



My Aunty Mary

Welcome to the wedding issue. In my usual back-to-front fashion I shall dedicate this column to all those who have passed over marriage and remained single for a higher cause. No, I'm not talking about priests and nuns here, I'm thinking of my Aunty Mary and all the women like her who said no to marriage because they felt it was their duty to remain at home and look after their parents in old age.

The legacy of Aunty Mary's sacrifice is that she has no children of her own to look after her now that she too has reached old age but oddly, the phrase you are most likely to hear Mary say is, "I loved all my children". The children she is referring to are us, her nieces and nephews but also the hundreds of children she cared for at one of Lancashire County Council's Nurseries in Nelson. Aunty Mary worked there for years and loved those children to bits. They came from some of the poorest homes in the area, arriving in dirty shorts and T shirts in the middle of winter, cold and hungry. Aunty Mary would be ready with a hug and a hot bath, a spare set of clean clothes, breakfast and a cuddle. She sang silly songs, put on plays, built dens and taught her little ones the names of birds and flowers as she led them across the fields on her nature treks.

Two years ago, aged 85, my strong and independent aunt said it was time to look for a care home. A change in neighbours had left her fearful of strangers, she began forgetting things, hiding things, wandering from her home and losing her key.

This is the point where I start listing the reasons why she could not come to live with us. We didn't have the room, she was almost blind and was sure to kill herself on our stupid stone staircase, I could not afford to give up work to look after her all day. Is that enough excuses?

My neighbour, Ruksana, is of Pakistani heritage. Her mother moved in with her after her father died suddenly. Ruksana has two children and only two bedrooms which means Ruksana has to

share a room with the children to accommodate her mum. It's not easy for any of them but there is no question of it being any other way.

When Ruksana's younger brother marries, her mum will go to live with him and his new wife.



How many young couples would want that when they are just starting out? Ruksana's mum told me that it was only right that the younger women of the family should care for the older

who would look after her garden the way she had?

Then after a couple of weeks Aunty Mary began to settle in. She felt safe and because of this she became calmer. She no longer panicked about her things going missing. I breathed a sigh of relief and congratulated myself on finding the perfect residential home. Sometimes when I visited I would even find a care worker sitting with Mary and listening to those stories of all the children she had loved.

Mary has now been in the care home for two years and has made her little room her own with pictures of birds and butterflies and vases of silk flowers. But things are not always perfect. While some staff are angels others are lazy and uncaring and the management will never, ever admit to anything being wrong.

On a bad day, Aunty Mary will tell me: "I wish I'd had a little daughter to look after me." On a good one she will say, "You're like a daughter to me, Gillian." The very least I can do (if she cannot live with us) is make sure that Aunty Mary is as happy and well cared as those waifs and strays she looked after at her nursery but I have to tread a very careful path. I don't want anyone to be cruel to her because I've complained about them. I don't want them to move her to the secure dementia unit as some kind of punishment.

So instead of complaining about her bathroom being dirty or her clothes unwashed I'll take care of it myself because I love her and I

know how very great a sacrifice it was for her to stay at home instead of marrying as her brothers and sisters did.

I know I would be less of a person if I didn't have my husband and children to support me through my mad life but still, would I want Zoe to sacrifice marriage to look after me in old age? Would I be happy to move in with a newly married Joe to let his bride care for me? Probably not, but it would be lovely to think that they might consider it. ☺

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members and that they should be willing to wash and feed the elderly when the time came. For now this tradition continues; things may change in the future but presently there are no Asian old people's homes. It makes you think, doesn't it?

It was a sad day when Aunty Mary moved into her care home. She didn't look right in a strange chair, in a strange room. She worried that the birds she had fed for years would suddenly starve if she was not at home to feed them and