

HALFWAY
by Elizabeth Pulford

Halfway up the stairs
Isn't up
And isn't down.
It isn't in the nursery,
It isn't in the town.
And all sorts of funny thoughts
Run round my head:
"It isn't really
Anywhere!
It's somewhere else
Instead!

My mother's arm is thin and feels like a well-picked chicken bone under her jersey. (Part of a twin set, I bought for your father's funeral, she tells me every time she wears it.) The funeral was years ago now and he wasn't my real father, he was my stepfather. She has worn the jersey every day while staying with me. Already four days and nights, there's another week to go. It's the first time she has stayed in this house.

‘I don't like these stairs,’ she tells me.

It's eight o'clock in the evening. She's off to bed and the rule is she isn't allowed to go up or down the stairs on her own, so we go together. Thank goodness for the second toilet downstairs, out the back door, behind the herb garden.

‘It's a pity you never married William.’

‘It was a long time ago, Mum.’

‘Such a nice boy.’ Her fingers curl around the wooden rail and we start off again. The setting sun is warm through the windows, ribbons on the wood. My mother feels fragile. It's her littleness I can't get over. How can she be so little when she is so full of memories?

She stops halfway, gazes at my sister's painting. 'Oh, that's nice, isn't it. Did you do it, Isabel?'

'Mary's the artist, Mother. Not me.' Every day the same questions, every day the same answers.

'She has lovely hair, your sister. Not like you.'

I know she doesn't mean to be unkind. It's a simple fact. My hair has never been nice. Mary's is black and wavy, mine is brown and straight.

'Ahh!' she gasps on reaching the top. 'Here we are.' She reaches out for her handbag. It is real leather ('not made from some of the rubbish they put out these days, Isabel'), and contains a mirror, a comb, a tube of red lipstick (never worn) a clean handkerchief and a small purse fashioned out of fur. Her handbag goes with her everywhere. Up and down the staircase, into the toilet, next to the chair at mealtimes and beside the bed at night.

In the morning my mother is up early, half past seven, waiting at the top of the stairs, dressed in her hat and coat.

'I think I will go to the shops today, Isabel,' she announces, when I appear in my scabby dressing gown. She wants to go every day, but once she gets downstairs and has had her breakfast, she falls asleep in the big old Chesterfield chair by the heater. Then after she wakes up, she wonders why she is wearing her coat and hat. Wonders if she has just come in from the shops or is meant to be going out? And after fumbling around in her head for the answer and none comes, she gives up.

About morning tea time I help her out of her going-out clothes and take them back up to her room, hang the coat behind the door and put the hat beside the bed as instructed. Not her handbag though.

‘We’ll do the shops later,’ I say.

Going down the stairs we need only one stop.

‘Do you remember the staircase at Chester Street?’ she asks.

‘Yes, I do.’ Always the old family home was known as Chester Street. Where the stairs ran up to a false ceiling. Blocked off, halfway up and halfway down, so the upstairs people couldn’t come down (an outside ramp was built) and we couldn’t go up, allowing my mother to rent out the top and get some money to feed the three of us, or so I was told when I had asked.

‘You used to play on them with your dolls.’

‘Did I? I don’t remember. But I do remember sitting right at the top, listening to the footsteps and voices of the upstairs people.’

My mother is shocked. ‘Isabel. You know very well it isn’t lady-like to listen in.’

I laugh as we shuffle down the remaining few stairs. Soon my mother will doze, waiting for the climb back up at the latter part of the day, while I escape outside into the garden.

‘You should have married William,’ my mother says that evening, on the fifth stair going up. ‘Robert was hopeless.’

Not William again! Robert was my husband, until he died of cancer but she was right, he was hopeless. But at least he stuck by me at a time when it was important to go down the isle in a halo of white, for I was in the shameful position of being seventeen years old, unwed and six weeks pregnant, even though I knew he was

madly in love with my sister, Mary, as indeed I thought I was with William. My pregnancy was not the result of a passionate affair. No - it was the result of Robert and I getting together one afternoon to spite Mary who had given Robert the cold shoulder to teach him a lesson for some reason or other, while she had gone off with my heartthrob, William.

Our few wedding photographs were taken in the backyard, under the deformed apple tree at Chester Street, by my Uncle Ewan. I've still got them somewhere.

‘You were the one who wanted us to get married, Mother.’

She shakes her head. ‘Not Robert, dear. Robert should have married Mary. Two of a kind.’

It's funny how she remembers some things so well, whilst others appear to be a complete mystery to her, as if the memory is part of someone else's life and not her own. I change the subject, knowing from experience, no good comes when she is agitated.

There's another seven more days to go before my mother returns to the Lily Haven Rest Home.

‘Your father was such a nice person.’ Another stop. Halfway.

Now which one is she talking about? Jacob, my real one or Henry, my step-father.’

‘He was very gentle. You know.’

Ahh, my real father. She rarely ever mentions him, never did when I was little. But of late he seems to be sitting closer to her than Henry, even though she was married to Henry for three decades and my father for a mere five years. When I asked how he died, my mother could not bring herself to tell me, so I turned to my

grandmother. She told me Jacob took his own life. He was carrying too many scars, both inside and out, something to do with his own father, so fragmented rumour had it, and he couldn't cope with living.

We climb the remaining stairs.

‘This house is too big for you, Isabel.’

‘I love it.’ I am quick to protect it. I bought the property after Robert died, the children having flown the nest long ago, so there was only me. I moved in one wet day and by night-time there were so many wet footprints up and down the wooden passage and stairs, it looked like I still had a family.

‘If you won't sell. Get Mary to move in with you.’

‘She has her own house. Besides there's Russell?’

We reach the top landing. The handbag exchanges arms. ‘He won't last. They never do.’

Soon my mother is tucked up with her book, a murder mystery, with the radio blaring. Some talkback show, with a senseless voice going on about his neighbour's tree and how the leaves in autumn messed up his yard.

I close the door - God save us - and go and stand at the top of the stairs. My mother's right of course. I should have sold the house, moved into a tidy brick bungalow, for if I'm honest the stairs are getting a bit much even for me these days. But do we ever do what's right in life?

I go into my bedroom. It's a house that suits me. Tall walls like Chester Street, the same sort of windows, the same sort of feeling throughout every nook and cranny. All, except for the stairs.

I didn't think to ask where my father committed his suicide; I had always assumed he had done it in bed. Taken tablets. Don't ask me why, but that's what I had thought. It wasn't until years later, long after my grandmother had died and I was well into my forties, I found out the truth. It was my aunt Dorothy who told me.

My mother had arrived home from town, pushing me in the pram, Mary lagging behind grizzling and when she had opened the front door there he was.

Hanging.

Halfway up the stairs.

~ ends ~

Second half of Poem by A A Milne

Approx: 1490 words