

PROLOGUE

The first child had a stack of dark hair. Her temperament placid, she ate well and grew fast. Her English relatives saw her as a typical big Thonger and just like her father.

The second child was a screamer, allergic to milk, scowling, blonde. Her German relatives saw her as a typical pale Vollmann and just like her mother.

The older sister grew tall. Asthma kept the younger small. Only 18 months between them.

The mother saw she had a fat child and a sick child. Not the children she'd expected.

The father –

Ursula Thonger, mother and wife

The photo (St John's Wood 1960) shows her about to cross the road, holding her children's hands in a stern grip, forearms surprisingly muscled on her narrow frame. Her voice is loud, her nose big and curved. She's all slamming and rushing: digging tiny plants into the rockery in rageful haste, shaking them pitilessly out of their miniature pots.

She whistles tunelessly, like wind through cracks, or she'll sing a song fragment over and over: 'A tisket a tasket a jolly little basket'.

Her lips, when she goes out, are red and sharp, her handkerchief dotted with lipstick mouths. Her brows are pencilled to match the darkened, permed hairdo sitting high on her head like a helmet.

At home, when the lipstick's worn off, her mouth droops. Except when she's whistling.

They call her Ursel, Ushi, Uzi / often feels woozy / loves her
garden
taught not to say pardon / speaks three languages quite perfectly
but any deviation / makes her frown in concentration / and force
a laugh / not understanding a word / we're used to her phrases
and curse words and odd words / *Donnerwetter nochmal* / at the
dinner table no banter
no politics no opinion / keeps her peace / anything for a quiet life
our wonderful English guide! enthuse pinned-up postcards / from
around the world

Richard Thonger, husband and father

The photo (Mayfair 1960) shows a tall man in a suit: broad shoulders and chest, wide mouth, weak chin. Bald, apart from a neat horsehoe of dark hair around the back of his head. Upright posture. Five o'clock shadow.

Soft, white hands that wave while he speaks, two fingers nicotine-stained.

Tortoiseshell glasses, less the academic, more the businessman. He rarely takes them off except to massage the dent on the bridge of his nose. The thick left lens is heavy.

In daily life, he lumbers – but when he dances ballroom, he's elegant, sleek, weightless.

He kisses all women on the lips, his daughters too. His speaking voice ranges from baritone to falsetto. He laughs at his own stories. His accent, when not jokey, is Cambridge English.

Kiddiwinks on the blink / me old china rag-and-bone
Froggy onion-seller on yer bike / bonjour cock from Le Continong
down the hatch / where's the catch? / fifteen men on a dead man's
chest
shysters conmen / bloody good driver / lend us a fiver you old
skiver
Spanish War fighter / Morse code writer
all her chums are in cahoots / put in the boot / don't touch my
papers
sweet-heart poppet moppet / it's *not* an argument say a discussion
don't speak German / only civilised English / how dare you invite
my child?

Caroline, elder child

In the photo (Puigcerdà 1961), the girl grips the ends of heavy wooden oars. She's midway through the pull, feet braced, teeth clamped onto her lower lip. Her shorts ride up her thighs, bunching around her waist: this is a child – not a young woman – under ten years old. The sunglasses make her appear older: her mother's fashionable, owlish Sophia Lorens.

Despite her father's bulk in the stern, the rowing boat is moving well; strands of hair fly forward, haloing her head. Her pale little sister lazes behind her in the bows, hand trailing in the water.

From the stern:

'Darling! Bring the oars to the middle. Not like that. Straighten up, for goodness' sake. No, Callet, no, no!'

The soft sounds of her name match her plump cheeks giving smile eager to please she learned how to write it at the age of three the curved C a hug a cuddle but when he calls her Callet it's a whip crack a snap a demand a dagger more stab words jostling deep inside

Vivian, younger child

She stands still in the photo (Regent's Park 1961), unsmiling. She can't run. She can barely walk without help. At the moment, she can't speak.

In the park, she drops her mother's hand and dashes a few steps, then falls forward in a mock headlong dive.

Hey, there's another inbreath, thanks for showing up! Oh wait, here's an outbreath – go on, use those neck muscles, use every muscle you've got – well, you made a meal out of that one – oh no, d'you mean we have to put up with you going through the whole performance again?

Her sister runs loose, easy circles back to the invalid propping herself up on the grass, their mother reading on a blanket nearby. The older girl flops down. 'Tell me how to run, Weezlewum,' she sings.

'Zigzags,' whispers the girl.

convivial
revivifying
surViVor
vivacious
vivid

Oma, Ursula's mother

Brussels, Belgium

Smiling, well-dressed. Tiny. Old.

She always puts on jewellery, gloves and a hat when she goes out.

Her heavy coat reaches down to her ankles. It's made from unborn lambs.

She has a Peruvian passport.

Her real name is Eva. She tells everyone to call her Oma. Oma means Grandma in German.

Opa, Ursula's father

Ehrang-Trier, West Germany

Fat. Short. Bald. Old.

He's Dick Vollmann. He's German. His voice is bossy but his English stumbles.

In summer he wears lederhosen.

His wife's name is Ilse. She fusses, but she has nothing to do with us.

PART ONE

April 1953

The White House, Albany Street, London NW1

Dickie,

How ghastly England is! Why on earth did that man have to drag poor Ursel over here when they had a nice life at the Allied Commission in Dusseldorf? Everything is black with filth, and there is hardly room to move in that cramped basement flat with draughty windows and shilling-in-the-slot meters.

Of course times were happier before the war - Ted was a wonderful son-in-law. When I was in London he invited me out to restaurants all the time. I do not suppose this man would ever take me somewhere decent, not that he has even asked me, nor could I bear living near him.

Nevertheless, I cannot let Ursel be without a home, what with the baby. The new lease is in her name so she had better take care of her assets. Otherwise it will all end in tears.

23 Prince Albert Road, London NW1

June 1953

Well-appointed, substantial, end-of-terrace property in late Georgian style situated between Little Venice and Primrose Hill. The house comprises 6 individual flats on three floors, producing a potential income of circa £1,638 per calendar year minus expenses. Rates for the entire building: £305 per annum; water rates £50 per annum. Potential for landlord and family to occupy one flat while renting out the other five as a useful source of income.

Habitation

Basement flat

2 First Floor flats

Zoo flat

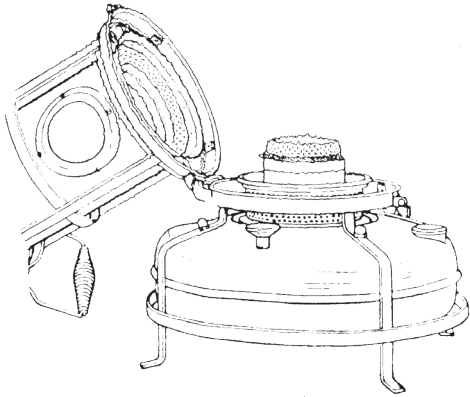
Balcony flat

Cottage flat (in small building in the walled garden)

Each self-contained flat is equipped with tap (running water), solid-fuel stove, electric lighting and an individual coal fire. Most have a private water closet. Coal can be delivered to and accessed via the coal chute close to the basement flat. Capacity for gas installation in whole house.

The property stands on the main arterial road leading to London's West End. The nearest 274 bus stop is a short walk away at Primrose Hill. Lord's Cricket Ground, St John's Wood and Hampstead are nearby, while Regent's Park and the Zoological Gardens can be easily accessed on foot.

Asking price for 99-year lease: £5,000



Item 1: Aladdin upright portable paraffin heater
Blue Flame model, green enamel finish



Boy

Primrose Hill, London NW1

The boy goes up and down the slide, humming to himself. He wears grey trousers, a grey belted raincoat, and a grey cap.

From the sandpit, I watch him go up and down, up and down. On the bench, my mother chats to the woman in brown next to her. Vivvy kicks her feet up. She's strapped into the pushchair and Mum won't let her out.

I pat sand down flat with my spade and tip the bucket upside-down. The castle comes out wonky because this sand is dry and gritty, not like at the seaside.

The boy stands rigid in the sandpit, staring at me. He has stopped humming and doesn't blink.

'Hello,' I say. 'I go to big school. Do you want to play with me?'

There's no smile. The boy moves closer; the grown-ups stop talking. The woman next to my mother shouts, 'No, Simon!'

She springs to her feet, takes the boy by the arm and leads him back to the slide. He goes up and down, up and down. I start to go after him.

Mum calls me back. 'Come on, Caroline, we're going home.'

Vivvy lets out a '*mmpf*' of frustration. Soon I'm trotting to keep up, away from Primrose Hill and across Albert Terrace.

Cursing under her breath, Mum bumps the pushchair down the uneven stone steps to our basement flat. I ask, 'Mummy, why couldn't I play with that boy?'

She replies at once, not looking at me. 'His nanny said he strangles little girls.'

I'd wanted to play with him.

Before pushing the door open, Mum turns around. Her face softens. 'I said, he throws *sand* at little girls.'