

Bonne Maman

Daddy's fourth wife was, looking back, not a bad mother.

She was never nasty, often funny and did not pretend that we were going to be the best, best friends two people ever could be.

Also, she made faces behind Daddy's back when he was 'going off on one' and asked him, please, not to bring his acting home with him. I agreed with her on that - especially when it was Iago or Dr Faustus he was bringing home.

Yes, she was fine and certainly better than number 3, who even my father admitted was crazed.

We found out just how crazed one Sunday when Daddy, I and Eloise (our housekeeper), had to lock ourselves in the big pantry while she smashed everything her little, grabby hands could reach.

Luckily, she wasn't very tall, and she didn't like heights, so pretty soon she ran out of ammunition. Except for her words. As they exploded against the pantry door, Eloise placed her hands over my ears and Daddy loosened the lid on a jar of plums in brandy and methodically started to eat them. They looked swollen and bruised as he popped them in his mouth, which seemed apt somehow.

When the noise finally stopped on Number 3's side of the door, it erupted on ours as my father's plummy voice launched a counter-attack. It became slightly less sharp as the brandy kicked in. He stumbled finally on a misjudged, 'You bore me to death. In and out of bed.'

At this Eloise sighed in her particularly French way and said, 'Plus ça change,' a statement she was well qualified to make having worked for Daddy since Wife number 1 – my real mother, a by-product of my father's embarrassing flirtation with French films.

Before I could recite Number 3's catalogue of persecutions to fire Daddy up again, (a catalogue that included dark threats about cellars) we heard a grating noise and watched as bits of the things previously shattered were posted under the pantry door.

She managed to send us half a gravy boat and the Christmas turkey plate, its little holly berries coming through separately, before my father's agent and his publicist cornered her in a theatrical pincer movement.

She did not go quietly.

'No more actresses,' Daddy declaimed later as we crunched our way over the kitchen floor, and then he left Eloise and I to sweep up while he went to speed dial his lawyer.

So, all in all, number 4 was a cool drink after all that fire. Particularly as she left Eloise to do what Eloise had been doing forever - mothering me and lifting me gently back on to my feet when I wobbled (or, rather, when Daddy wobbled), and sending me off to school in the right clothes, with my journal signed in all the right places.

When I fell over she cuddled me; when I was hungry she fed me. At night she read me a story and tucked my duvet in around my neck.

The complex, simplicity of love.

Number 4 understood this and concentrated instead on massaging Daddy's ego; something she did very well judging by the noises that reverberated around the house at night.

My days were filled with different sounds. When Eloise could step away from her duties, we would shriek through made up games and escape along the lanes, singing.

But what I liked best was sitting sideways on her lap and teasing out the strands of her fat, brown plait as she told me about France. Together we walked among sunflowers and felt the waters of a blue, blue sea run between our toes.

I hankered to go there with her when she returned each summer, but instead played at happy families with Daddy and his current wife in a succession of fashionable Italian resorts. Smiling waxenly for the cameras, I would drag my hot little sandaled feet about and count the days until we could go home. And there would be Eloise when we got there - browner, a bit plumper, she brought me new stories of *her* family and I listened, little shards of jealousy mixing with my pleasure.

When I was ill, or needed cheering, Eloise would talk about my own mother. How beautiful and talented she had been; how much she loved me. And although I knew the story did not end well, that an icy road and a drunken driver had whisked Maman away, I would melt into Eloise's assurance that my mother was, without doubt, watching over me.

Dozing as I listened, I would feel Eloise drop little kisses on my hair to make up for the fact that black ice was slippery, men were slippier and Daddy

was one of the slippiest. She knew as assuredly as I did that if Daddy's wives wanted to mother anyone, it had to be him. Somehow Wife number 1 had slipped me through the net.

As I got older, Eloise would flesh out my knowledge of the roll-call of wives. Number 2 was the most fleeting; arriving before I could walk and leaving just after I said my first words. She filled the house with a flotsam and jetsam of artists and trailed a large spotted pig around on a lead. She led Daddy a pretty dance too, bewitching him with her green eyes and with the gap between her front teeth that made him think of the lusty Wife of Bath.

Chaucer had been right about the gap-toothed thing. One night she disappeared with two men from the village leaving Daddy with a house full of bohemians and pig manure.

In response, he dabbled in a period of free-love. I learned to smile at every new arrival. Some were just blurs on the panelled staircase; others stayed for months. All bored him eventually.

One memorable week Daddy even brought a man down to breakfast. Justin was kind and pulled a boiled egg from my ear to make me laugh, but as he did, I saw my father's mouth twitch. Daddy did not do second billing.

Two weeks later he was staunchly heterosexual again and an exotic dancer was buttering his breakfast rolls.

I was thirteen by the time wife number 4 was on her way out, only making a short detour through the kitchen to drop her best pearls into my hands. 'To make up for being a rubbish mother,' she said and then positively skipped down the gravel drive.

Barely six months later, the worst wife of them all arrived. A permablonde, perma-tanned pile of permafrost whose body had been surgically enhanced while evidently leaving her mind in its original, feral state.

'Hello,' I said that first afternoon.

'Hello back,' she replied and tucked her ratty dog further up into her armpit.

They were the only nice words I ever got from her.

Nothing was right about me. My weight. My attitude. My clothes. My breathing.

She particularly didn't like my breathing.

To be specific, that I did it at all.

When Daddy was away filming for months, we waged a totally uncivil war that neither of us could win. She had his sexual organs firmly on her side; I had a teenager's ability to stonewall.

Careful not to openly antagonise 'The Mahogany One', Eloise secretly reinforced me with lemon gateau and whispered kindnesses. But the skirmishes came to a head when Daddy was persuaded to send me away to school.

That day something in our relationship curdled. I'd always seen him as a bit dashing, a bit daft, childlike in his tantrums and demands. Now he was just mean; too in love with himself to have anything left over for me. Daddy had left the building.

I turned, of course, to Eloise. She patted my hand and smiled enigmatically. Later I heard her singing 'La Marseilles' in her bathroom.

Lying on my bed that night, I knew that should I be separated from her, I would simply drift and drown without anybody noticing. I could already smell the foul seawater sucking at my legs as I fell asleep.

On waking, however, I found myself enveloped in an even more putrid smell. My nose led me to the kitchen, past little piles of steaming evidence that someone or something was not well.

The pole-axed rat dog lay cradled in mahogany arms. 'Upset stomach,' the vet pronounced, somewhat unnecessarily. 'Eaten something tricky. Get this down its throat every four hours.' He shook a bottle of white liquid in my father's direction.

Twitch went my father's mouth.

Swaddled, carried and coo, coo-ed over, the sick dog was like a newborn baby, sleeping between my father and his wife and waking in the night for medicine.

Two days in, my father was rancid.

By Friday he snapped, 'Dog. Or. Me.'

After Wife number 5's taxi had gone, my father U-turned about school. Eloise and I sat in my room and she produced a bar of glossy, French chocolate.

I observed that two squares were missing.

'Small dog,' she said, her head slightly tilted, 'two was plenty.' We ate the evidence.

For a while after that my father was fallow, and when Wife number 6 did arrive, I was too busy experimenting with my own romances to take much

notice. There was a wedding, I remember, but I cannot pull out its individual strands to separate it from the other five I had attended. Within two years she had slipped through my life without marking it, leaving one January before snow blocked the drive.

I thought of the black ice under my mother's car and looked at my father and knew there would be no more wives. While the whole world had grown tired of his weddings, my father had just grown tired. Too many low budget films to pay off too many high maintenance wives. He had a look of sucked paper.

'Even Henry the Eighth stopped at six,' he joked and shortly after dropped dead during a matinee.

Two days after the funeral and some weeks before the memorial service, Eloise and I sat at the kitchen table and drank sweet tea as we read the entrails of my father's life. The papers were not kind. Particularly to the neurotic, drunken, drug addict who had been my mother.

She was her own killer it transpired; the ice was innocent.

'You kept mum all these years,' I managed.

Eloise nodded and continued to sip her tea.

Later though, with the light in the kitchen fading, I heard her say, 'Too old to sit on my lap now, I suppose?'

'Too heavy,' I replied, but got up and did it anyway.