

White Cargo 18

Felicity's marriage had turned out to be a disaster, with scenes of jealousy and very soon a diagnosis of manic depression in her husband. But she struggled on with the marriage as she became more successful as an actress, and from it came her beloved son, Charley. A family holiday in Goa was only a temporary respite.

After her marriage, her parents visited England every year, and despite Laura's desire to stop touring and settle down, Geoffrey couldn't lose his itchy feet, returning to India until at last stopped by his final stroke. One of his favourite jobs was on a cruise on the QE2.

Episode 18

My work was going well. *The Norman Conquests* was a hit: three plays by Alan Ayckbourn which were sold out for the first nine months in the West End. Drewe and I had moved to a house in Shepperton, with a magical garden where weeping willows bowed into the Thames. But despite our best efforts, the marriage was still difficult, and I, as usual, was throwing myself into my work.

It was a joy to be part of such a happy production.

One night, halfway through our season, Richard Briers popped his head around the door of my dressing room after the show.

'I'm going to be doing a little comedy series for the Beeb,' he said nonchalantly. 'It might not be hugely successful – it's an oddball kind of subject, but I think it would be fun to do. I wondered if you might like to read a few episodes for the part of my wife?'

I was stunned and delighted. Richard was an established star: I felt at ease with him from the moment I met him, and he was one of the best and funniest actors of his generation. I knew I would accept the part even if I hated the script. But I read it and loved it. It was called *The Good Life*.

From the very first day Richard, Penelope Keith, Paul Eddington and I slotted into a way of working together that was fun, fast and furious. We truly loved the show and worked together in complete harmony.

To everyone's surprise, *The Good Life* took off and became one of the most popular shows on television. We filmed outside London, doing the exteriors at two houses, one posh and one not so posh. The not so posh one had its garden dug up for the filming on the understanding that the BBC would landscape the garden to a very high standard once the filming was finished. Pigs, goats, chickens, straw, mud and manure, carrots and fully grown vegetable plants were installed. We filmed happily, then said a fond farewell to our hosts, who waved the crew off with some relief and settled back to enjoy what would soon become a showcase garden.

When the reaction to the series was positive, we all accepted the next series with great celebrations. Only one problem had to be overcome: someone had to go to the location house and inform the lady owner that her beautiful garden was to be dug up again and invaded once more by pigs, goats, chickens.....

This continued for the next five years, and our hostess was a local star, plying

us with coffee and cake on our first day back, then happily watching the destruction of her charming home and garden.

The pigs never did what they were told, the chickens always squawked at the wrong moment, and the goat was a devil to milk. Our main difficulty was getting through the script without having hysterics. We were the public's darlings and had to grow accustomed to being accosted in the supermarket with cries of 'Don't you grow your own then?'

But as *The Good Life* took off, my marriage finally fell apart. With sadness, we parted and started on the inevitable struggle with blame, divorce and custody. It was a time of extreme pain, neither of us behaving very well. Through the worst part of all this, Geoffrey was a tower of calm. He surprised me with his fairness and his reluctance to apportion blame. Mother was equally supportive, looking after her grandson and, when things got very bad, taking him off for a holiday in India. My parents, who had been so aggressive at my departure, were a close and comforting presence during this crisis in my life.

Jennifer dropped everything to help me. Within a few days she flew in; within a week she had bought the lease on a little flat. She handed me the keys, and with kisses and hugs to take my breath away, she returned to Bombay and her own small children. In my darkest hour she was there, and she made things better. I could not do the same for her.

As the years went on and I became a single, independent woman, my insecurity about my looks began to fade. I found to my surprise that I was not regarded as plain after all, and that a touch of wit worked wonders. I discovered that I was able to flirt my way into almost any pair of arms I wanted, and I experienced my personal version of the raving sixties, somewhat belatedly, in the seventies.

I still felt a driving need to please Geoffrey through my work. He looked down from a great height at most of the television shows I did, and even a leading part in the West End was not in his eyes comparable to the glories of Shakespeare.

But as the years went on and I did more and more work in the theatre, he gave up on the idea of my returning to tour with him, and became my biggest champion. Mother would come when she could to a preview and, with a few gentle notes, nudge me in the right direction. They both insisted that it was not the point to be the best, but to do the best one could in any given performance.

Jennifer was not so easy to please. She wanted me to be the biggest and brightest star, blinding everyone with my talent. Nothing else would do, and I dreaded her seeing my work. She would say I was wonderful, and yet insist that I had to do better. But I rarely did better enough for her, not in my acting.

As a sister though, I was perfect. It was easy for me. I loved everything about her, and I knew she felt the same.

When she was diagnosed with cancer, I had just got married for the second time. I cut short the honeymoon and flew to India to be with her. I knew she would have done the same for me. She had a loving family, her husband, her three children and her parents, but I knew she still need me – and so I was

there for her during her two-year illness.

Geoffrey refused to believe she was seriously ill, and later on turned in on himself with silent anger. Mother seemed not ever to fully recover. Her rosaries were packed away, along with her bedside Bible. She stopped going to Mass, a blind was pulled down on some part of her being, and she turned her heart away from India.

During Jennifer's last weeks the whole family gathered about her bedside. Shows were cancelled, tours stopped, filming halted. There was a lot of laughter, a lot of eating on and around her bed as we camped out around her. Her hospital room we filled with jokes and funny picture cards, desperately and helplessly waiting with her. Geoffrey's visits were short; he was unable to hide his anguish, but Mother was beside her, faffing a lot and looking suddenly old and slightly mad. The three children were pillars of strength and love, constant and cheerful, and heartbreaking to watch.

Then she was gone, early one morning, with her daughter beside her. It seemed a gigantic mistake. Any one of us should have gone, but not Jennifer. She was the nice one, she was the good one. This was not fair. 'Fairness has nothing to do with it, Fool!' she would scold me, when I dared to say that to her.

During her last few days we talked and talked. One day, out of the blue, she cried out, 'Who will look after my children?'

'I will, of course,' I promised.

'I know you will, Foo, but it's not the same as me, it's simply not the same.' I wasn't wise enough to know how to comfort her, nor wise enough to calm myself.

'It will be all right!' I said stubbornly.

But she knew it would not be all right, not really.

I wish she had not died.

Oh, Geoffrey, in a few months you will be eighty-nine. And we will have a party. I will give you a whisky, even if it chokes you, and fill the room with balloons and flowers. This will not be a date to remember Jennifer's death. It will be your day again, and I will spend it with you.

Mother's not being here is still a sadness, but a natural thing, a timely thing, an inevitable passing on. But fifteen years of missing Jennifer has not healed the ache I feel in my stomach.

I often felt second-best to Jennifer, believing that your ambitions for me were a response to her leaving the company. But I had not read your journals or understood your strident letters of encouragement and advice. I think I know you better than before. And I like you better. I'd like to thank you for giving me the life you did, for showing me another way of being.

I'm starting a new play, and so much need your bullying wisdom to cheer me on. For the moment you are still with me: still staring, still silent, but still here.

The crescent moon is shining down on the brown stone Gateway of India. The moonshine glimmers on the water. A tiny single star shines above the moon. It's one o'clock in the morning. I have placed what's left of you, your absurdly small coffin, underneath the window of my bedroom, from which I look out at the night.

When you died, my need to return with you changed from a duty to a longing. I realized this as soon as the plane started the descent, as soon as the first hot blast of air struck my lungs, bringing with it the smell of spices and sewers and perfumes. Like you, this is where I feel at home. There is a grasp of reality here, an acceptance of the fragility of this one life and the certainty of death, some unspoken understanding that there is more beyond our need for high achievement, that there is a past and a future as important as the moment, and that we are not to take ourselves so very seriously.

Carrying my father's ashes on the first lap of his journey back was tricky and awkward. At the security X-ray the embarrassment had reached its height. No provision was made – he went through with the cameras and the handbags and the carry-on luggage. As the nice chap swung my bag merrily out on to the collection rack, the box clunked down just as he realized what was in it. He blushed deep red. The special services person gasped in dismay as I sheepishly retrieved my parent and handed him over to my big son.

Arriving in Bombay was quite different. The bag was acknowledged with no shyness. Eye contact was fully established, with understanding and respect. Jennifer's eldest son, Kunal, was there to meet us. With Eastern style he swept his grandfather's box protectively under his arm, kissing us all better, and for the first time since Geoffrey had died, I felt at peace.

'Gaga's dead,' Karan said simply, using his childhood nickname for you and looking about seven years old, not his grown-up thirty-six. 'They have been calling you for an hour, but your machine was on.'

'I was re-reading the last chapter and some of his letters, then I was going to see him this morning,' I babbled. 'It's strange, did he wait for me to finish the book?'

As I rounded the corner to your room, I had to stop myself shouting out, 'Darling, I'm here.'

I have been blessed with a family of outspoken youngsters, due, no doubt, to their outspoken grandfather. They gathered round, to be with us, with you, for the cremation. They came with tears, laughter, hugs and unholy stories, and concern for me, the eldest of your tribe. After me, there will be no one who remembers you as a young man with thick dark hair, dashing clothes, and a head full of mad ideas.

The night after the morning you died, I rocked myself to sleep in hot tears of loss. You're free, darling, no more pain or struggle. And yet I miss your being part of the living. You were warm when we arrived at your bedside, and you looked rested, lying straight and still, your hair so beautifully combed. I felt if I shook you, you'd turn and look at me again.

The peace in the room hung in the air. I wanted to sit all day just stroking your feet and touching your hair. But after an hour the ache of death became a reality. All I felt was loss. I had found a way to talk to you, about you, that did require your being here. Now that is gone, what shall I do now? Maybe India is the final chapter.

The children gathered round, as Kunal set to unscrewing the box. The sea

was choppy, and the warm wind was blowing as we made our way to the prow of the boat. I read 'Fear no more the heat of the sun', rather badly, I'm afraid - my voice shook, and you would have asked me to speak up.

In the distance the Gateway to India glowed pink in the setting sun. Your ashes were in the warm brown waters of the Arabian Sea, poured out lovingly by two of your grandsons. The trumpeter played the Last Post, and we threw sweet white jasmine and red roses after you. When the bugle stopped we toasted you with champagne.

Now you are back in the land you made your home. I can't regret your life for you. You're home... you're here.....you're free.

The End