

All the Better to Sit Yourself In



Woman in a Chair Reading, William Castle Keith

My maternal grandmother's given name was Jocelyn, spelled with one L, one Y and one N, although everyone in the family thought it was Joyce with one Y, one C and one E. Nobody called her Joyce anyway. She was always known as Josey. Her birthday was March 21st, although everyone in the family thought it was March 19th until she died and we found her birth certificate. Josey always called her eldest son Walt but, when a genealogist obtained a copy of his birth certificate, we discovered that he had been christened Albert William.

Grandma Josey (whom I always called Nana) was idiosyncratic with facts and even more idiosyncratic with her turns of phrase. She peppered her speech with reflexive pronouns. She always *took herself somewhere*, or *thought herself something*, or *sat herself on* this or that piece of furniture. She also adored prepositions. She *made up the bed*, *took in the milk*, *left over the potatoes* that she couldn't eat. If someone was ill, they were *under the doctor*, *laid up with a cold* or *had come down with the flu*. She was also always facing in the wrong direction if anyone spoke to her:

"Mrs Webster came round and asked me if I had seen her cat, and I turned round and told her I hadn't."

Arguments with neighbours must have been a dizzying affair, with antagonists perpetually turning their backs on each other:

"I saw Mrs Turner down at the chemist, and I turned round and told her straight up not to leave her rubbish all over the front path, and she turned round and told me to mind my own business and I turned round and told her to be more civil and she turned round and said I didn't know the meaning of the word."

It brought to my mind those ornamental clocks you see on some Town Halls, where wooden figures come out at the chiming of

the hour and spin back and forth in a little dance.

Grandma Josey was blessed with several children, one or two not completely within wedlock, it transpired. Shortly after she died, we found her long lost marriage certificate, and everyone's jaw dropped when they counted forwards nine months; but no one said a word. I still don't know to this day, many years since her death, if her children fully acknowledge all their siblings' true status in the family. I don't suppose it really matters: everyone got on with everyone else, and everyone got on with Josey—more or less.

Des, Josey's second son, was the first through the door when Josey complained that her chair was giving her backache. He bought her a brand new one—a Parker Knoll, nothing cheap or shoddy where Des was concerned—and Josey settled herself into it with delight.

“I can sit myself down all the better in this new chair you brought me over, Des,” she said gratefully. How surprised we all were that Josey was pleased with something.

A week later, her next son down from Des, Ron, popped in to see her.

“That's a nice chair you've got there, Ma,” he said.

“Des brought me it over,” said Josey, “but I can't really get myself comfortable in it. It tips me backwards and I can't get myself up out of it easily.”

“Oh, I can fix that for you,” said ever-resourceful Ron. “I'll just saw an inch off the two front legs.” And that's what he did—which instantly solved the problem.

“Oh that's much more comfortable, Ron,” said Josey. “I can sit myself down in it all the better now.”

A week after that Des called 'round again to see how Josey was getting on with the new chair he had bought her.

“How are you getting on with the new chair, Ma?” he asked guilelessly.

“Well to tell you straight up, Des, I’m finding myself a bit uncomfortable. It pitches me forwards and I keep sliding out of it.”

“Oh, I can fix that for you,” said ever-conscientious Des. “I’ll just saw an inch off the two back legs.” So he did—which instantly solved the problem.

“Oh that’s much more comfortable. I can sit myself back in it all the better now,” said Josey.

The next week, Ron called in again, just to make sure his adjustment of the chair had been adequate, and that he hadn’t taken too much off the front legs.

“How are you getting on with the chair, Ma?” he asked. “Is it still tipping you backwards?”

“Yes it is,” replied Josey. “I can’t get myself comfortable in it.”

“I’ll take a bit more off the front legs,” said Ron. “I probably didn’t take off enough last time.” So he did—which instantly solved the problem.

Back came Des the next week. How was the chair? Still pitching forward? Should he take a bit more off the back legs?

When Elsie, Josey’s middle daughter, paid a visit a few weeks later, she was shocked to see how uncomfortable Josey looked sitting in what appeared to be an old nursing chair.

“Why it’s almost down to the floor!” she exclaimed. “Who brought you in this rubbish?”

“Des,” replied Josey, truthfully.

“Well he ought to be ashamed of himself,” exclaimed Elsie,

“foisting such junk on you.”

“I know,” replied Josey. “Ron’s been trying to fix it up, but he’s only made me worse off.”

“Well shame on him too,” snapped Elsie. “Ron’s not short of a bob or two. Instead of trying to bodge it, why doesn’t he get off his backside and buy you a proper chair? I’m going round to Ron right this minute to have it out with him and to make sure he fetches you over something decent ...”

... all the better to sit yourself in, she could have added.

When Elsie picked her bone with Ron, it caused a big argument between Ron and Des; Des accused Elsie of stirring things up while Ron didn’t take too kindly to being put down. It all got a bit out of hand, until Walt got dragged in. He took a day off work to have a word with all the various parties. When it came out what had been going on, everyone turned round and laughed their heads off. That Josey ... she just couldn’t help herself!