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1950s: Reflection on childhood

Mother wore a cardigan even on the hottest of days, and I have no recollection of her wearing any garment without sleeves. She was what I'd describe as a handsome, rather than pretty woman – tall and slim with fine high cheekbones and a straight nose too long for a classic beauty. She never wore powder, and only a touch of lipstick on what she considered formal occasions such as a visit to the doctor or an appointment with the headmistress at my school. Her thick lustrous, raven black hair was harshly folded into a French roll, held tightly with a cumbersome clip. No wisps of hair were left untamed to stray across her face. I think if they had, her expression would have been softer. The only times it fell freely around her shoulders was in the mornings before she got dressed. I thought then that she looked beautiful – but I never told her.

When I was a child Mother had dark moods, inexplicable moods; they were unpredictable and made me feel afraid. At these times I'd often catch her staring at nothing; standing motionless, a statue with shards of cruelty sparkling in her eyes, and yet in truth she was never deliberately unkind. However, I have to admit that she was rather out of touch, and sometimes even mildly ridiculous, mood or no mood.

The much-hated hat she bought me when I was six, says it all. That broad brimmed, brown felt hat I wore with sufferance and a great deal of protest, because at school it made me a figure of fun. Although children in the 1950s weren't obsessed with fashion, there were certain things even a six year old wouldn't wish to be seen dead in, and that hat was definitely one of them. I absolutely loathed the thing.

"Please Mummy," I begged one winter morning. "I don't want that hat. I don't like that horrible hat."

As I was about to throw it back into the coat cupboard, Mother smartly grabbed it, and it was back on my head before you could say Jack Robinson.

"The big girls keep laughing – saying things..." I began to cry, but tears changed nothing.

"What things do they say?"