

Auntie Sadie's cocktail cabinet was as exotic and mysterious as its owner.

To appreciate the standing of both, you need to bear in mind that early 1960's Salford was still a traditional city based on heavy industry, and existed if not in black and white, then in sensible colour variations that washed well and didn't show the dirt easily. Windows and doors, for example, would be dark green, black or maroon. It would be a brave soul that painted their door white in those heavily polluted and ultra-conservative times. Not only would it become grimy – worse still, it would attract comment.

If it all sounds a bit Victorian it's not far off the mark. Unlike wealthier parts of the country most Salford people simply couldn't afford to buy brand new furniture, and redecorate their homes, just because fashions changed. Most of us lived among chairs, sofas and sideboards that had been bought on hire purchase in the 1920s, in dark-stained wood and brown hard-wearing leatherette or uncut moquette. This necessary conservatism also governed the way people dressed. Adults wore serviceable woollen clothes in shades of putty, brown, black and grey. Women and girls might occasionally break out in a summer print frock but nothing too loud. It's strange to think that there was no concept of 'leisure clothes'.

So in this sepia-toned itchy woollen world, imagine the impact of Auntie Sadie's cocktail cabinet. Firstly, the raciness of cocktails. Secondly, the very idea that you would have cocktails in your own home. And thirdly, the object itself. It was shaped like a traditional writing bureau with a cupboard below and a sloping front that opened outwards, but beyond that all contact with tradition ceased. For a start, it was coloured pale yellow, embellished with a criss-cross pattern of gold lines and gold starbursts, stood on spindly black legs with gold trim, and opened to reveal not only drinking glasses and bottles, but also a mirror-glass-lined interior and clear glass shelves.

The drinking glasses that Auntie Sadie kept inside the cocktail cabinet added to the aura of international mystery. No simple tumblers there. They included tulip shapes, wide shallow glasses like saucers on long stems, tiny glasses frosted with pastel shades, gold rims and even – now steady on – glasses that were not colourless but were blue or amber or green. Most households of my acquaintance did not possess even a wineglass back then, so my fascination with these knew no bounds.

And then there were the bottles inside. Coloured labels on bright liquids of 'Cherry B', 'Snowball', 'Babydam', 'Tonic water', 'Bols', a riot of traffic-light-coloured drinks reflected endlessly in their mirrored cupboard. This was almost like going to the cinema and contrasted dazzlingly with the beverages consumed by the other adults in my life, namely tea, occasionally coffee, or beer if you were a man.

But it didn't end with the brilliantly-coloured drinks. Adding to the glamour were a couple of jars, a stubby one of 'cocktail cherries' sitting in whorish red syrup, and a tall, slender one of green olives with red middles, and a third one filled with tiny white 'cocktail onions'. Now we were used to cherries, both the sort that appeared in the greengrocer's briefly and the bright red glace cherries used in baking. We were also used to pickled onions, but they were always as big as an eyeball and in dark brown vinegar. But I never saw olives anywhere else but there.

The cocktail cherries tasted of sweet marzipan. The cocktail onions tasted like a salty

pickled onion but only briefly as they were gone in a single chomp. The olives tasted so revolting that it was years before I ever tried one again. But it didn't really matter that olives were so nasty because to get one meant using a sharp wooden 'cocktail stick' to stab it out of the jar, and the cocktail sticks had their own novelty container. Made of thick metal wire bent into shape and decorated with a raffia grass skirt, Auntie Sadie's cocktail stick holder was in the shape of a black man with huge comical white eyes and a grinning red mouth holding out in both hands a basket packed with handy cocktail stick spears.

So in the greyscale world of my childhood Auntie Sadie and her cocktail cabinet represented an island of alluring colours and unfathomable mysteries. The cabinet's owner was every bit as unusual. For a start she was from Glasgow and her accent veered between a strange refinement to alley-guttural growls. Another glaring difference that set her apart, and probably helped her gruff tones, was that she smoked. Not just the occasional ciggie, but Capstan Full Strength high tar unfiltered cigarettes, and I'm guessing with hindsight about sixty a day. This gave her a constant gravelly cough and made her wheeze like creaky bellows.

Sadie used nail polish in all sorts of pinks and reds and even put polish on her toenails, which you could see when she wore peep-toed sandals. Sadie's hand-bag bag was the first place I ever saw mascara – a rectangular plastic box with a hinged lid that opened to reveal a little hard cake of mud-coloured stuff, and a little brush like a doll's toothbrush. You had to wet the brush, scrub it on the mudcake and then paste your eyelashes with it. Sadie was the first woman I know to have eyeshadow – not just one colour but a whole palette of blues, lavenders and purples. Our mothers only ever wore lipstick and powder. The contents of Sadie's hand-bag were the mark of a fallen woman like nothing else.

But I didn't care and ignored the pursed lips and sidelong glances that accompanied the mention of her name, as Auntie Sadie gave me my first glamorous Christmas present, which was a pretty box of scented pink soap flakes for scattering in the bath. She also gave me her cast-off underslips to play dressing up with, when the full skirts they underpinned suddenly went out of fashion in 1962 – a frou-frou treasure trove of green, yellow and blue frothy nylon frills that had been bang on trend until Mary Quant arrived.

Despite her title, Sadie wasn't really my auntie until many years later. She was 'engaged to' my uncle. To me at that time, Auntie Sadie's engagement to Uncle Jack was the only explanation necessary, or offered. Uncle Jack had spent all his life in the merchant navy and when discharged had a comfortable pension and a car, but no house, so lived with his parents, my grandparents. Uncle Jack worked in the telephone exchange and often chose to do night shifts.

Unlike all the adult women I knew, Auntie Sadie went to work full time, as a nurse. She owned her own house, a cosy terraced house, and had a pampered Corgi dog just like the Queen's, an electric fire instead of messy coal in the living room, a radiogram, and of course a cocktail cabinet. Although she was a spinster she had a big double bed in her bedroom. I know you have worked it all out already but it was decades before I realised what much of Uncle Jack's night-shift entailed, and where it was spent.

As a child I had no comprehension that Auntie Sadie was committing the

unspeakable crime of having a sex life. I kind of gathered that the same disapproval was not extended to Uncle Jack, who as the baby of the family, the only boy to survive the war years, and a man, was extended endless forgiveness and tolerance. After a good twenty years of 'engagement' Uncle Jack made Sadie my real Auntie in a quiet wedding ceremony largely shunned by Jack's disapproving older sisters.

She didn't wear white.

And sadly their legal marriage lasted for only a few brief years. A lifetime of lard, sugar, salt and smoking caused Jack's arteries to give up, and he died suddenly of a heart attack as did so many of his generation.

Sadie, mortified and enduring what old-fashioned stories called 'a broken heart', disposed of the tiny maisonette flat they lived in and went to live near a man she had referred to all her life as her nephew. But as you, unlike me, are not naive, you know he was her illegitimate son, conceived in mystery and sin in the war years. By some miracle she had maintained close contact with her child, in an age when unmarried mothers were meant to hand over the Unwanted One to an adoption agency and Say No More.

Sadie's glorious cocktail cabinet disappeared with the tiny maisonette, but she trailed her flag of glory for at least another decade before joining her Jack in eternity. She smoked her Capstans to the last.

I met her 'nephew' at her funeral, and even as a 30-something mother of two, I was astonished that he was a middle-aged bloke with a boozier's nose. Somehow my imagination still had him as her perfect boy-child, shiny, new and as full of wonders as a 1950s cocktail cabinet.