

To Uncle, With Love

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In our family, Christmas was a thoroughly kept festival and brought an adamant necessity of present-giving that was hard on us four small girls at the tail of the family clan.

For weeks before Christmas, we toiled away making bookmarkers, penwipers, raffia table-napkin rings, calendars.

The Uncles were particularly difficult.

Of all the Uncles, our Uncle Edward was the most difficult. He was our eldest maternal uncle and as English as his name, Edward.

He was a partner in a firm of solicitors in our seaside town.

Every day he lunched at the same table in the restaurant at Boots, the chemist.

His friends and colleagues lunched at the Royal Sussex Hotel but there the wine waiter came round and asked, embarrassingly, for orders and my Uncle Edward did not drink.

At five o'clock he left the office and took the bus to the corner of his road where he walked up the chalky lane to his house. He was the bachelor and lived with his maiden sister, my Aunt Hilda, on the edge of the rolling green Sussex hills.

Uncle Edward's things were curiously elegant for a country solicitor.

How could we give him a lead pencil, a packet of drawing-pins, a cake of cheap soap, which was all our money would run to?

Every day we asked ourselves that question, but the Christmas I was twelve years old, the position was particularly acute; I found myself with only three-pence to spend on Uncle Edward.

'Give him a card,' said Ruth, but cards were considered paltry and all presents were distributed with horrible publicity from the tree in Aunt Hilda's drawing-room.

'Nothing for Uncle Edward?' Aunt Hilda would say, and at four o'clock on that Christmas Eve I had nothing.

We, Ruth and I, were standing outside Fidler's bookshop in the South Parade and I was turning over a tray of second-hand books marked 'All at 3d'.

It was the 3d that had attracted me, not the books; they were shabby and dirty and at no moment had I thought of giving Uncle Edward a book. My feet were cold, I was miserable with worry; listlessly I turned over a book and then I saw it.

It was under a tray, under a sheet of newspaper as well. Lifting the newspaper I caught sight of its cover, which was of clean white vellum stamped with gold. It was a book that looked not unlike some of Uncle Edward's own books and I could not imagine how it came to be in the 3d tray, but cautiously I drew it out, opened it and took a quick look inside.

It was poems with a few pictures, and it was obviously quite new; most of the pages were uncut.

I felt the end papers which were of satiny white paper stamped with a curious little object in gold that conveyed nothing to me at all, nor did the title that I made out with difficulty. *Sonnets on the Kama Sutra*.

I could not stop to read or look very carefully and in any case I was stunned by the beauty of the binding and paper. I could hardly believe my luck.

I handed over my three-pence, put the book under my coat and ran all the way home.

I showed the book to Ruth but there was no time to do more than glance at it, because Mam was waiting for us to take our presents up to Aunt Hilda's and hang them on the tree for the Christmas

afternoon party.

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‘Do it up,’ urged Ruth.

‘There’s a picture of a naked woman and man in the front,’ I said. I had just seen it and it made me hesitate.

‘They are probably gods,’ said Ruth. Gods, we knew, were allowed to be naked as long as their hands were properly disposed.

Then I saw there was a sub-title and read it aloud: ‘Kama Sutra. The Eight Attitudes and Sixty-four Ingredients of Love.’ It sounded strange; I had known that love had attitudes or ingredients. ‘Will it do for Uncle Edward?’ I asked, hesitating still more.

‘Well, Mam says he is the most loving man we know,’ said Ruth, ‘and it looks quite new. Hurry. Do it up.’

Christmas Day arrived. The presents were handed out with due celebration.

Uncle Edward opened my parcel almost at the last. I was covertly watching.

He undid the string, opened the paper and looked. After a moment I began to think he was stunned himself, he was so still.

I took this as a tribute; it was a surprisingly handsome book to come from an obscure niece.

He opened the front cover, still keeping the book in its paper, not once did he lift it proudly out to public view as I had hoped;

I had written a card, ‘To Uncle, with love’, with my name underneath and he shot a look in my direction. Then I saw that he had coloured deeply - with pleasure? I wondered - and all at once I was as uncertain as I had been when I saw the naked gods.

The next minute he had wrapped it swiftly up again and thrust it under all his other presents, his fingers trembling a little, began to undo Jose’s packet of spills.

He had been quick but not quick enough for Aunt Alice. ‘Why, what have you got there?’ she asked.

‘Nothing,’ said Uncle with strange briefness.

Nothing! My precious book! I opened my mouth but I got a look from Uncle that I had never had before, a look that quelled me.

‘But I saw..’ said Aunt Hilda.

‘It’s a book of poems,’ said Uncle. ‘They are only for me.’

‘You funny girl,’ said Aunt Hilda, who had caught sight of my card and immediately thought I had written them. ‘Poems! Uncle doesn’t go in for that sort of thing at all.’

There was a sudden sound from Uncle Edward. ‘What’s the matter, Edward?’ asked Aunt Hilda. I raised my head and looked at him. He was quietly opening his presents but it had sounded like - a chuckle?

Many years later, and three days after Uncle Edward’s funeral, Aunt Hilda began to cry. We were at tea, and I had said something a little inarticulate about Uncle Edward and his gentleness and goodness. Aunt Hilda burst into tears, tears that were inexplicable from her because they were bitter.

‘I should rather have cut off my hair than have to know this,’ she sobbed, and when we asked what ‘this’ was, she could only sob, ‘Edward! Edward of all people, to do *that*?’

‘Do *what*, Aunt Hilda?’

‘I never meant to tell anyone but I can’t keep it to myself,’ she sobbed. ‘Edward, whom I could have sworn...I know some men are nasty but not Edward!’

‘Nasty?’ Mam and I said together, ‘Uncle *Edward*, nasty?’

‘Like dirty postcards!’ and Aunt Hilda wept again.

‘Aunt Hilda,’ I said firmly, ‘do please tell us what you are talking about.’

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She sat up and dabbed her eyes and then said in a quick, stifled voice, 'Edward kept pornographic books in his drawer - a pornographic book.'

'Edward?' 'Uncle Edward?' We were both stupefied.

Then, 'Are you *sure*?' I asked but Aunt Hilda stood up, tears spattering on her blouse, and went across the room to his desk; it was a knee-hole desk and on the right-hand side was a deep drawer; it was locked; she took a key, unlocked the drawer and opened it.

When I looked in I had tears in my own eyes.

I had not known that Uncle had really cared for us, but in the drawer were all the presents we children had given him, carefully dated and labelled; home-drawn cards and clumsy spills, a pair of knitted scarlet cuffs sewn crooked, blotters and calendars, pen-wipers, table-napkin rings.

'He thought a lot of you children,' said Mam.

'That's what makes it so much worse,' said Aunt Hilda, and her tears ran over again. 'Look,' she said, and as if it were red hot, from underneath everything else, as he had once hidden it under his parcels, she pulled out a book. I recognised it instantly. *Kama Sutra. The Eight Attitudes and Sixty-four Ingredients of Love.*

'But I gave him that,' I said.

'You!' She and Mam stared at me appalled.

'Yes. Look.' The book was as when I had brought it, its pages were still uncut and my card was where I had put it. To Uncle, with love. 'Don't you remember...?' I said.

'But - you nasty child!' Aunt Hilda's voice began to rise.

'I was only twelve,' I pleaded but, looking at the book, I wondered that even then I had not guessed what it was; I looked at the end papers with their frank phallic design, the front picture - gods indeed! - at the first lines of a poem;

I was a mature, grown woman but I grew hot as I looked and I stood before Aunt Hilda as ashamed as I should have been if Uncle had uncovered it that day.

'I didn't know what it was,' I said, 'I was only twelve.'

'Twelve or not!' snapped Aunt Hilda.

'It was Christmas....'

I stopped. Aunt Hilda stopped. We seemed to hear something, something I thought I had heard on that Christmas day long ago; Uncle Edward's chuckle.

We looked at one another and began to laugh.