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NANCY MITFORD



THE
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OF
LOVE



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CHAPTER ONE

The Radlett children

There is a photograph of Aunt Sadie and the six Radlett children sitting at the table at Alconleigh. They are sitting under an enormous **spade** that, in 1915, Uncle Matthew had used to kill eight German soldiers during the war. It is still covered with blood and hair. We were **fascinated** by it. You can also see Aunt Sadie's face. She looks strangely round, her hair strangely soft and her clothes strangely boring. But it is definitely her sitting there, with Robin on her knee. The other children, Louisa, Bob, Linda, Jassy and Matt, sit around the table in party clothes. The camera clicks and life continues, taking them away from the happiness of being a child, away from their dreams and the hopes that Aunt Sadie had for them. I often think that there is nothing quite as sad as old family photographs.

When I was a child, I always spent Christmas at Alconleigh. While some Christmases were boring, others were unforgettable. There was one Christmas, for example, when the house caught fire, and another when my horse nearly killed me. There was another Christmas when Linda, then aged twelve, explained sex – or what Linda *thought* was sex – to the neighbour's young daughters. Linda's words had been so horrible that the girls left Alconleigh crying. Linda was punished by Uncle Matthew and sent to her bedroom, this time for a week.

There was also the unforgettable Christmas when Uncle Matthew and Aunt Sadie went to Canada. The Radlett children all hoped that something bad would happen to their parents' ship. All the children, **especially** Linda, wanted to be free from their parents. But the Christmas I remember the most was when I was 14 and Aunt Emily became engaged.

Aunt Emily was Aunt Sadie's sister, and she had looked after me for most of my life. My own mother felt that she was too beautiful to have a child at 19. She left my father when I was a month old and ran away with another man. After that she ran away with another man and then another man and soon she became known as "the Bolter". My father's second, third, fourth and fifth wives did not want to look after me, so I was left with Aunt Emily.

Sometimes, my mother or father visited me. They were very **glamorous** and exciting, but in my heart, I knew I was lucky to have Aunt Emily. And, when I became older, I realized that my parents were not really glamorous or exciting. My mother was living with an officer in the army in the South of France and my father had no money and lived in the Bahamas. Aunt Emily was never glamorous, but she was always my mother, and I loved her. But during those early Christmases, I wanted my parents very much. I thought it must be exciting to **live in sin**. Linda and I were fascinated by **sin**, and our favourite **sinner** was Oscar Wilde.

"But what did he *do*?" I asked Linda one Christmas.

"I asked Father," Linda replied. "But he screamed at me. It was frightening. He said, 'If you say that name in this house

again, I'll hit you!' So, I asked Mother, but she wasn't very clear. She said, 'Oh, I never quite knew, but I think that it was worse than murder.' Bob says that he'll ask the other boys about it when he goes to school."

"Oh, good! Do you think that Oscar Wilde was worse than my Mummy and Daddy?" I said.

"Surely not. Oh, you're so lucky to have parents that **sin**."

That Christmas, aged fourteen, I walked into the hall at Alconleigh. It was always the same every year. I always came by the same train and arrived at tea-time. Aunt Sadie and the children were always at the same table under the enormous spade, just as they were in the photograph. It was always the same cups with large roses on them and silver plates for cakes. The children, of course, were getting older. The babies were becoming children, and there was a new Radlett, little Victoria, now aged two. The Radlett children always ran towards me, all except for Linda. She was always very pleased to see me, but she never wanted to show it.

"Where's Brenda?" Linda said as I sat down. Brenda was my white mouse.

"She died," I said.

Aunt Sadie looked nervously at Linda. "Oh dear," she said.

Linda immediately started crying. Nobody cried as much as she did, especially about animals. She was very **emotional**. The other children, usually Louisa and Bob, loved to **tease** her. They were often punished for making her cry. Linda was my favourite cousin, but she was also my favourite person. The Radlett children were all beautiful in their own way, but

Linda was the most beautiful. There was something different about her.

"Where's Brenda now?" Linda said angrily, looking at her plate.

"In the ground," I replied.

"Now, Linda dear," said Aunt Sadie, "why don't you show Fanny your fish?"

"He's upstairs asleep," said Linda.

The other children looked at each other and laughed. Linda started to cry even more and ran out of the room.

"You all need to stop teasing Linda!" Aunt Sadie shouted.

The room was quiet for a moment.

"It's the child **hunt** tomorrow, Fanny," Louisa whispered.

"Yes, I know," I replied.

Uncle Matthew had four beautiful dogs, which he used to **hunt** his children and sometimes me. Two children were chosen to leave the house first and Uncle Matthew and the rest of the family followed the dogs on horses. It was great fun.

The child hunt on this Christmas visit was a great success. Louisa and I were chosen to leave the house first and we left soon after breakfast. After about two hours of running, and only half a mile from home, Uncle Matthew caught us.

"I hear Brenda has died," Uncle Matthew said as he got off his horse. "Never mind. That mouse smelled awful. I always told you it was unhealthy, or did she die of old age?"

Uncle Matthew was nice when he wanted to be, but he wasn't usually nice to me. At that time, I was very afraid of him.

"You should get a cat, Fanny. They are more interesting than mice. When I go to London after Christmas, I'll get you a cat."

"Oh, Father, that's unfair," said Linda, who was walking her horse beside us. "I've always wanted a cat."

Linda was Uncle Matthew's favourite child. But today, my uncle was angry with her which explained why he was being nice to me.

"You've got enough animals," he said. "You can't control the animals you have. And don't forget what I told you – I don't want your dog in my house."

Linda started crying, climbed on to her horse and rode home. Uncle Matthew's anger towards Linda never lasted long and, after a day or two, Linda was Uncle Matthew's favourite once again.

These moments were normal in the Radlett home. They were either extremely happy or extremely sad. They loved or they hated; they laughed or they cried. Their life with Uncle Matthew was confusing. Sometimes he was nice, but sometimes he attacked them for no reason at all. He also did not allow the girls to go to school. And while it was sometimes difficult for them, the Radlett children had learned from Uncle Matthew how to manage life's problems. Ordinary children like me, however, could not.

Everybody knew that Uncle Matthew hated me. Uncle Matthew either loved or hated and he usually hated. He hated me because he hated my father; they were old enemies at school. When I was born, my mother wanted to leave me with Aunt Sadie because Linda and I were the same age.