

Serendipity Antiques

Dearest Ellis,

What I am intending to write down for you is something Janis and I have agreed I should tell you, but only in the future, eleven years from now, when you are eighteen.

I suppose it is a confession of sorts and I hope you will forgive us for withholding these details until you are an adult.

My latest scans show I am on the way out. With only a few months left we are trying to get everything arranged so that Janis can muddle on alone until she finds a new partner, which I have asked her to do, for your sake and for my peace of mind, as I spin high above you in Eternity with my lovely Mum and Dad, grandparents who would have loved you to bits had they lived to meet you.

Here goes then, let me see if I can make sense of it without rambling off track. If I do, please make allowances for the painkillers. They make me woozy, unfocussed, apt to stray.

This secret began around two weeks ago, when Janis and I began working our way through the boxes from the rented cage at the self-storage unit, Mum's 'treasure chest' as she referred to it. Mum had always been a hoarder, reluctant to give up on anything, particularly items bought at house clearance sales and auctions. To be honest, when we started going through these boxes, we soon discovered it was mostly worthless bric-a-brac accumulated from three decades of running *Serendipity Antiques*.

Right, let me get back on track. By the time you read this, I expect Janis will have explained you are a donor sperm baby and that your father is Danish. Sadly, unless the law has changed, he will have to remain a mystery to you. Suffice to say, you were a perfect child, right from inception. My pregnancy was entirely trouble-free and when you arrived, you just popped out smiling and gurgling happily, growing up to become the perfect, clever, happy boy you are today.

Janis will also have explained that 'Ellis' is Danish and means 'he who carries the flame'. We chose this name because you are 'our flame' and we want you to carry forward our Fraser-Reid name into the future, proudly, for us and your grandparents who would have loved you too, had they lived to see you.

In case she has not yet told you, Janis was born Jolaife Obakatu. As a child in Nigeria, she was a victim of FGM, inflicted when she was an infant. Aged sixteen, she was sent to a relative who lived in Manchester, a horrible woman who in turn sold her on as a child bride to an older man, a Nigerian who already had two wives.

At the first chance, Janis stole money and got on a train, which happened to take her to Glasgow. Three days later, while they were walking our dog Biffy in Kelvingrove Park, Mum and Dad found Janis sleeping rough, huddled in the centre of a huge rhododendron tree. It was early January; she was hypothermic, mumbling incoherently. They brought

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her here, to this flat on Dumbarton Road and six months later, on my birthday, they adopted her, changing her name to Janis Fraser-Reid.

At first, I was just her big sister, but what happened over the years is her story to tell, if she is willing. Suffice to say, we fell in love. When we made our commitment, central to this was our decision to try for a baby to carry forward the memory of us and 'our' parents.

Now, Ellis, back to the present and to you.

Today is the 29th of June, which is my thirty-eighth birthday. Janis has the same birthday, at least according to her adoption papers. These documents, fully authentic, say she is Scottish, and that her parents are my parents and so, in the eyes of the law, Janis and I are sisters, even though she is much, much prettier than me. Dad made these arrangements through his older brother, your great-uncle Peter Fraser-Reid, who is quite a famous Advocate who is very well regarded in Edinburgh. If he is still alive when you read this, perhaps he will be willing to tell you how this was achieved but I imagine he will say only it was accomplished by 'irregular means', a phrase he enjoys using.

I should have explained earlier; our Mum was half-Jamaican and half Irish, from Tipperary, where she had been born and brought up until she moved to Glasgow to attend the School of Art where she met your grandfather, James Fraser-Reid who was originally from Edinburgh. According to our family legend, they fell into love and into bed that first night and I was born exactly nine months later, Ellen Fraser-Reid.

When they graduated, with a starter loan from Uncle Peter, they moved to this shop on Dumbarton Road because it was cheap but also because it came with a tenement flat directly above. The flat and shop were connected by a voice tube with whistles at both ends so that they could call and speak to each other. People used to say it contravened fire regulations, but we ignored them.

When I was a wee girl about the age you are now, during the school holidays, while Mum was out looking for bargains, I stayed home with Dad, sometimes in the shop but usually upstairs, playing our grand piano. He would whistle up to check on me and we played a game, I was the Captain on the Bridge and he was the Chief Engineer, in the Engine Room. I would decide where we should sail to on any day and off we would go, with my school atlas open, calling down to tell him where we were, travelling all the globe.

Right, Ellis, back to the nub of my story.

My Mum, your Granny Matilda, was the driving force in the business. Dad was more of a shop-minder, happy to spend his days touching up paintings, repairing old watches and clocks and re-constructing broken crockery, anything to avoid dealing with commercial realities. Mum was much more outgoing, attending auctions and house clearance sales,

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always on the hunt for a bargain. One day, in Pollokshields, she bought a stuffed gorilla we called Jonny. He was centre stage in our shop for years, labelled 'not for sale' until a professor from a museum in England, Leeds I think it was, asked if she could buy it for her display. She was from Jamaica too and, after a good hagggle, Jonny went off to his new home. It was a relief for us because he always gave off a distinctive odour. Someone told us once the smell was formaldehyde which nowadays is classified as a human carcinogen.

Oh dear, Ellis, there I go again, wandering down memory lane. Forgive, let me start again.

So, around two weeks ago, Janis and I opened one of a batch of boxes she had brought from the self-storage unit. Our aim was to clear out the entire backlog stock so that I might have the final say before unwanted items were consigned to the rubbish bin.

One box, not really a box, a sort of stout leather travel trunk, looked promising.

Attached by a string to the handle of the box was a buff-coloured label, in Granny Matilda's swirly handwriting:

From the attic of Mount Rigi, Nithsdale Road, Pollokshields (bought blind at auction).

Folded neatly and stable to the back of the label was a Bill of Sale from McTear's Auctioneers, made out in the amount of £5, with the description:

One storage box, damaged lock, sold unopened, believed empty.

Janis has a huge bunch of keys and, eventually, we found one which opened the lock.

Under a dust sheet, each wrapped in thick brown paper, tied with string and sealed with red sealing wax, there were thirty-two identical wooden boxes, flat, thin, inlaid in red, black and gold with ornate Swastikas. Inside these display boxes, we discovered coins and stamps from around the world. From a study of reference books at The Mitchell Library, Janis realised we had found a treasure trove of rare items.

To get a feel for their value, we took a few stamps and coins to a dealer in St Enoch's Square, using the cover story that they had belonged to my uncle who had recently died and had left them to me in his will.

We could see at once the man was excited by these items. After checking his reference books and making a few phone calls from his inner office, he offered us £10,000, adding if we wished to be paid in cash, this could be easily arranged.

Realising that this amount must be a low estimate, we declined his offer, which made him angry. He upped his offer by £11,000, and finally, by stages, to £15,000. We were now sure the items must be worth even more. When we got out, he would not give up, trailing after us along the street, muttering angrily. As we headed for the Subway, he upped his

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'final offer' to £17,000 cash. When he asked for an address and contact telephone number, fearing he would send someone to rob us, I gave him details for a fictitious person who lived in Motherwell.

At this point, we rang Uncle Peter, who drove through from Edinburgh and took charge.

Well, Ellis, the upshot is that there is to be a private closed auction in London in September, timed to coincide with an International Convention of Philatelists and Numismatists to be held at Kew Palace.

Bonhams have given a lower estimate of £3,200,000 net after fees and charges. Uncle Peter will set up the 'Ellis Fraser-Reid Trust' to secure your future, regardless of what happens to me and Janis. He has also insisted on putting your name down as a day boy at *Fettes College* in Edinburgh and has promised to help Janis to find a nice place for you both to live and suitable premises for her to relocate *Serendipity Antiques* nearby.

I am hoping both the flat and shop will be in Queen Street, overlooking the gardens where I have asked Janis to have my ashes scattered with a tree planted in my memory and a bench with our three names on a brass plaque.

Ellis, I hope both you and Janis have a good life. Always strive to do your best, for yourself, for Janis and everyone you encounter on your path through life.

Make me proud of you,

Your loving mother,

Ellen Fraser-Reid, M.A. (Hons), ARCM