book forgotten.

Amelia, dreamy and languid with heat, lay on her back on the scorched grass and fired earth of the lawn, staring up at the endless, cloudless blue, pierced only by the giant hollyhocks that grew like weeds in the garden. She watched the reckless, sky-diving swallows and listened to the pleasing buzz and hum of the insect world. A ladybird crawled across the freckled skin of her arm. A hot-air balloon drifted lazily overhead and she wished she could be bothered to wake Sylvia and tell her about it.

Rosemary's blood was running sluggishly in her veins. She drank a glass of tap water at the kitchen sink and looked out of the window at the garden. A hot-air balloon was crossing the sky, moving like a bird caught on a thermal. Her children all seemed to be asleep. This unwonted tranquillity made her feel an unexpected twinge of affection for the baby inside her. If they would all sleep all the time she wouldn't mind being their mother. Except for Olivia, she wouldn't want Olivia to sleep all the time.

When Victor proposed to her fourteen years ago Rosemary had no idea what the life of a college lecturer's wife would entail, but she had imagined it would involve wearing what her mother called 'day dresses' and going to garden parties on the Backs and strolling elegantly across the plush green of the courts while people murmured, 'That's the famous Victor Land's wife, he would be nothing without her, you know.'

And, of course, the life of a lecturer's wife had turned out to be nothing like she had imagined. There were no garden parties on the Backs, and there was certainly no elegant strolling across the college courts, where the grass was afforded the kind of veneration usually associated with religious artefacts. Not long after she was first married she had been invited to join Victor in the Master's garden, where it soon grew apparent that Victor's colleagues were of the opinion that he had married (horribly) beneath him ('A nurse,' someone whispered, in a way that made it seem like a profession only slightly more respectable than a streetwalker). But while one thing was true – Victor would be nothing without her – he was also nothing with her. At that very moment he was toiling in the cool dark of his study, the heavy chenille curtains closed against the summer, lost in his work, work which never came to fruition, never changed the world or made his name. He was not great in his field, merely good. This gave her a certain satisfaction.

Great mathematical discoveries were made before the age of thirty, she now knew,

courtesy of one of Victor's colleagues. Rosemary herself was only thirty-two – she couldn't believe how young that sounded and how old it felt.

She supposed Victor had married her because he thought she was domesticated – her mother's loaded tea tables probably misled him, for Rosemary had never made so much as a plain scone when she lived at home – and as she was a nurse he no doubt presumed she would be a nurturing and caring person – and she might have presumed that herself in those days but now she didn't feel capable of nurturing a kitten, let alone four, soon to be five, children, to say nothing of a great mathematician.

Furthermore, she suspected the great work was a fake. She had seen the papers on his desk when she dusted in that hole and his reckonings looked not dissimilar to her father's intense calculations of racing form and betting odds. Victor didn't strike her as a gambler. Her father had been a gambler, to her mother's despair. She remembered going with him to Newmarket once when she was a child. He had lifted her on to his shoulders and they had stood by the winning post. She had been terrified by the noise as the horses thundered down the home straight and the crowd at the stand side grew frenzied, as though the world might be about to end rather than a 30/1 outsider winning by a short head. Rosemary couldn't imagine Victor anywhere as spirited as a racecourse, nor could she see him in the smoky commonality of a betting shop.

Julia emerged from beneath the hydrangeas looking querulous with heat. How was Rosemary ever going to turn them back into English schoolchildren when the new term began? Their open-air life had transformed them into gypsies, their skin brown and scratched, their sun-scorched hair thick and tangled, and they seemed to be permanently filthy, no matter how many baths they took. A drowsy Olivia stood at the opening of the tent and Rosemary's heart gave a little twitch. Olivia's face was grubby and her bleached plaits were askew and looked as if they had dead flowers entwined in them. She was whispering a secret into Blue Mouse's ear. Olivia was her only beautiful child. Julia, with her dark curls and snub nose, was pretty but her character wasn't, Sylvia – poor Sylvia, what could you say? And Amelia was somehow ... bland, but Olivia, Olivia was spun from light. It seemed impossible that she was Victor's child, although unfortunately there was no doubting the fact. Olivia was the only one she loved, although God knows she tried her best with the others. Everything was from duty, nothing from love. Duty killed you in the end.

It was very wrong, it was as if the love she should have had for the others had been siphoned off and given to Olivia instead, so that she loved her youngest child with a ferocity that didn't always seem natural. Sometimes she wanted to eat Olivia, to bite into a tender forearm or a soft calf muscle, even to devour her whole like a snake and take her back inside her where she would be safe. She was a terrible mother, there was no doubt about it, but she didn't even have the strength to feel guilty. Olivia caught sight of her and waved.

Their appetites were listless at teatime and they picked at the unseasonable lamb hotpot that Rosemary had spent too much time making. Victor emerged, blinking in the daylight like a cave dweller, and ate everything in front of him and then asked for more and Rosemary wondered what he would look like when he was dead. She watched him eating, the fork travelling up and down to his lips with robotic rhythm, his huge hands, like paddles, wrapped around the cutlery. He had farmer's hands, it was one of the things she had first noticed about him. A mathematician should have slender, elegant hands. She should have known from his hands. She felt sick and crampy. Maybe she would lose the baby. What a relief that would be.

Rosemary rose from the table abruptly and announced bedtime. Normally there would be protests but Julia's breathing was laboured and her eyes were red from too much sun and grass – she had all kinds of summer allergies – and Sylvia seemed to be in the grip of some form of sunstroke, sick and weepy and she said her head hurt, although that didn't stop her from being hysterical when Rosemary told her to go to bed early.

Almost every night that summer the eldest three had asked if they could sleep outside in the tent and every night Rosemary said no, on the principle that it was bad enough they looked like gypsies without living like them and it didn't matter if gypsies lived in caravans – as Sylvia was at pains to point out – Rosemary was trying her best to retain good government in this family, against all the odds and without any help from a husband for whom the quotidian demands of meals and housework and childcare were meaningless and who had only married her in order to have someone who would look after him, and it made her feel worse when Amelia said, 'Are you all right, Mummy?' because Amelia was the most neglected of all of them. Which is why Rosemary sighed, took two paracetamol and a sleeping tablet – which was probably a lethal cocktail for the baby inside her – and said to her most forgotten child, if you want you can sleep in the tent with Olivia tonight.

The dewy grass and canvas smell of the tent was a thrilling thing to wake up to – better certainly than Julia's breath, which always seemed to grow sour in the night. Olivia's own indefinable scent was just detectable. Amelia kept her eyes closed against the light. The sun already felt high in the sky and she waited for Olivia to wake and climb under the old eiderdown that was making do as a sleeping bag, but it was Rascal rather than Olivia who finally roused her by licking her face.

There was no sign of Olivia, only an empty shell of covers as if she'd been winkled out of them, and Amelia felt disappointed that Olivia had got up without waking her. She walked barefoot across the dew-wet grass, Rascal trotting at her heels, and tried the back door of the house which turned out to be locked – apparently her mother hadn't thought to give Amelia a key. What kind of a parent locks their own children out of their home?

It was quiet and felt very early but Amelia had no idea what time it was. She wondered if Olivia had got into the house somehow because there was no sign of her in the garden. She called her name and was startled by the tremor in her voice; she hadn't realized she was worried until she heard it. She knocked on the back door for a long time but there was no answer so she ran along the path at the side of the house – the little wicket gate was open, giving Amelia more cause for alarm – and into the street, shouting 'Olivia!' more forcefully now. Rascal, sensing entertainment, began to bark.

The street was empty apart from a man getting into his car. He gave Amelia a curious look. She was barefoot and dressed in Sylvia's hand-me-down pyjamas and supposed she did look odd but she hardly cared. She ran to the front door and rang the bell, keeping her finger on the buzzer until her father, of all people, yanked the door open. He had obviously been roused from sleep, his face looked as rumpled as his pyjamas, his mad-professor hair sticking out at all angles from his head as he stared fiercely at her as if he had no idea who she was. When he recognized her as one of his own he was even more puzzled.

'Olivia,' she said, and this time her voice came out as a whisper.

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In the afternoon, a bolt of lightning cracked the flat skies above Cambridge, signalling the end of the heat wave. By that time, the tent in the back garden had become the centre of

a circle that had grown wider and wider as the day progressed, pulling more and more people inside it – first the Lands themselves, roaming the streets, scrambling through undergrowth and hedges, yelling Olivia’s name until they were hoarse. By then the police had joined the search and neighbours were checking gardens and sheds and cellars. The circle rippled outwards to include the police divers fishing the river and the complete strangers who volunteered to comb meadow and fen. Police helicopters flew low over outlying villages and country side as far as the county borders, truck drivers were alerted to keep an eye out on the motorway and the army was brought in to search the Fens, but none of them – from Amelia screaming herself sick in the back garden to the Territorial Army recruits on their hands and knees in the rain on Midsummer Common – could find a single trace of Olivia, not a hair or a flake of skin, not a pink rabbit slipper or a blue mouse.