

PRESERVING HISTORY

ANGI HOLDEN

OPEN BOOK UNBOUND WRITING

The ceremonial reopening had long been talked about in the town and was, as expected, a grand affair. There was a TV crew from the regional news channel and even a mention – a couple of column inches, her nephew later tells her – in one of the more cultured national newspapers. Edith was very surprised to be asked to cut the ribbon declaring the premises open to the public. She'd been proud too. George would have loved that, seeing her dressed up, posing for the photographer with those big gold scissors in her hands, the mayor in his chain of office standing to one side. There was a demonstration by the newly-appointed life-guards who pretended to rescue a gentleman in distress, followed by a mini-gala between the children from the two local primary schools, which was proclaimed a draw despite one team winning every race. The finale was provided by a team of synchronised swimmers who performed a routine that the programme claimed they were perfecting for the Olympics. Edith was amused by the tiny pegs on their noses and their fixed smiles, and wondered whether it was normal these days to wear eyeshadow and lipstick in chlorinated water. Afterwards tea was served to all the guests. Salmon and cucumber sandwiches with the crusts cut off, and spiced chicken on cocktail sticks, and dainty macaroons in pastel shades for afters. And flutes of bubbly. Altogether, it was an afternoon to remember.

A week later a framed print arrived, accompanied by a kind letter from the Chairman of the Works Committee thanking her for her attendance. The picture had already been on the front page of the paper: *Caretaker's Widow Opens Refurbished Pool*. There had been a nice write-up about George too, saying how dedicated he'd been and that he was remembered with great affection by the local community. They'd quoted Edith saying how honoured she was to declare the baths open again. The pool had been closed for so long and hadn't they done a good job with the renovations?

It's the Chairman who sets her thinking. He'd been talking about the importance of preserving history, assuring her that the investment was totally justified. Not that she'd questioned it. But maybe he'd seen her jaw drop when he'd mentioned the sums that had been spent. Eye-watering, George would have called them. The Chairman had told her about the extensive modifications, including disabled access and new water treatment systems, which had been required to comply with the updated regulations. Then he'd twinkled with pride as he'd told her he'd seen no reason to change the beautiful Victorian handles and locks. Yes, he'd reiterated, as pleased with himself as if he'd polished them with his own lawn handkerchief. They make wonderful reproductions these days, but few places can boast the originals.

One particularly muggy summer's evening, about a month later, Edith fetches the old Cornishware jug from the dresser in the dining room. It had been her mother's, and her mother's before her, and Edith can almost taste the creamy milk that Grandma used to pour for her. Thick it was, and yellow, not like this thin blue stuff you buy nowadays, and you had to lick your lips afterwards, or be laughed at for wearing a moustache. She smiles as she brushes the dust from the shoulders of the jug and tips the key onto the table.

She remembers how George had occasionally shaken the key out onto the palm of his hand, just to take another look at it. To other people it might just look like an old key, one that could secure the entry between a terrace of houses, or maybe just the door to a garden shed. It is nothing spectacular, but George had been so proud of the responsibility entrusted in him, and the key was a symbol of their faith. Not that it was actually used very often. He normally let himself into the building by the fire door, the one with the Yale lock. Later he'd open the main doors with the more ornate copy of his Victorian key, one which was kept on display inside the cash office. He'd kept the plainer Yale key on a leather fob, along with the master keys to the changing rooms, and the cleaning cupboard. He'd handed those in when he'd retired of course, patiently explaining the purpose of each key to the new caretaker. He'd always intended returning the Victorian key too. But then they decided the baths were uneconomic, and boarded up the windows and chained the doors. After that there hadn't seemed much point.

And so it begins. She takes her black swimsuit from the drawer where it has lain unused for so many years and tests the fabric between her fingers. She tries it on. Maybe it's not quite as elastic as the last time she wore it, but it's unlikely to disintegrate on contact with water and the seams are holding firm. She opens the door to the airing cupboard and lifts aside the pile of white towels. Underneath is the brilliant turquoise bath sheet she is looking for. With the key secure in the zipped pocket of her padded coat and the soft towel carefully folded under one arm, she leaves the house under cover of dusk. She has learnt the invisibility of an older woman, but doesn't want to meet an inquisitive dog-walker, so she cuts down the alley behind the terraced houses, away from the street lamps. When she reaches the baths she glances around briefly before she tries the key. It unlocks the newly refurbished oak door and she opens it just enough to slide inside.

No need to turn on any lights; she knows these corridors like the back of her hand. Pausing beside the steps that disappear beneath the still surface, she kicks off her shoes and drops her coat onto the green ceramic tiles.

With barely a splash, she slips gracefully beneath the water.

Angi Holden is a retired lecturer, whose work includes prize-winning adult & children's poetry, short stories & flash fictions, published in online and print anthologies. Her 2018 pamphlet Spools of Thread won the Mother's Milk Pamphlet Prize.