SYLVIA KELSO

THE MEDICI CHAPEL

"This is called the New Sacristy,
And is a work unfinished
By Michelangelo. Here are the Dukes."
The light
Holds up the faces
Of two totally insignificant Medici.
"And here lies Lorenzo, called
The Magnificent." The child
Slides on her knee, thumps at her bosom. The Madonna
Waits upon space.
"Here Michelangelo was free to shape his own conception."
"These are the statues."
The tourists limp out, shepherded
Round the corner, the next circus
Is already open. Silence interludes.
Under the tombs the earth moves, harnessed:
Moves and is still moving.
Evening, Dawn, Day, Night.

HELEN BULLEY

MY AUNT MAISIE

Aunt Maisie was peculiar. We all accepted the fact without question. She moved through our lives somewhere in the background, rarely coming into full focus, an aunt who was always pleasant and kind but nevertheless a bit odd, who sat after dinner in a corner of the room and never commanded universal attention but inhabited a little space all her own, slightly but clearly separate from the communal space of the rest of the family. Like a part of the furniture she was always there, like the old fuel stove in the kitchen or the family photographs that lined the walls of the rarely-used sitting-room.
When we arrived for holidays at my grandmother’s farm, the place where my mother grew up and which my Uncle Paul now managed, Aunt Maisie would come out of the house and down the steps somewhere behind my grandmother and uncle and aunt and a knot of cousins, smiling politely, hovering, waiting to be greeted and then gone, off to the kitchen to make tea or into the garden to cut fresh flowers for the dinner table that evening.

She was really my great-aunt, my grandmother’s sister-in-law, and she always seemed old, even from the time I was three.

She wore her grey hair pulled back and fastened with an old tortoiseshell clip, and she had pale smooth skin and not many wrinkles. Her eyes were what I remember best, clear blue eyes, bright not with happiness but with a kind of intensity whose origin I didn’t know and which lent her a mystery that excited curiosity. They had depths, her eyes, depths, my father once remarked, that were better not fathomed.

They got along well, my father and Maisie. They connected, through their love of poetry and of the landscape around them and through a common sensitivity that seemed to set them a little apart from other family members.

Once I asked my father why Maisie seemed different from other people. You could sense in her some experience or emotion that had divided her off, invisibly, from others.

“You must always be kind to her,” my father said, and he said nothing else.

So I was kind to her, because my father said so, and because Aunt Maisie was the sort of person you wanted to be kind to.

She had lived at the farm always and had had the same little room at the north side of the house which opened onto a small verandah of its own and overlooked the orchard. An old cane chair sat on the verandah and sometimes when my sister and cousins and I were playing in the orchard we would see Aunt Maisie sitting in the chair, working away at a piece of embroidery or reading a book. She would pause to look at us and smile her funny crooked smile and then she would go on with whatever it was she was doing.

“She’s always been a wizard at her embroidery,” Auntie Kaye said. “It’s a lost art these days really, except for women like Maisie.”

It was the fifties by then, and the nation was flushed with material success and absorbed in watching television and buying new Holdens and voting for Menzies.

Aunt Maisie embroidered napkins and doilies and tablecloths, and smocked and pintucked the bodices of dresses for other peoples’ grand-
children. Her wrinkled fingers were skilful and precise, and at night she would sit leaning over a piece of work by the lamp in the corner of the big kitchen, quiet, absorbed, while conversations rose and fell about her. Sometimes the entire evening might pass without her speaking.

And yet you noticed if she wasn’t there.

"Where’s Maisie got to, I wonder?" my mother might ask, remarking her absence.

Maisie was necessary to the atmosphere of peaceful security in the household. Her presence was taken for granted, and her absence upset the balance of quiet contentment. Finding her gone was like finding the clock in the hall had stopped chiming or that the fire in the stove had died down and the water in the kettle grown cold.

One day I went into her room. I went in quietly, slowly, feeling the room’s dark coolness and silence. It wasn’t that any of us were forbidden to go in there, just that the opportunity never seemed to arise.

There was a bed with a beautiful embroidered linen cover; an old oak wardrobe and a rose-coloured velvet armchair with a blue silk cushion; there was an oak dressing-table with jars of creams and little pots and boxes of pins and clips and buttons and rarely-worn brooches, and some old photographs in silver frames.

One of the photographs showed a little boy in a dark suit and stiff white collar seated under a huge pepper tree. He was serious, unsmiling, a little forlorn. I wondered who he was.

The room smelled of fruit ripening in the orchard outside, of lace and feathers perfumed by lavender in little silk sachets. On the walls were paintings of rivers and hills and churches and one of a lady on a big black horse. She was dark-haired and beautiful and had bright blue eyes. It couldn’t be Aunt Maisie though, I thought. She wouldn’t have looked like that, even if those were her eyes.

One day after a few more summers had passed and my sister had given up playing with me in favour of listening to the Beatles and Bob Dylan I asked my mother about Maisie.

We were in the garden, walking between beds of petunias and phlox. My mother wore a big broad-brimmed straw hat to protect her complexion from the sun.

"There’s a photo on her dressing-table," I said. "Of a little boy."

"Oh yes," and my mother beat away flies that crowded round, undaunted by her hat. "Yes, that’s right."

I waited for more. My mother was clearly reluctant to provide it.
"But who was he?" I asked. The little boy's big solemn eyes were still quite clear in my head even though I hadn't been back in the room again.

"He was called Edmund," said my mother, and bent down to break off a little bunch of pink phlox. "It's an old story. It all happened so long ago."

My grandmother came out of the house then to tell us tea was ready. And another summer passed before I talked again with my mother about Maisie.

"He wasn't her little boy was he?" This I asked the following year, when my mother and I sat shelling peas on the verandah steps in the late afternoon sun.

"Yes, he was hers."
My mother looked down at the peas in the blue bowl and was sad.
"Poor Maisie," she said softly.

And I was excited then, sensing that I had stumbled upon a tale of dark romance.

"Nobody ever talks about him," I said. I put some more peas in the bowl and looked at my mother. "Wasn't Aunt Maisie married?"

"No, she wasn't."

And suddenly Aunt Maisie was utterly transformed in my imagination. She was like a character in one of the many novels I borrowed at a great rate from the local library or the ones I wrote endlessly in my own head and was always changing, never finishing.

"She fell in love with a young man who was visiting your grandfather, from the city." My mother paused and broke open a pea pod. "She thought he would marry her, but he didn't. He went away." There was a silent judgment passed in the way my mother pulled apart the next pea pod. "Maisie was sent to the city, to stay with an aunt. The aunt took the baby, and Maisie came back home, and she's been here ever since." My mother pulled at the brim of her hat, a new hat this year, with a wider brim. Still the flies found her face.

I wanted to hear more but my mother didn't seem to want to talk about it. She went away inside with half of the peas still unshelled and I stayed on the steps and thought about Aunt Maisie, immersed in the romance of her lost love. I tried to conjure up her lover. A hero from Gallipoli perhaps, one who had been forever scarred by the horrors of war and whom Maisie could not save, despite her love. Thus he had brought destruction to both their lives. Oh, it was achingly tragic and satisfying. There they were in the orchard, all those years ago, in the moonlight on a summer's night, a night filled with the scent of the ripe
fruit and the sound of the creek water gushing. A night to consummate a grand passion. And then the night when Maisie came and waited in vain, discovering his betrayal, discovering she had been left to struggle with her guilty secret, abandoned and alone.

Aunt Maisie took on the stature of one of Hardy’s doomed heroines. There was about her a whiff of the Brontes, and the musical melancholy of Keats and Tennyson. She fed my adolescent imagination. Pain and loss had not yet become real emotions; they were still the stuff of which great art and literature were made, not part of personal experience.

And so it was quite exciting to discover a genuine skeleton in the family closet. My other aunts paled into dull insignificance and boring respectability beside Aunt Maisie. But it never occurred to me that I might actually talk to her about it. There wasn’t the necessary connection between us. We were separated by my illusions and the depths of her experience.

Then I grew up a bit, and went to university, and graduated, and loved, and lost, and travelled a bit, and met Felix, and travelled a bit more, and married Felix, and wrote a few poems.

Aunt Maisie came down for the wedding, a small affair held in my parents’ garden. She wore a long blue dress and had fastened at her throat one of her lovely old silver brooches, and there was about her, just for a moment, as she walked across the neat green lawn towards us, just a hint of that confident, dark beauty of the painting hanging on the wall in her room.

It was when Felix and I were cutting the cake that I looked up suddenly and caught Aunt Maisie looking, and there was then in her eyes such a terrible naked sadness that killed for good the darkly romantic picture I had been carrying for so long in my head, and for the first time I had a true glimpse of her suffering, even if only in the apprehension of the contrast between her experience and my own present one.

And I wanted to talk to her then, felt at last the time had arrived when understanding and sympathy were possible.

But of course it wasn’t possible to talk, not at a wedding. There was only time to kiss Aunt Maisie along with the rest, and give her an extra hug and hope that somehow it might convey my feeling, my new feeling. But I couldn’t tell. She had become habituated to masking her pain. She simply smiled, and wished me well.

She got sick. I wanted to go and see her but my doctor told me not to go gallivanting about the countryside when my baby was due at any time. And it was just as well I took his advice since my son decided to arrive early, one star-filled autumn evening.
After Felix had gone home exhausted and I lay in a state of total euphoria in my crisp white hospital bed the sister on night duty came in and offered to take my son away to the nursery so that I could get some sleep.

I was amazed.

“Surely women don’t sleep after they’ve just given birth?”

She’ll find out herself one day, I thought, feeling a flood of maternal instinct. There wasn’t any point in trying to explain. There weren’t words adequate for the task.

“But the baby will keep you awake, Mrs. Stephenson. You tend to hear every little noise. I’ll bring him back in time for the early morning feed.”

I sat up and instinctively put my hand on the side of the metal crib that held my baby.

“No thank-you,” I said. “I want him with me.”

And she gave up then and went out, no doubt marking me down as a nuisance and troublemaker. I stayed sitting up, and looked at the little knot of soft limbs and pink skin and white cloth that was my son, and that was when I thought of Aunt Maisie and knew what it was I’d failed to understand down all the years, saw how I’d had to wait till now to know what had been done to her.

I leaned over the crib and picked up my tiny son and held him to me as Maisie must have done half a century before. Only when the morning came someone took her son away.

Aunt Maisie was dying. She lay on her white bed in the crisp cool room propped up on pillows and I took my baby in and sat on the edge of the bed. She touched the baby’s cheek with her thin wrinkled fingers and then took my hand and smiled at me, that funny crooked smile of hers, only now it contained within it a kind of peaceful resignation. I looked at the painting on the wall above her and then at the old face as it was now and for a moment the room filled with the terrible waste of all those years in between. But the moment passed and the words I had imagined I might say didn’t come. Somehow she had learned to live with her sorrow, and serve others. I didn’t understand yet how, but I might, in time.

I held her hand, and we sat in the white silence and smelled the fruit in the summer air.