

## A BLAST FROM THE PAST

Lucinda is now in her late eighties. Our paths first crossed when as a teenager I took up employment in her home as a kitchen maid. Today we both reside in an old folk's home in rural Ireland.

In her more lucid moments she talks about the past. She is back with Nanny the governess, sitting on a rocking horse looking out the Georgian window in the nursery, looking down the avenue to where it veers left, and out of view. She is waiting for her parents to return from South Africa. She waits and waits, they never come.

They were killed in the Bush by a hunting Tribe while on Safari. Lucinda was five at the time.

We the residents sit in chairs lined up along the front wall of the day room. We sit every day with our back to the windows. The t.v. drones on, moving images acting as unpaid minders for the mentally feeble and forgetful clientele, sitting submissively among us, who watch it every day from after breakfast until they shuffle off to bed at night.

Lucinda is back in the late nineteen thirties. My grandmother was housekeeper at the time. She adored my grandmother, much to Nanny's disgust. 'She will turn out common, if she spends time with the servants,' Nanny would say.

Her grandparents were of a different opinion. They came to live in the Great Hall after the tragic accident. While aloof and austere, they were fair. I rarely saw them, as I was confined to the kitchen. They allowed her visit the kitchen, as the only other person she had access to was Nanny. Poor Nanny, she didn't belong to either upstairs or downstairs. She had grown up in Germany. The late mistress had met her while she herself was at finishing school. Both of them having a German background brought them together.

Now, she turns her chair around, facing the window in the day room. She sits all day staring out onto the Local Authority lawn, sometimes calling 'Nanny, Nanny, I think they are coming.'

I resented her, in fact I hated her. Having so much privilege and taking it all for granted. She had been blessed with blonde hair, blue eyes and a charming smile. Whereas I had to live with carrot top red hair Celtic freckles and protruding front teeth, with a tendency to blush when spoken to. 'Why do you always look so guilty,' my gran would say. 'You have done nothing to be ashamed of.'

Feeding and grooming Lucinda's dogs was the task I liked least. 'Have you walked them today, McGuire,' she would ask, even on the coldest wettest day in winter. Two Pomeranians, Peach and Perch. I can see them now in my memory, bounding down the front staircase whenever she grew tired of their company. Every six months a young man came from Dublin to trim their coats. I remember once having to take Perch by train to have his teeth attended to by a vet who specialised in small animals. The butler, who looked after domestic accounts told me the visit had cost the equivalent of my wages over a two year period.

Lucinda had good points. However, I didn't find it easy to forgive her for one incident that got me the sack. She smoked, although it was forbidden by her grandparents. A big

hullabaloo ensued when her grandmother discovered her smoking. A search was made for the dreaded weed and they were discovered in my coat pocket in the servants' lobby where she had hidden them. Servants weren't allowed to smoke either, because of the potential fire risk. She stood silently by as I was dismissed, leaving me with no prospects. The gardener became my saviour when he told her I was picking spuds for a farmer, trying to save my fare to America. She immediately felt remorse, confessed to the butler, and in time I was reinstated. It was a couple of years after that the household wound up, and she herself was forced into exile.

My grandmother was head housekeeper when I joined the staff. A plump little woman with bright pink cheeks and fuzzy auburn hair, she wore a big white apron and bonnet-like cap with a frill framing her face. She always smelt of lavender. On my first day, she took me aside and said 'you are getting a chance to improve yourself, don't you dare let yourself down.' That was the code at the time for don't get pregnant.

My grandmother was in charge of the kitchen, the parlour maid, and the kitchen maid who was myself at the time. The ladies maid and chauffeur were answerable to the butler. The head gardener and his assistants appeared to just get on with it, delivering fruit, vegetables and flowers to the kitchen several days a week.

The household staff consisted of Nanny the governess, who also acted as nursery nurse taking care of Lucinda and sharing meals with her until she was considered old enough to join her grandparents in the dining room for dinner. James the butler ran the house. He took pride in his knowledge of wines and often boasted that he kept the best cellar in the country. He had served his apprenticeship in the house of a German Count in Cologne where he had also learnt to wax his moustache.

When I first arrived they had a scullery maid. When she left they didn't replace her. She had become pregnant and was sent to the county home. Her absence made my workload more difficult. My day began at six cleaning out grates and setting fires. After two hours of dusting I was more than ready for breakfast. Looking back now I can see that things were beginning to crumble. When the chauffeur left, he wasn't replaced either. Instead, the butler took on his duties. In time the head gardener became the gardener after his assistants were no longer on the pay roll.

Only basic vegetables and fruit were now grown. Grapes, melon cucumber and exotic lilies no longer graced the dining room table as heating the green house was discontinued. The cut roses began to have greenfly dropping like dandruff on the mahogany furniture. Repairs were no longer carried out and the roof began to leak. As the deterioration continued, the front lawn became a meadow and reverted to pasture.

The world changed greatly during the second half of the twentieth century. Many of the rich became less wealthy, while the poor became better off. Consequently, we no longer knew our place.

It was considered vulgar to mention money in those days. Wages were paid in a discretionary manner and were never negotiable.

Nanny's social standing in the Great Hall changed after the accident. The grandparents made it clear to her that while she was a governess she was also a servant to the family. She got no more invites to afternoon tea in the drawing room.

I have one memory that has stayed with me. Lucinda sitting on my grandmother's chair by the range in the kitchen, reciting a poem, over and over. It meant nothing to me, but I asked Nanny what it was about. Apparently it was from a very long poem written by Pushkin the Russian poet. A fairy tale that meant a lot to Lucinda. 'She likes to recite the prologue,' Nanny said. I didn't know what that meant, but said nothing. I still remember the first few lines because I heard them so often. They went like this -

On seashore far a green oak towers,  
And to it with a gold chain bound,  
A learned cat whiles away the hours  
By walking slowly round and round  
To right he walks, and sings a ditty;  
To left he walks, and tells a tale....

The poem is about a prince and princess, the princess being taken from him on their wedding night.

'It was a great time to be alive.' Well, she would say that now, wouldn't she. She who never did a stroke, swanning and swooning until wrinkles and old age took care of her. She is talking about early twentieth century Ireland. When carriages and coachmen, maids and minions, populated her world.

At one point towards the end of the functioning of the Great Hall an incident occurred that left suspicion and mistrust hanging in the air over all of us servants. Her priceless diamond ring that had supposedly been passed down the female line from a Tzar of Russia went missing. Or so she said. The Garda were called in and a formal statement taken from each of us. A search ensued. There were no female police or Ban Garda in the force at that time, so it was two male policemen who carried out the operation.

My grandmother was appointed chaperon, while the female staff were requested to undress and put on a nightgown while the Garda searched each bundle of clothes.

Every jar of tea and sugar, currents and raisins were tipped into pudding basins. The flour made a right mess when the Garda underestimated the amount contained in a five stone sack.

They arrived unannounced at 6.00 a.m. All work was suspended. It took them a full 14 hours to search the house. Cold and hungry, my grandmother and I were left to clean and tidy after they had gone. James the butler excused himself and went off to bed the moment the Garda closed the back door. But that wasn't the end of it.

A letter in the post a week later exposed the truth, but at James's expense. Until that day we the servants had no idea that James had the habit of secretly opening the post for upstairs and discreetly resealing same after inspection.

On the day the fatal letter arrived, James burst into the kitchen looking for my grandmother. He never stammered, but he stammered that day. Misssus Maaac Guuuiire, he stuttered, can you come into my office? When she returned to the kitchen she was pale as a ghost. Now she was stammering. I stood looking at her, knowing something serious had happened. 'Get on with your work' she barked, banging the kitchen table and causing teacups to rattle on their saucers. I had never seen her in such a state.

James came in, red faced. 'What do I do Maguire?' he asked. 'She has put in a claim. I am damned if I do and I am damned if I don't. May the Lord help me.' 'Where is Soleman in all of this' my grandmother implored, throwing her hands in the air.

They both returned to the butler's office. I remember taking them a tray of tea and biscuits in an effort to calm them down. It was years later before I got the full story.

Apparently the Honourable Lucinda, as she was always called in those days, had sold the ring to Weirs the jewellers on a trip to Dublin the previous week. The letter contained a cheque for 80,000 Sterling, as was the currency at the time and an acknowledgement to say the ring's provenance had been validated by a London expert.

How James dealt with her ladyship remains a mystery, but she did gather us all together and offered a profuse apology, should we consider for a moment that we were under any suspicion. 'It was wrong of me to get the Garda involved,' she said. 'But I was in a terrible pickle.'

I should mention that nearly sixty years ago an engagement announcement appeared in the 'Irish Times.' It referred to the Honourable Lucinda Goldcrest becoming engaged to Mr. Theobald Richie, owner of a tobacco plantation in South Africa. It stated that the wedding would take place in Harare. A couple of years later news came back that the marriage had ended.

A very fragile Lucinda arrived at the local town railway station about five years ago. According to the taxi driver who drove her out to the Great Hall, she had told him that she wanted to see her old home before she died. On arrival at the gates, she was sure he had taken her to the wrong place. The elaborate stone entrance, gates and railings were no longer there. A string of barbed wire and line of wooden stakes having replaced them. The area was totally overgrown with blackberry bushes and yellow ragwort. The original driveway had a long line of thistles and high grass growing on it. He recounted the story, saying he asked her if she wanted to continue her journey, reminding her that no one had lived there in over sixty years. It was with difficulty he reached what was once the front entrance to the house.

He said she dropped to her knees and wailed like a child, when she saw what remained. That she was inconsolable. The front steps and railings had been removed too, as had the front door. A sheet of rusty galvanise lay on its side, propped up by concrete blocks keeping the cattle out. The window frames had rotted and fallen out. At that point the taxi driver stopped describing the scene in an effort to compose himself.

He took her to the local doctor, as he could think of no other option. She was hospitalised for assessment and found to be malnourished and in the early stages of dementia. When a bed became vacant, she came here to where we are today.

Since her arrival, there have been a number of occasions when she has been searching for her priceless ring. She always called it that. She makes everyone stand up, while she removes their cushions and fumbles with their little crochet blankets, shaking them and tossing them about, demented.

Her dogs are another memory she reverts to. She calls them at night. It is usually bedtime when she begins to summon them. 'Peach, are you there,' she calls, as she

searches the bathroom and toilets. 'Did someone let her out?' she continues, getting distressed when no dog appears. This goes on until the night nurse reassures her that they are both fast asleep under the kitchen table and don't want to be disturbed.

Lucinda has been a source of intrigue since her arrival, and that is not surprising. Last week events superseded anything we could have imagined.

A tall middle aged woman arrived with a Garda dressed in uniform. Matron accompanied them into the day room. 'Lucinda, can you come out here to meet your visitor?' she said, indicating the door. 'What visitor?' Lucinda asked, squinting, as she turned slowly away from the window. Her eyes rested on the Garda. 'What does he want?' she asked, 'has he found my ring?' 'No, he has brought a visitor, indicating the woman standing before her. 'Hello Mother,' the woman faltered in an awkward tone. Lucinda looked long and hard at the lady, before she asked 'and who are you?' It was a moment I wish I hadn't witnessed. There was no recognition on Lucinda's part.

We are equal now. Cleaned daily with the same Aldi wipes, and dusted with the same special offer talc. There is no morning room or library here. No upstairs or downstairs. She has shrunk to the same size as the rest of us, or perhaps we have grown in the intervening years. A Welfare State now keeps us both alive. All equal in H.S.E. nappies supplied by the Government.

Together we sit in our final years, knowing our rapidly approaching resting place will be equal in both width and depth, and the hearse will have no hitch attached for either of us.

It wasn't the real world back then and although I was young I knew it. Rank and privilege didn't mix with subservience and poverty.

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