

Prudence

by Chloe de Lullington

“It’s a little girl!”

The words meant little, as they drifted through the window on a sticky summer’s day, to the seven-year-old on the carpet. Barbie had just caught Action Man cheating with the Betty Spaghetti doll, for one thing; the culmination of a three-hour slow burn narrative, its creator could not be swayed from her afternoon’s endeavours. It was another two hours before she properly realised she had a cousin.

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“We’re going to see her tomorrow.”

She pushed the mash into a sludgy gravy-soaked mess with a distinct lack of enthusiasm and dissected the sausage, peeling its paper-thin skin, translucent and oily, from the meat, smearing it across the plate. Her father was sipping a cold beer with the time-honoured serenity of the off-the-clock office worker, her mother gazing dreamily out the open window as the sun began its soft descent.

Her cousin was three days old, and she had already forgotten she existed.

“Are you excited to see her?”

“Who?”

“Oh, don’t do that! Just eat it, you like sausage.”

“I don’t.”

“Your baby cousin.”

“You do! We had this conversation in Safeway.”

“What’s she called?”

“It’s just one sausage, Jem.”

“That’s a funny name for a baby.”

“Oh, don’t encourage her.”

“She’s called Prudence. To be fair, that’s also a funny name for a baby.”

“David!”

“I’ve eaten most of it.” The tone turned wheedling as the sausage turned to mush in the gravy-sodden mash.

“You did great.”

“David!”

“Come on, let’s go get a yoghurt for pudding.” He was two beers down and genial with it; effortlessly, he lifted her from her chair, swooping her with a whooshing sound away from maternal disapproval and through to the kitchen.

“Why is Prudence a funny name for a baby?”

“It means ‘makes good decisions.’ Lot of pressure for a baby.”

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The house smelt different, and Jemima wrinkled her nose as she crossed the threshold, her hand firmly planted in her father’s. It used to smell of flowers, her auntie famed for the blooms that blossomed across every available surface; jugs of roses lined the kitchen windowsill and even the bathroom held an overwhelming aroma of seasonal foliage. Now, the windowsills were bare and all she could smell was chemical cleanliness and a strange milky undertone that made her gag. She politely swallowed down the acidic revulsion and smiled up at Uncle Paul.

“Hello,” she said. “Where’s the baby?”

There was a large wicker armchair in the living room, dappled with slatted spring sunlight. Jemima took her seat, creaking the wicker beneath rounders-bruised legs, and waited, arms out.

“This is Prudence,” said the proud new mother, and Jemima ignored her. The baby, shrivelled and rosy pink, had a puckered little mouth and a fine dusting of hair, and she was definitely, Jemima realised, the source of the weird milky scent. She gave no indication of enjoying, disliking, or even noticing her transfer to the arms of her big cousin, swathed in sleepy milky neutrality, and Jemima respected it enormously.

“She’s very small, isn’t she?”

Uncle Paul chuckled.

“She is,” he agreed. “Dinky little girl.”

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The tenth birthday was a big one. The double digits weighed heavy on her mind, a discomfort no amount of cake and candles was going to shift. They invited all the family and some of the other people from church, and she watched them milling around in the garden.

“Jem!”

She was three, all chubby cheeks and fat ankles above lace-trimmed white socks. Auntie May had fastened her into a frilled dress with some sort of inbuilt modesty bloomers that rendered her several decades out of time, and Jemima wondered if she could steal the little girl away and dress her in some of her old dungarees instead. It would never go down well—“little girls wear skirts, little boys wear trousers,” after all. Or, as Uncle Paul frequently quoted, “woman shalt not wear that which pertaineth unto a man.” Jemima liked the word pertaineth, but was decidedly less keen on Uncle Paul. Prudence would look a lot nicer in double denim, she just knew it.

“Hello, Pru!”

Fat little hands reached up expectantly, and Jemima felt a smile spread throughout her, starting at her cheeks and warming right down to her toes. She scooped the toddler to her hip, and Prudence plunged chubby fingers into her hair and clung on with bubbling giggles of uncomplicated joy.

She saw them growing up together, sitting in a flat on the seafront, best friends forever—boys be damned and Uncle Paul even more so.

It means ‘makes good decisions.’

“Gentle,” she said. “Don’t pull it.” The grip obediently relented. “Thank you. Do you want some cake?”

“Betty Scetty,” Prudence said.

“Oh, you want to play Betty Spaghetty?” Jemima’s eyes lit up. “Where did we get to last time?”

“Fighting.”

“Oh, that’s right! We started a gang war, didn’t we? Let’s go and get cake and then we can play.”

She strode out into the sunlight towards the gazebo, Prudence attached to her hip.

“She’s got the knack, hasn’t she? Getting the practice in for the next ten years,” remarked Uncle Paul. Jemima ignored him, but her face felt hot and her grip on Prudence tightened. Ten more steps to the cake, then twenty paces back to the house. Ten more years, then twenty of—what? Babies attached to her hip all hours of the day? There would never be a better baby than Pru, and even if there were, she didn’t want them.

“Can you not?” said David, mildly. “It’s her tenth birthday. We’re not raising her like that.”

They’d stopped going to church twice weekly; muffled arguments through the closed kitchen door, floating between creaky banisters, meant little to Jem. Words like “black sheep” and “albatross” meant even less.

“Has May told you we’re having another one?” said Paul.

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She turned in the pew as the door opened and the elfin figure emerged, coyly obscured beneath a veil. The aisle was long and narrow, each step a year, a step away from a seafront flat and freedom. Nineteen steps to the front culminating in the thirtysomething groom, gangly in his three-piece suit. The wedding march played, but it felt like a funeral. Jemima scrubbed a hand across her face as furious tears pricked the back of her eyes.

Alongside her, a distant aunt smiled a benign and unknowing smile—it was nice when people wept at weddings, after all.

It shouldn’t have come to this.

I was so sure we’d break the cycle together.

It means ‘makes good decisions.’

To love, honour and obey...

It’s a little girl.

