

# In the Wrong

**Barbara Latham**

Regina Jurd visits regularly. She, who was our neighbour through my childhood, also continues to cross town and clean for my aunt as she has done for thirty years.

Regina Jurd is loyal, although it has to be less complicated for her. My Aunt Penelope is furious and won't forgive me.

Family contact has shrunk dramatically since my disgrace, though members I no longer see remain players in my sense of things. Especially mother, as it begins to seem my unacceptable act might have been aimed primarily at her, though she is long buried across the world.

Fifteen years ago, my parents and four siblings went to New Zealand, leaving Kaye recently married to her college classmate, and leaving me with Aunt Penelope.

Kaye and Aunt Penelope are the two who refuse to see me. The others, being far away, don't have to make a decision. I doubt I make much impact on them.

It was the month Kaye announced her startling pregnancy that our father jumped into moving: before it was too late, he declared over pig's trotters, his favourite, which I hate and which, despite everything, I haven't had to eat since he left.

Dad's school friend then workmate, and nephew to Regina Jurd, had gone to New Zealand ten years before and done well. So Regina often said. She also said there was a job whenever Dad wanted. It came up occasionally at dinner: I never expected action. My siblings insist I was the one who had no wish to go. But I was not offered a serious choice.

After Kaye's hasty marriage, the others were off and I couldn't grasp why it was me who was to stay and be smartened up by my aunt. Aunt Penelope, who "married well", was not one to squander such advantage on too many children but, having moved up in the world, decided I might go with

her. Despite talk of opportunities in New Zealand, not one of the family who went rose far and mother sank right out of it. She had gone willingly, possibly with that intention of finally getting her husband away from the extravagant claims of his sister. For whenever Penelope suffered, father was called and mother left complaining that with all of us children she was far too busy to be prostrated by headaches, or by another repeat of that long lost mother saga.

Penelope's husband provided material padding but was said to be no comfort. He was artificially sweetened pink jelly, a little yellowed and with no hope of backbone, mother muttered. But presumably the once attractive Penelope married him for his social place and that more or less shaped him. "At least her husband has a secure income," mother would say, when once again father was needed at his sister's bedside.

Headaches plagued Penelope. When a doctor suggested fresh air and golf, she took to a darkened room for three days. As always when she was stricken, her husband moved to the spare room and her brother was summoned.

Penelope, seven years older than her only sibling, was twenty when their mother eventually died, after a decline during which she extracted repeated promises from her children to look after each other. Not one of that trio held any expectation of the father being much use, though he never deserted and was not a dreadful drinker. No worse than our father, as far as I can gather.

At thirteen I got left with Aunt Penelope, whose only child, Jeremy, is seven years older than me. Such symmetry was noted, though it looked unlikely much else would repeat. I doubted I'd have to soothe Jeremy's upset at life not being as he wished. He was not a young man with expectations – creeping by, without too much coming at him, was more his way.

These days Jeremy comes to see me bringing the chocolate creams Aunt Penelope likes, though I make no claim on him. While Penelope's notions of her due appeared solid, as if obligations towards herself had substance, I pirouette in mist, unsure which if any strands of connection might hold. I see her feet rooted on firm ground. She carries an assurance that her place remains unquestioned. I can half admire my ageing aunt's determination not to register where she might be responsible for herself.

Dad did not stand up to his sister. Even on her wedding day, his bride failed to eclipse Penelope's need for attention. Father lingered too often and too long with his sister. She held tight the arms of his suit with tearful regrets that their mother did not live to see him married.

The wedding day left scores to settle and mother's continuing impotence to dent Penelope's grip on our father obviously rankled.

When we were small our dad was quick to offer himself for a parents versus staff tug of war on sports day. If one was not scheduled, he set it up, offering the teachers a tough parent or two, as he liked teams evenly matched.

But with emigration, that game between his wife and sister was suddenly over. He quit the field and gave the outwitted Penelope a consolation prize. Me.

If mother was pleased to win that round, it's clear she didn't get satisfaction from a fresh start. I felt bought; there seemed to be some recognition of debt. With six children on an unreliable income, Penelope's money made life manageable, as mother freely admitted.

I already understood that our cousin Jeremy's material privilege could make us feel deprived but that we would always be rescued from going shoeless to school, unlike Regina Jurd's five children, despite her careful budgets and hard work.

"Helen is young still, she can learn," I overheard Mother tell a neighbour.

Other phrases about me were passed between the adults.

"Helen is a gentle girl, she is from our side," Penelope said, though only to father; and more generally: "Helen has potential". What was it my aunt saw in me? I felt too busy with my own eyes to make much sense of what others saw with theirs. It didn't then occur to me I also wished to avoid adults' gaze. Not always easy, even when you were one of many. And how they came to conclusions was hazy; why me, not either of my elder, unmarried sisters?

I could be helped to make the most of myself, it seemed, whereas it was too late to turn them into ladies. I was told there would be visits, and I could always join them later if I wanted; promises which came to nothing.

I didn't go to them. My cousin Jeremy went after university. Kaye took her baby and stayed six months. Penelope said that was the end of that marriage but there, as in her other predictions, my aunt was wrong. Kaye is still married.

When they left, I hadn't yet found my way out from mother's skirts. When I was simply put outside, there was no way back – just a disconnect.

It looked fine to face adolescence free of parents, with only one aunt and an older sister around. But it proved an illusion of freedom. I became too careful after mother cut me loose. I didn't risk being difficult. I did whatever I could for Kaye and her child over many years. Yet when I ached for her to stand by me, she did not. Perhaps she feels she has no choice; perhaps lending me a hand in my disgrace is impossible for her, just as I saw no alternative to helping bring up her son. Having taken

for granted my parents would always put up with me – until they didn't – how could I dare to push things with my sister?

Not that I have been seduced into believing there is one explanation to excavate for my later action, although others are quick to blame my parents' decision. That makes a neat end of it, but things don't add up as easily for me. Kaye is faster at reaching conclusions.

"You were Penelope's favourite." QED.

"Besides you and mother got prickly. Better to be apart missing one another than getting on her nerves." Therefore the right decision was made.

Kaye might be on to something but how could she be so sure? After all I was a concerned party and I did not recognise my role as most difficult daughter.

I wondered if I was not father's child. That could account for my being left. But soon decided Penelope would not claim me for "their side" if that was the case.

Two older sisters said I was the closest to the pregnant Kaye. She'd been put out by their arrival and bullied them, but not me, so I should be the one to stay.

My uncle said, "four children is already too many to take." In what way too many? We'd always been a full family, while his seemed empty, but I'd never considered ours having bulk that might be too hefty to move.

Jeremy, who was earnest about schooling, said I was the one whose education would be severely disrupted by a move. My two brothers could be settled in New Zealand in time to start secondary school there and my elder sisters had already finished.

My siblings threw themselves into belonging and into New Zealand accents. Only mother's voice didn't alter, the rest quickly sounded different, including Dad.

Perhaps it is a time for picking up dropped stitches and beginning afresh to knit a display self. But what if the wool is tangled, with burs attached? It's not obvious which direction might only pull knots tighter.

Father has moved on. Penelope claimed herself too sensitive to fly and never went out to her brother while he was alone, but flew out fast enough when he re-married. However his second wife greeted Penelope's woe, that at twenty she became responsible for a beautiful boy tragically deprived of his mother, with an uproarious laugh. "Come off it, he's bloody fifty-three and my husband!" Perhaps this robust new wife has freed Dad from his interest in tug of wars.

What is clear, is that my being left with Penelope was decided on my behalf, though I balked only a little. Well before I turned thirteen something somewhere seemed to be my fault. I lived with shameful flaws, only I had little understanding of what they were, and feared others might find them first. I was on guard, throwing out what others were to see. School examinations were mini-torture and seemed preparation for what awaited my soul.

Our teacher, in my final year of primary school, ominously intoned that handwriting showed character: I wrote self consciously after her warning.

“Well, don’t you have an untidy mind!” she snapped at the boy behind me. While he and I both blushed, the rest of the class tittered, as if masturbation showed through his report on strip farming in Norfolk. But it was no laughing matter to me. Why couldn’t the teacher keep judgement for correct spelling and sums? What else might she uncover? If only it was a matter of visible rot – but I was no satsuma with a few soggy segments, growing furry.

Later I would be accused of planning. But that was only true of the detail. I felt longing to locate transgression, to name it and give it shape sufficient to feel sure “that’s it!”

Despite the counsellor’s assumptions, I can’t blame my sense of guilt on religion. We only went twice a year and I couldn’t put my pervading sense of being wrong on Easter hallelujahs or Christmas carols. So where did it come from?

It was frustration over the lack of answer which won out. I wanted to know, “this is what I have done!”

Probably consideration for my aunt and sister should have prevented such reckless ruin of my supposed good character. Those two certainly think so.

Revenge is in the air these days. Their fury with me strips away my veneer of better behaviour, and thinking harshly of them now comes easily. Would I prefer to be back feeling less spiky towards them? Stupid question. Since Penelope won’t have me inside her house, I might as well see her with these newly serrated eyes.

With Kaye it’s different: I would run to her if I could. It never occurred to me she would be a casualty. I took her certainties as her bulwark. I did not once consider that a blow from me might crack her. I once glibly described her as a rock. “Unfortunately,” I added, “I have not turned out to be the limpet she wanted.” I saw my watery life as making no impact on her flinty surface. Rocks aren’t worn by water in one winter.

When Kaye made a dam of herself, bursting free was the most I could do. I never intended to do it completely; yet it seems I have done so. She refuses contact and clings to Penelope. Regina Jurd tells

me my sister's spirit has collapsed, which, despite all, mine has not. Finding a crueller streak in myself is not without advantages.

Even so, I had no intention to harm Kaye. I forged a focus for myself. To know what it was I'd done: to be clear about the offence and where the threat of exposure lay. My first attempt was minor, a tax fiddle, just in time for my twenty-third birthday. After I failed to declare a small sum from mother's estate, every official looking letter set off a physical response – the broken breath, the sweat – the dread of being caught out. This seemed to do the trick of fencing in that fuggy trepidation.

What eventually killed mother might have been the underlying cause of her other ailments. No one can be certain though several family members sound sure.

Father is convinced the menopause defeated her. Suddenly, with only the boys living with them and those two always out, mother was no longer busy. Apparently, she grew morose and went off Dad. My sisters said she'd had enough of sex. I certainly never had exchanges like that with mother, but we talked once a fortnight and even I picked up that her body was becoming a source of discontent. When the symptoms changed she took little notice: they were just further evidence of decline.

My sisters say it must have been the brain tumour all along which changed mother.

Anyway, it went undiagnosed till too late. It was recognised during my finals at university. On advice I delayed flying over and she died as I sat my second to last paper. They buried her immediately.

"No point in coming to say goodbye now," my sisters said.

Kaye was out there. She was not sitting her final exams, getting herself a degree while a mother, who had to leave school at fifteen, lost her life.

I didn't say it out loud but I truly couldn't believe that woman had left me yet again! How could she? Later, I planned to go to New Zealand with my husband. He said we'd go but we never made it. Our holidays came at the wrong time for New Zealand summer, or we didn't have the money. It was not top priority, just as I never felt top priority for him.

I liked looking at Kaye's albums of her New Zealand visits. She went twice, though she'd never even been to France – she didn't see the point, she said.

During her early married years, when a younger Penelope lay crushed beneath any disappointment, her small son could sit for a morning by her feet and not disturb her. Regina Jurd, who even then cleaned Penelope's floors and did high piles of ironing, would bring Jeremy back to spend many of his preschool days in our cramped place.

My aunt did not allow that her troubles might also be inside her own skin. If anyone dared find fault with Penelope – and her husband certainly didn't – she was embattled with righteous indignation before any accusing sentence could be finished. Jeremy through his teens began to stutter, but he never managed to utter a word of criticism to his mother, and our Dad escaped rather than stand up to his sister. Yet this woman believes herself put upon and let down by those who prove insufficiently grateful. At the moment I'm the chief offender in that category.

She does not know her son visits me too often and that even her husband came once. Briefly. And saying nothing other than that he was on his way to golf. I felt called upon to perform politely.

Perhaps it is small wonder I used to catch Penelope's face falling into harsh lines of disapproval when she was in repose. Her features never seemed to soften in peace. As soon as she ceased to make an effort, her once good looks drooped, lips pursed ready to rebuke, and eyes narrowed with the burden of seeing almost everything turn out worse than she intended.

I have no idea if Penelope's gaze into her many mirrors told her she, too, was failing to keep up to expectations. She carries an air of knowing herself to be as lovely as she'd been till thirty, and maintains a coquettish air, as though certain of remaining desirable. Once we passed a building site together, when I was early twenties and Penelope turning sixty, and she took for granted the wolf whistles were for herself. Her tweed covered back straightened further as she gave a toss of her head.

Yet those first five years with my aunt worked out surprisingly well.

Penelope said the headaches vanished with the ending of her menstrual cycle. But my uncle and Jeremy gave my presence the credit for Penelope's improved health.

There was little doubt I basked in attention. Jeremy took my school work as seriously as he'd taken his own. I could afford to go to movies and on school trips. I had plenty of clothes. I should be grateful, and I was, back then. Nevertheless it felt as if Penelope and I were simply playing at family life.

I didn't know quite what I missed but I said to myself I'd lost the grit, as if I merely floated in Penelope's household. Obviously I was less tied into my own family. But I began to lose connection with the night. I used to remember dreams – some of them seemed to matter – so having them on automatic wipe out was a loss.

I once suggested to Kaye that whatever it was that made for tension with mother, which I'd barely recognised, though Kaye had seen it as fact, remained land locked within me. How could it become visible if it could not sail into open water, after mother flew away?

I tried confiding to my sister that I felt driven and finally said perhaps I'd done something unforgivable long before I could hope to see what it was.

"Of course," she said dramatically, "the first boy died and you failed to be his replacement."

We both laughed. I assumed she'd made it up, to mock my fanciful talk. Our family didn't wallow; we got on with things.

I rely on Regina Jurd for intermittent news of my sister. How often Kaye used to say she could depend on me! And she could, more or less, all those years I helped with her son, until I forced my sister to face that I was not a fully reliable person. Her sense of me took a sharp about turn and she got a shock. So did I, of course. Although mine was not over a shattered image of myself.

"We need each other," Kaye would say and I wasn't sorry to be needed as a minder for little Tom, though I would surely have made a fuss if it had been my parents asking for so much of my time to care for younger brothers.

Was I cheap child care for Kaye, or a devoted family member? It's murky now. Sometimes my washing machine mind comes to the end of a cycle with no clean conclusion to the agitation.

It did not occur to either Kaye, or me, that having been set a fine example of family freedom, each of us might fly off unburdened by any weight of familial obligation. But when the rest of them flew away, Kaye was already heavy with child. That baby curtailed an unfolding of the life she expected and Kaye set herself to make sure the unplanned did not happen again. I have badly upset her satisfaction in choosing paths and keeping to them. Tom says I shouldn't be so surprised his mother's earnest streak has not proved sufficient to see her through.

Through my teens autumn decay was highly gratifying. I made a lot of it. Not that I got the inevitability of deterioration, but relished in the idea of grim times ahead. This infuriated Kaye. Although she got on with grey winter better than I did, she believed in positive thinking. This faith, she said, kept her going. Perhaps now it doesn't.

Some years ago Jeremy looked over Kaye's accounts and I caught a glimpse. How had I been so gullible as to believe Kaye needed to be careful with money? There was a staggering disjunction between her assets and her tightness. I took her to a spa one birthday and paid for a treatment, while she gave me hand cream she forgot I'd seen her win in a raffle. I'd always given generously to Kaye, thinking she had a family to consider and was always concerned over money.

She wasn't even open handed with what she knew.

It was Regina Jurd who told me recently that she often had me as a baby. Though Kaye often told me bitterly, as I looked after Tom, that she'd done the same for me when I was small and she was only seven. It never occurred to me Mother might have abnegated responsibility. I watched mother's

pleasure in two younger brothers, who certainly weren't put as a burden on Kaye or Regina Jurd, and assumed mother had enjoyed all her babies.

I did not know that she became pregnant with me immediately after the much wanted first son lay dead in his cot. Or that when she then gave birth to a fourth girl, mother lay weeping. It's hard to imagine, but apparently she left me unchanged, the dishes unwashed and "made a fuss". I can only remember how mother was brittle over indulgent ways and had no patience if her children made a scene. Next time round, she'd come back as one of the weak, she said often, and implied she'd always kept at it, getting on, and too busy to take to a daybed.

My history surfaced only once the family searched for excuses for me.

While I struggled with the consequences of what I'd done, Penelope and Kaye did not immediately walk away. They were too angry. Understandably. They looked to me to put it right – to explain, to justify and find a loop hole to let all of us out of hurting.

Until confronted by the judge's opinion, Penelope and Kaye did try not to hold me fully responsible. The judge roundly eliminated Penelope's hopeful view, "that at least it wasn't premeditated and when we aren't thinking straight we can slip into mistakes." Mistakes ran in the family, according to my aunt. Dad's first, rash marriage was a big one, compounded by too many pregnancies. Dashing off to New Zealand was a further blunder and how could anyone account for the worst misjudgement of all, that vulgar second wife? Penelope was put through "an unbearable trial" by my behaviour but she didn't miss a minute of it. Her usual proof of suffering, a collapse, had to be postponed.

Kaye accepted I'd broken the law but until it came to court doubted I could be held completely accountable. There must be some syndrome, some defect in my brain, for this could not be the sister she knew so well. Such insistence was punctuated with plaintive fury "why, why, why?" But I did not have the kind of answer she sought.

And "no premeditation" could hardly pass after the judge noted how ingenious I had been. Yet I can't say I meditated on it as an idea. I once went in for meditation. It was one of those things you were expected to try in my group of friends. I was glad to have it beneath my belt, so I could not be accused of having made no effort. I did my bit to appear to be mastering my flesh and mind. I didn't let myself go to fat, or sink too far into obsessive thought and when I did, knew to spare my friends. Staying on top was the requirement, but despite meditation and counselling, yoga and body work at the gym, some mutiny remained, refusing to knuckle under any captancy.

In the end this mutiny interested me the most. I let it rip.

The judge was on to me when he said he was ready to accept the character witnesses, but I had wilfully put decency aside to see what I could do. The fact that it wasn't out of personal greed was in

my favour. I'm not sure why, except that greed for money is too common and must be firmly stopped. Not one penny went into my own account – spending power was not the issue. The money went to two charities and it was one of them which began the enquiry. That I didn't expect. My skill and daring have impressed Jeremy. He is not a brave man and is qualified in tax law. That I should have had a "brain wave" in his field, though I lack his training, suggests to Jeremy that we have much in common after all.

Besides, he can do something for me, whereas he could never put right his mother's disappointments in shop assistants and her marriage. He tried hard, however. Kaye remembers him at five, waiting at the door, in one of his immaculate blue and white sailor suits, asking in a whisper if my parents, with Kaye and a baby or two, who had been invited for lunch, could go round to the back garden and he'd bring out biscuits, because he was sure his poor mother must stay lying down. My drama does not defeat him and he seems determined to see more of me.

Regina Jurd does not take my fall personally – she is as she has always been.

It was not a major fraud but nor was I. Yet it gathered in a reserve of shapeless fears of exposure. It focused the prospect of being caught and that proved a surprising stimulant. Sexy almost – probably more so than my marriage.

Any day might bring an enquiry and a pursuit.

Once again, official looking letters gave a stab of uncertainty. What if this one started the unravelling of my credibility?

Followed by a quick – phew! Not yet.

I had always lived my days waiting to be caught out. Now, it grew into a story line.

I did not believe there was one original crime worth finding and even if there was it was beside the point. No, I was taking control. By knowing the crime, I laid the bait for a chase.

Possibly I was simply tired of being good, of feeling a need to be right just in case my wrongness should be revealed. Besides I despised the company I worked for.

When I saw two police outside, I knew with complete certainty that this was not the relief I had sought. This would be something else entirely! Too late then to divorce myself from my actions. I'd done it now.

As I watched them walk to the door, a sharp thought cut in, "perhaps this is what will break me."

It never occurred to me to fear it might be Kaye who would tip off her apparently firm base and be flung to the ground, broken.

I've somehow got through but can I do anything now for Kaye?

Everyone seems agreed that my days of trying to make things easier for my older sister are far from over. Only now it's obvious to all that I am the one in the wrong.

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