

THE MATTER OF MY SISTER

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OVERVIEW

I was nineteen when my sister was murdered in France. She was twenty-one. My dad and I conspired to cancel the killer. Dad also chased away the press and roared at anyone who would listen that Alix's killer was irrelevant to her life. I followed the logic, believing that if we ignored the murderer, he would cease to exist. Her death would be erased, her life would be remembered.

The theme concerning silence and repression can best be summarised by Foucault's words: *an injunction to silence, an affirmation of nonexistence, and by implication, an admission that there was nothing to say about such things, nothing to see and nothing to know.* Fifty years later, I changed my mind. I broke the mandate of silence and hired a lawyer to search the chaotic archives of the French criminal justice system.

Another theme addresses the reliability of otherwise of memory: buried memories, too painful to contemplate, memories lost in the murky waters of dementia, memories of war, killing, sadism and torture.

There are books which are explored to understand themes relating to my sister's death: *The Vitamin Murders* by James Fergusson, *The Question* by Henri Alleg, *Forgiveness* by Marina Cantacuzino, *The Outsider* by Albert Camus, *The Meursault Investigation* by Kamel Daoud all served to illustrate Jean Paul Sartre's idea of the victim and the executioner merging into the same figure.

France's colonial past, particularly in relation to Algeria, and the Nazi occupation during WW2 raised many questions in my mind about the mental health of a whole generation who were, arguably, deeply traumatised. Murder rates were

high and in the early 1960s — you were almost ten times more likely to get murdered in France than in Spain.

My story is structured chronologically, mostly alternating between the 1960s and the present day.

CHAPTER ONE

SILENCE

On April 22nd 1965, my sister, Alix wrote me a letter instead of revising for her final exams. Dad had given her a typewriter on which the Z and the Y were swapped, there was an Ü to the right of the P and other umlauts Ö and Ä to the right of the L. It was a great source of pride and fascination to both Dad and Alix that she had a typewriter with a German QWERTZ based keyboard. This typewriter delivered the text in a faint cursive script.

It took Alix another three days to track down an envelope amongst her chaotic pile of papers on the floor, on the desk, on the bed and in the bed, within the confines of her very small bedroom that had been her home for the last year in Oxford.

Finding my Edinburgh address obviously defeated her as it was sent to our home with a 'PLEASE FORWARD' underlined at the top of the envelope. On the 26th of April, the letter reached the Oxford sorting office and was stamped with time, date, month and year. Alix must have been relieved to have unburdened herself and to have completed the task of sending the letter.

Whether Mum forwarded the letter to me or I simply collected it on my next weekend home I have no memory. I also have no memory of absorbing the contents of the letter. Why would I care if Alix had been to a palmist, we all fooled around with

that sort of thing, I was much more interested in the fact that my best friend at the time had 'gone the whole way' and if not her, why not me? I had a very unstable and charming man in mind to make this happen.

This poignant letter, tenuously bound by a half-perished elastic band along with a handful of other letters written to me from Alix, was placed in a bag labelled 'Alix' waiting for me to tell the other story — the one about her death. It took me nearly fifty years.

...I met a palmist this week and I got him to read my hand. The real thing which got me was what he said about the future. he didn't say very much: that I am not going to live till I'm 70, that I am going to travel quite a lot, that I'll be quite prosperous – but he can see no signs of marriage, or even children or a deep love affair...So now I'm taking a fresh look at my life and trying to think of something to fill up these eternal years of spinsterdom which I'm doomed to... but one of the other very extraordinary things in my palm was that I have absolutely no career line at all apparently...I must say, it would be quite nice to find some other palmist to say that it was all wrong...

Three months later, on the banks of the Rhône River, in the Provence-Alpes-Côte-d'Azur, shadowed by *le Pont d'Avignon*, my curious, adventurous sister was murdered. She was twenty-one years old.

The palmist could see no future because she had no future.

The family could find no words because there were no words.

There was a compliance with the roar of my father, 'The killer is irrelevant to Alix's life, we will remember her life, not her death.'

His mantra echoed in my head and beat in my heart like a persistent bluebottle banging against a windowpane.

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We were a conventional middle-class family. Dad went to work every day, Mum dealt with the house, dogs and children – in that order – and we had very little to gripe about. We lived in a big old house with a bedroom each, a burn at the bottom of the garden, a pony called Lighty, a tennis court and neighbourhood friends. That was what we grew up with. We thought it was perfectly normal and we felt neither gratitude nor ingratitude.

We were four sisters.

The eldest is Sarah. Sometimes, she holds her head gently in two hands and says, 'I'm going mad, I'm losing my mind.' I say back to her, 'you aren't going mad, your memory has just flown away somewhere.' Her past has been eradicated; she lives in a never shifting present. She no longer is her memories. She feeds the dog, she forgets she has fed the dog, she asks the dog if she has fed the dog, she asks her husband if she has fed the dog. We try little tricks like putting a crumpled piece of paper in the dog-dish when the dog is fed. That doesn't work, 'what's this paper in the dog-dish?' she asks with increasing anxiety. Two years ago, when I asked for her blessing, I said, 'I want to find out what happened to Alix — I need to know what happened to Alix,' and she looked confused, then a sad smile spread across her face, 'Alix... yes, yes, do it, tell me everything.'

Vicky came next, she was two years younger than Sarah. Although I probably used more or less the same words to tell Vicky that I was planning to write about the Alix's life and investigate her death, I worried that it might have been difficult for her to say, 'No, leave it alone, it's too late.' The same words don't always have the same effect on different people. What would I have done if either of them had begged me to leave it alone? Fortunately, I wasn't faced with that dilemma.

Alix was the next sister to be born into our family.

Dearest Alix, I can feel your stillness in the grim void of death, that terrible sense of aloneness. I want to recover your voice and find a truth that will help me to understand what happened to you.

The last of the four sisters: Margie. That's me. Alix preceded me by two and a half years. I am the one who has chosen to take on the task of trying to make sense of Alix's senseless death. We sisters were united in many things, but conspicuously solitary in grief. I have a strong sense of my own mortality. I'd better get a move on before the brain becomes irreversibly atrophied. Hurry! Hurry!

Dad was a master at the act of looking the other way. The memory of life and death in the trenches got buried deep in his psyche, only to be joined later by other memories, too terrible to contemplate. When we were little girls, playing in our garden of Eden, I sometimes wonder if our dad felt a rising sense of panic as he watched our carefree antics. Did he ever think that there was too much innocence and happiness around him, how dare he be allowed this when his classmates, all but himself and one other, were killed in WW1? If those were his thoughts, he must have swallowed the panic, steadied his breath and soldiered on.

One month after Dad volunteered to join the 11th Battalion of the Argylls there was a 'Knockout blow' at Arras that claimed the lives of 150,000 British troops:

At 5.30 on the sleet-sodden morning of April 9th, 1917, officers sounded their whistles along the allied front line at Arras and went over the top. Tens of thousands of troops poured into the shell-scarred -no-man's-land, running or stumbling through the barbed wire towards the German lines... (The Guardian of 20.6.2001)

Dad survived that one, but two weeks later, at nineteen years old, he was wounded in action. He was invalided out of the First World War, with his right eye strewn across the fields of Arras and a volley of shrapnel planted in his chest. He never said much about the incident, only that he was in a field hospital for a lengthy period and the nurses were very pretty.

Dad, my patriotic, soft-hearted dad, was no longer able to fight for his country, thanks to the loss of his eye. He was retired with a British War Medal, a Victory Medal and a Silver War Badge. I don't know if he felt shame or disappointment or relief. He never told us.

Dad certainly maintained a stoney silence over his memories of the first world war, and the frosted lens on one half of his glasses served as an implicit reminder that suffering should be carried out in silence. However, he was, generally, not a gloomy man. Far from it, he loved a good (or usually bad) joke, enjoyed all sorts of sport, relished a glass or two of whisky and loved playing games with his children, particularly clock-golf, and backgammon. He taught us all to ride a bicycle and to drive. He was a very nice father.

When Dad removed his specs you could see a huge cavern with a tiny blue, glass eye set against the interior wall. There was a spare eye, in case the one he was wearing fell out; it lived, embedded in cotton wool, in a patterned box in his chest of drawers. When Alix and I had friends over to play, it was great entertainment to sneak into Dad's dressing room, pull up the laundry basket, serving as a stepping stone, and reach out for the little box in which there lived another untold story.

'How many eyes in the room?' Dad would bellow at teatime, and the playmates, despite the secret initiation, would fall for it. 'Two, four, six, eight, ten' they cried, and the Mitchell girls would screech with delight, leaving the little friends feeling somewhat overwhelmed.

When Alix died, he didn't just go quiet on the topic of her murder, he sank into a deathly silence and looked like the saddest man on this planet. I was careful not to smile in his presence, it seemed irreverent. I had no idea how to cheer him. Once, he reached out and held my hand and it felt like the action of a drowning man. He died of a broken heart ten years after Alix was murdered.

I have long lived with unvoiced grief. Can I penetrate the silence and find a narrative that makes sense of the chilling events that lead to Alix's death? Can I turn a life-time hush of denial into a deafening cacophony of words demanding to know the how, where and when of the day and the hour that led to the momentous second when my vibrant sister became a corpse? Do I really believe that however hard the truth might be it has to be better than not knowing? I am, after all, my father's daughter.

March, 2020 found me confined to quarters, in a one-bedroom cottage within the Garden of Cosmic Speculation — a spectacular garden designed by my daughter Amy's parents-in-law. Amy and her family all stayed fifty yards down the track in a typical Scottish farmhouse with black framed windows; my grandchildren and I pressed our lips together and kissed with only the glass separating their covid-y breath from mine.

I was expecting to be there for a weekend or maybe a week. The week became five months.

I was shamefully happy.

Most mornings, I poured out my life on the white screen. Every time I mentioned Alix, twenty more memories came to mind; they somersaulted around the pages and as much as I rounded them up and smacked them into shape, they wilfully took their own path like naughty little imps. I liked these playful games with my lost and found sister.

On my afternoon walks I showed Dead-Alix the DNA garden, the huge jade frog hidden in a jungle of bushes by a still pond, sculptures popping out of grassy furrows, crows raucously going to bed at night and the Nith river, racing its way towards Dumfries. In the evenings I often sat high up on top of a mound, watching the late, late sun reluctantly slip behind the rolling hills beyond.

Look at me, Alix, back in Scotland, in the most beautiful undulating garden with mounds and lakes and little red bridges and tangled woods and pretty staircases.

The absence of Alix dissolved into a hovering presence. I could feel a burgeoning connection increasing by the day. It felt alright to remember the real Alix, as she was in life, it felt alright to try and communicate with the soul of our departed Alix, but I was still not able to face the fact that someone, maybe a someone still alive, once wished her dead and with terrible strokes of a knife made her dead — that, I couldn't yet think about, I tip-toed around the death scene.

The act of writing enticed Alix back to me. The more I wrote the more I remembered. I re-lived one of our childhood fights: Once, when I was a mad little girl, volatile, shouty and spoiled, I hit Alix. My mother, who didn't have a fierce bone in her body, told me to apologise. 'Say sorry, to Alix, you hurt her. Say sorry now.' Alix was looking smug and not in the least hurt. I scowled and cast around for an escape route, but Mum was backed up against the door. There was no escape. I was adept at shifting the blame. It was unusual for me to get cornered in this way. What was the meaning of life when things were to be so tough? Defeated, I shouted through hot tears, 'Sorry for being born.' That carefully crafted apology could, rightly, be construed as a dramatic little performance bursting with tragic pathos. I was not sorry I hit her, but I was extremely sorry to find myself in the present situation and I wanted them to feel pity and guilt in equal measure.

Now, precious sister, I want to grasp your sweet face between my two hands and look into your eyes; now I want to say sorry, not for my birth, but for your death. And sorry it came so soon and sorry I left it so late to find out everything that happened to you in life and death. Sorry, sorry, deeply sorry.

‘*Your life and your death.*’ Did I say that? That was the moment I knew that I was going to write about the whole ‘thing’ the whole Alix, life and death. Knowing I was going to break the dad-mandated vow of silence and unite Alix’s life with her death felt completely right. It had been an instant decision and yet, one which had been festering for decades and I embraced the idea with absolute certainty. It felt like quitting a job simply because the locker key had stopped working, or leaving a marriage because the husband said something mean about the clothes you were wearing. The triviality of the trigger hardly explained the enormity of the decision.

For the next few weeks, I was in a state of high alert. I worried about everything to do with the project: would I upset my sisters? How should I set about hiring a French lawyer to search for the police files? What would I feel when I finally read the newspaper reports? Was I too old to open this can of worms, to stir the sleeping dog, to challenge the adage that silence is golden?

I sit at my desk listening to the tap-tapping of the woodpecker in the tree beyond my cracked red-brick wall and I listen to the click-clicking of the letters on my keyboard. I ruminate: Why have I waited so long? What made me change my mind? Was it my dancing fingers racing over the keyboard and landing memories on the white screen, or was it no more than a simple shift in time when I felt returned to a Scotland that included Alix, peaceful walks that allowed me to catch glimpses of her shadow as I stepped lightly through the Garden of Cosmic Speculation?

Whatever the spark may have been, I recognised the time and the space that was hovering around me, nudging me, pushing me, whispering to me, *go, go, find your Alix, find her now, before it’s too late.*