The Lights Went On Again

by Shrubbery_Girl

Summary

Connie Fitzwilliam turns 16 - not a sequel to Blackout per se, just a glimpse into what the future might have been.

Connie Fitzwilliam was going to turn 16 on the 6th October and it was going to be great, she knew that. Her birthday last year had been horrible, the grown-ups had only talked about boring politics and the Suez and daddy had not stopped going on about Poland and in the end, she and Hope and Jennifer had retreated upstairs where Bea was playing with her stupid dolls and they had tried on a couple of mummy's frocks, but altogether, it had been a complete disappointment.

This year, however, everything was going to be different. She would be 16, for one thing, which was almost grown-up, and mummy had said she could have a real party on the next weekend, with records and a bowl of punch and no Bea and no Mark and no grown-ups. The grown-ups would all come on her real birthday, for tea and later dinner, and Connie would be allowed to have some wine with the dinner, mummy had said. Even auntie Louisa would come, and grandma, and uncle David and aunt Betty of course with that total brat Hope and her brothers, and aunt Jenny and uncle Charles with that moron Andy and with Jennifer, who was now already in the Lower Sixth, and Nina with her new baby and everyone. It was going to be fabulous and everyone would say how much Connie had grown up and how pretty she was in her new frock with the nicest petticoat one could imagine.

She had seen pictures of mummy from before the war, when mummy had still been young and lived in London and was going out to dance every night. Mummy had looked so pretty and elegant then, in those funny frocks and with her hair done up in curls looking like an actress. Connie hoped someone would say how she looked exactly like mummy even though, unfortunately, she had inherited daddy's hair.
In the pictures from the war, mummy did not look so very elegant anymore, although she was still very pretty, being mummy, but she was wearing old frocks from aunt Jenny or uncle Charles’ trousers and she had a stupid bun that made her look like a teacher. Connie knew that during the war, she and mummy had lived on aunt Jenny’s farm in Cornwall and Bea had been born there, too, but Connie could not remember it. She only remembered that one day when she and Andy and Jennifer and Hope had been playing in the garden and Bea was still a baby. Connie had been thirsty and gone inside to drink something and mummy and aunt Jenny and aunt Betty had been sitting at the kitchen table, around the wireless, and they had all been crying. Connie had asked mummy why she was crying and mummy had picked Connie up and carried her through the room even though she was no longer a baby and just said, again and again, ‘it’s over, it’s all over.’

She could not quite remember what had happened afterwards, but Andy, who had already been seven then, told her. Her daddy and his daddy and Hope’s daddy had come home over the next weeks and everybody had been crying all the time, and the grown-ups had been sitting up long into the nights and discussing everything. Then, in July, aunt Betty had given birth to the twins, and nearly died from it, but Connie could not remember that either. She remembered though how auntie Louisa had come to live with them because auntie Louisa had looked so scary in her nurse’s uniform and mummy had told her to be nice to auntie Louisa because her husband had died. And Nina had come home too and she had been talking funnily and she had given them all chocolate; Connie could still remember how she and Hope had been horribly sick from all the chocolate and the chewing-gum.

It had been really crowded on the farm then but Connie thought it had to have been the best time of her life even though the food was still rationed, because that year, they were seven children in the nursery altogether, and if she remembered anything of that summer, it was that they had always been playing outside, whether it was raining or not.

Two years after that, Connie had started school in the village and she had been so sad that Hope could not go to the same school because she had moved back to Pemberley with her parents and her brothers and Nina. In the summer after that, they had moved to their own house, here in Shropshire and then, shortly before Christmas, Mark had been born. She loved her home, but she often wondered if somewhere, deep down, she was missing Cornwall.

Andy told her later though that not all had been as happy as she remembered. He told her how their parents had often been crying and how there had been quarrels because there was so little room and so little food. Auntie Betty had been very ill after she had had the twins and uncle Andrew, daddy’s older brother, had come back from the war and had lost both his legs. It was because of this that daddy would one day become an earl but Connie had only understood that last year when Hope had explained it to her and even now, she did not want to think of it.

Daddy’s younger brother had died even before Connie was born, and auntie Louisa’s husband had died in the war and the husband of Hope’s aunt Mary, and Hope’s aunt Lydia, which was why Mary and her daughter May and Lydia’s daughter Vivien were living with aunt Kitty even now, so many years later.

Daddy could have died, too, mummy had told Connie. He had been in the war and he had been captured by the Germans and they had almost killed him. That was why daddy had to use a walking-stick, and why he could not use his one arm properly. Connie shuddered. She could not even imagine what they had done to daddy and he did not talk about it to her. He had told mummy, and mummy had told Connie a little about what had happened when Connie had been old enough.

Connie hugged her pillow tighter and tried not to cry. She was so glad she could not remember any of this. When she saw the pictures, she thought it funny how their clothes had been mended and
patched so often. Andy said he still remembered what powdered milk and powdered eggs tasted like but Connie had forgot it.

She heard a soft click and saw that the door had opened and mummy peeked into the room.

‘Mummy?’ Connie whispered.

‘You’re still not sleeping, big girl?’ mummy asked and stepped into the room. She lit the lamp on the desk and came to sit on Connie’s bed.

Connie saw that mummy was already wearing her pyjamas and thought that it had to be very late.

‘Daddy can’t sleep,’ mummy explained. ‘He woke me, and I thought I would have a peek at my birthday girl.’

‘How late is it?’ Connie asked.

‘Just past one,’ mummy said. ‘It’s your birthday, darling.’

She pulled Connie into her arms and hugged her tightly.

‘Happy sixteenth, Cornelia Louisa,’ she said.

Mummy was the only one who was allowed to call her Cornelia, and only for special occasions like this. It was a stupid name. The only one who had a stupider name was Hope, because you could not even shorten that. Daddy sometimes called Hope Nadya, but that did not count, because nobody could pronounce it the way daddy could, and everybody knew he did that only to annoy grandfather Fitzwilliam.

‘How do you feel, darling?’ mummy asked. ‘Very different? Very grown-up?’

‘Oh, mummy,’ Connie said pointedly.

‘I know when I turned sixteen,’ mummy said. ‘Oh, I thought I was so old. I was getting new frocks and new shoes and everything and I was going to be presented that year. I was sure I would be getting married within the year … golly, I was so silly then …’

‘Mummy!’ Connie exclaimed.

‘Oh, darling, I’m not saying everyone is stupid at sixteen,’ mummy said. ‘But I was. I thought I was going to marry uncle David before I turned eighteen.’

‘Uncle David!’ Connie was shocked. ‘Mummy, that is awful! What did aunt Betty say to that?’

‘I didn’t know aunt Betty then,’ her mother said. ‘And eventually, I realised how wrong I was.’

‘And then you married daddy?’

‘Not immediately,’ her mother answered. ‘I was almost twenty-five when I married daddy.’

‘Twenty-five?’

‘Yes, darling, I married daddy on 14th January, 1942,’ her mother said. ‘I’m quite sure about the date. It was a Wednesday. We had to get to London to get married there and it was so horribly cold. Uncle David had managed to organise a car and aunt Betty and I were sitting in the rear huddled under so many blankets I thought we should suffocate, and we were still cold. We spent the night in
grandma’s house in London and we could not heat it. That was the coldest night of my life.’

‘But -’ Connie said. ‘But I was born in ‘41.’

‘Yes, darling,’ her mother said and smiled. ‘Sometimes, that’s the way things happen.’

‘And – the people -’

‘Oh, nobody knew we were getting married,’ her mother said. ‘They all thought we had married months ago. It was quite the secret affair. There were no guests, only the four of us, and the priest, and there was no notice in the papers, nothing. I wanted to take you along, but it was so horribly cold, and you were only three months old, so I left you with aunt Jenny. I invited auntie Louisa, but she could not come, and grandma could not come either. Daddy did not even tell his parents until a month later. Oh, I was furious with him then.’

‘Is that why daddy and grandfather do not get along?’ Connie asked tentatively.

‘What? Oh, no, no. That’s something else entirely. I’ll tell you some other day.’

Connie pouted. ‘When I’m -’

‘- older? No, not necessarily, darling. Sometime when it’s not your birthday. It’s not a happy story, you know.’

She hugged Connie again.

‘Now, sleep tight, my darling, and have sweet dreams.’

She was almost out of the door when Connie addressed her again.

‘Mummy?’ she asked. ‘Did daddy marry you because of me?’

Mummy came back to the bed and stroked Connie’s hair.

‘No, darling,’ she said. ‘Daddy married me because of all my faults, and he was lucky enough to get you as well. In fact, daddy asked me to marry him nine months before you were born.’

Mummy had already left the room when Connie figured it out. She buried her head under her pillow and knew she would never be able to tell Hope just that.

Connie woke up at six and could not sleep anymore. She was sixteen now and she could not sleep anymore. She traipsed across the corridor to her parents’ room and softly opened the door. They were madly entwined as usual, mummy lying on her stomach, half across daddy’s chest and daddy holding her tightly; Connie wondered how mummy could breathe at all. At least they wore pyjamas this time, it was embarrassing enough that they shared a bed. Daddy woke first and noticed her standing in the door.

‘Princess,’ he whispered and winked at her. ‘What’s the matter?’

Suddenly Connie felt stupid.

Mummy stirred but was not quite wake yet.

‘Come on, hop in,’ daddy said and patted the blankets.
Now mummy woke and shifted around. She saw Connie and smiled.

‘Come here, birthday girl,’ she said and moved aside so Connie could climb in between mummy and daddy.

‘Happy birthday, princess,’ daddy said and kissed Connie’s forehead.

Connie snuggled into the blankets.

‘Is it really sixteen years, Mrs Fitzwilliam?’ daddy asked. ‘It seems like it was yesterday.’

‘I believe it must be, Mr Fitzwilliam,’ mummy said. ‘Your hair certainly is white enough.’

Connie giggled.

‘I remember you behaved in a very undignified way on that occasion,’ daddy said. ‘I distinctly remember you threatening me with violent death.’

‘At least I didn’t try to strangle nanny Lucas and aunt Betty,’ mummy said. ‘I heard the most shocking reports afterwards, you know.’

‘I thought you were dying, woman!’ daddy exclaimed. ‘And they wouldn’t let me see you!’

Connie looked from mummy to daddy to find out whether they were joking. Her mother, sensing her discomfort, kissed her head and changed the topic.

‘It was the most horrible day,’ she said, smiling. ‘It was raining, it was storming, the wind was howling outside – daddy was so excited they had to throw him out of the room, and I could hear him pacing up and down the corridor for hours.’

‘It took twenty hours,’ daddy continued the tale. ‘At one point, I was sure both you and mummy had died – and then, they let me back into the room, and there you were, on mummy’s arm, and you were both so pretty, I knew not what to say.’

‘It was Wordsworth, Mr Fitzwilliam,’ mummy said. ‘Composed upon Westminster Bridge, to be precise. There I was, after the singularly most painful experience of my life, thoroughly exhausted, with an equally exhausted infant in my arms, and you had to quote Wordsworth!’

She hugged Connie to herself.

‘Still holds true to this day, though, my love,’ daddy said. ‘Earth has not anything to show more fair: / Dull would he be of soul who could pass by / A sight so touching …’

‘No Wordsworth, Mr Fitzwilliam,’ mummy said. ‘No Wordsworth, I beg of you.’

Connie looked from mummy to daddy, decided they were joking, and giggled. It was going to be good, being sixteen.

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