

## **The Reconciliation Paul Butler**

Aunt Liz didn't call often, but whenever she did my father's reaction was always the same.

"Liz?" he'd say, cheeks hollow and face blanching. In the muted light of the hallway his fingers would twitch towards the receiver. Taking the phone from my mother, he would press his palm into the mouthpiece, saying, "It must be bad news." My mother would turn and disappear into the living room while my father stood hunched over the receiver like the wireless operator of a doomed steamship.

His reaction was justified much of the time, at least when we were young. The deaths of his father and step-mother were relayed this way, as was intelligence of uncles and aunts passing. At some point in my own childhood, however, Liz began to call for an occasional 'chat' with her brother. For my father, this was a new and threatening development, as baffling as an invitation to play water polo. For the rest of the family, it felt like a surprise fire drill in a public building: everyone would become alert; hearts would roll; eyes would dart to meet one another, searching for clues. Finally, anticlimax would settle like dust on our shoulders as we realized the alarm was unwarranted.

Times had changed. Punk rock had peaked and subsided. Parents had learned to mention sex in front of their children. The nation had embraced self-help and twelve-step programs. Apparently, my aunt had been caught up in this new wave, but my father had not.

Their 'chats,' as I overheard them, had the flavour of an unstable truce. Agitated, my father would fire questions. How's Uncle George's heart? When did he last go to the doctor? How many pills a day?

Aunt Liz would answer patiently—or so I figured from the bewildered silence

from my father's end of the line. Then she would likely try to ease the conversation onto some less crisis-ridden ground. But my father would pin her down into the trench again. Did Fred reserve a plot for Ethel? She's almost eighty now. If the conversation could not be about someone having just died, my father seemed to reason, it could at least be about death and ill-health in general. And it was details my father wanted. Details kept some nameless beast at bay.

Something about the crab dance ritual of these conversations—my father's armored protection, his inability to see beyond disaster—seemed to explain the gloom that overhung me since I had heard the news. My father had died. I didn't know what to feel. Variations of his half-heard phone calls with Aunt Liz played out in my head as I pushed my way out of London's perpetual rush hour towards the A45.

The truck in front hissed at the change from red to green, and I eased my foot from the brake and rolled through the intersection. There was something stirring inside me, an injured moth fluttering in the pit of my belly. Would it grow to monstrous proportions over the next few days? Would it beat its tattered wings and ooze some sticky insect blood until I felt those dark, quivering sensations often misnamed grief?

The day was warm and sunny; of course, it would be. The driver in the next lane—a man of thirty or so with stubble and sunglasses—tapped his fingers contentedly against the steering wheel, and grinned in my direction. I touched the brake with my toe so that he would move ahead and out of sight.

Today was not for smiles, nor for any kind of normality, which is why the lines of hedgerows rising from the highway set my insides aching again.

I knew that it would all seem more real once I picked up Aunt Liz from the hotel, so I dawdled a little and let other cars pass. Even so, the road kept rolling beneath me like a munitions factory conveyor belt. I could feel the Grange Hotel getting closer and closer like a quivering torpedo awaiting the twist of a wrench.

When the sign came into view, my hands leaked sweat onto the steering wheel. In a few more heartbeats, I was turning onto the gravel.

Suddenly, she was there. A small, tidy figure, dwarfed by the entranceway and clutching a purse in both hands like an ineffective shield. I slowed to a stop, put on the handbrake and got out of the car. She was slow to spot me, distracted by a bickering family lugging suitcases through the entrance.

I tried to smile as I tramped towards her. She turned from the bickering family. The sun caught her glasses so it seemed for a moment that her eyes were on fire.

“Aunt Liz,” I said taking a final step. Her mouth hung open and her eyelids flickered like those of a reptile surprised by a passing shadow. She had not recognized the middle-aged man who had approached her.

I busied myself by picking up the suitcase at her side, then I stood up straight and smiled at her again. “How are you, Aunt Liz?”

“Oh,” she croaked, then twittered amiably; “Mark, you’re so grown up I didn’t recognize you.” Last time Aunt Liz saw me I was twenty-seven; now I was forty. Although it was considerate of her to put it the way that she did, I knew it was my greying hair and my thickened waist that had blind-sided her.

I turned with the suitcase and gave my aunt a tight smile, beckoning her to follow.

I opened the passenger door and held it as Aunt Liz stepped inside, neat and swift like a folding serviette, her purse on her knee. She strapped on her seatbelt.

I loaded her suitcase, clunked the trunk closed, walked around to the driver’s side and got in, turning the ignition. Aunt Liz was silent as I drove the car through the crunching gravel, circling back towards the road.

As I accelerated onto the highway, I noticed that Aunt Liz’s fingers were restless upon her purse strap.

“So, Angela wasn’t able to come with you?” she ventured after a small cough.

I watched a vintage open-top car switch lanes ahead. The driver's thick hair billowed in the wind; his companion's scarf fluttered in true flapper style. It took me a while to form an answer.

"Angela and I divorced three years ago, Aunt Liz," I replied at last.

"Oh," Aunt Liz said, wriggling like an unsettled hen, "that's a shame!"

I breathed in slowly.

"Your dad never mentioned it," she said.

"No," I answered, glancing at the rear-view mirror.

"I do appreciate you picking me up, Mark," she said as though starting afresh. "I know what an awful time it must be for you."

I felt a tug somewhere near my diaphragm and a stirring of unborn tears.

"It's no problem at all," I said, my throat constricting, "I could easily have picked you up from your home."

"No, you have enough to think about," she replied decidedly.

A truck growled in the fast lane, billowing black smoke in an attempt to pass. I eased off the accelerator and let it struggle ahead.

"It's a long way to come for you, isn't it?" she said once the noise of truck's engine had faded.

"About seven hours from Toronto," I replied.

"Is your work understanding about these things?"

"They don't have much choice," I said with a vague smile. "They don't like it when anyone has to take time off, but there are regulations to cover these things."

The answer seemed to satisfy Aunt Liz. The question, however, reminded me of something. Even though she taught in a high school as recently as ten years ago, Aunt Liz still carried an aura of Britain long gone: class oppression, war-time rationing and indentured servitude. Sometimes she seemed both ancient and modern at once, wearing tweeds yet using pop music in classes long before it was fashionable to do so. A child of

the 1930s, joyfully absorbing each new fad her country might throw at her, Liz was a 'good sport' in the vernacular of her age. This was the aspect of Liz that my mother had always mocked above all others. To her, Liz's openness was merely lack of discernment. Her interest in youth culture was undignified. I had a curious sensation that worlds were colliding now as I warmed to Liz. It was as if I were being disloyal to my mother's ancient prejudice.

"Well, they'll just have to wait until you're ready to return," she concluded softly.

I didn't know why, but I found these words jolted me. I had a life in Toronto, didn't I? I had a job, and off-on relationship that was at least on enough to be a comfort at the airport before going through security. Somehow she had called all that into question. She had suggested that the journey I was about to undertake might amount to much more than an altered schedule. I had been trying to see it all as a bump in the road after I would emerge intact and unchanged. Aunt Liz's suggestion had made me feel that I was on the edge of a precipice, that the next few days would see me opened up like an oyster, stirred up, rearranged and left reeling for months or years.

"I return on Friday," I said gripping the wheel too tightly.

There was a pause.

"It'll be good for your mother," she murmured, "having all of you back for a while."

"Yes," I replied bleakly. I tried to envision the comfort Aunt Liz seemed to see in the arrangement—the three warring forces of myself, my brother and sister somehow bestowing comfort upon our recently bereaved mother who—unbeknownst to poor Aunt Liz who would notice none of my mother's hostility—would also be suffering from the intrusion of an unwelcome guest. Was such a thing possible? It was like some sort of riddle without an answer; how could people with so little in common, and so little experience of harmonious behavior, suddenly combine to create a loving family?

Maybe there was some mystery in grief that could bring this about, but it was quite beyond me at the moment.

“I talked to Janet last night,” said Aunt Liz. “She was over at your mother’s house.”

My hands began to sweat on the wheel again.

“Yes,” I said, “she phoned me with the news.”

This—the essential fact, at least—was true. But no one in our family merely relays news, especially bad news. The fact of my father’s death was broken to me as an accusation. To Janet, my finger was on the trigger; the smoking barrel was drooping from my hand. This is how we handle things. Grief is inseparable from anger, and we must accuse before we can be accused. I was sufficiently far away to be an obvious target.

“You must be looking forward to seeing Janet and Anthony,” said Aunt Liz brightly. “I don’t suppose you get to spend much time with them these days.”

“No,” I answered, “it’s been quite a while.”

I felt like an actor entering a marathon production for which I had barely learned my lines. I had not seen or exchanged a word with my brother for years. What came wafting back to me now was a memory of his scent last time I had been in the same room with him. He was like a mailbag that had been lost in the crevice of a train carriage for several months, leaking unknown substances. He exuded hemp, clothes dust, stale tobacco and liquor, and his words, when they came, were pure venom. Who was Aunt Liz thinking of when she talked about this “Anthony?” Was it a vision of the angelic, blond child from thirty-five years ago who turns up on the pages of our family albums? How had her mind successfully preserved images which, for the rest of us, had long since crumbled into dust? With a tug of remorse I realized how much Liz had been kept at arm’s length.

“I know that Janet and your mum are looking forward to seeing you again,”

Aunt Liz offered suddenly. A little knot tightened in my stomach. Liz, the family peacemaker, I thought; Liz, the family fool sent with bogus messages, the only function of which must be to stir up a comedy of errors. Did Janet really say such a thing to Liz? Or did Liz mistake silence for depth of feeling? Did she read between the lines, detecting something that simply was not there?

I didn't want to think about it. I sighed and stared at the white dashes dividing the lanes. We were silent for a while. Aunt Liz must have fallen asleep because a few minutes later she moaned then gave a small cough, shaking her head.

"How are you keeping these days?" I asked her when I knew she was entirely awake.

"Oh not too bad, thank you for asking. Little bit of arthritis in my hands but I can't complain."

"And Uncle Jack?"

"Oh, coming along, you know," she said, beating her fingertips against her purse strap. "He hasn't been out much since he had a heart valve replaced in the spring. It's frustrating for him as he loves to get out in the garden."

"That's a pity," I said. I had a vision of Liz's husband from childhood, his wavy red hair tumbling over his forehead as he stood patiently in a windy flowerbed tying a rose bush to bamboo cane. Jack spoke very little, but was always working. This was something I didn't even notice until I was an adult; Liz and Jack were about industry and peace. I glanced at wild-flowers skimming past the curb on the driver's side, their leaves grimy with exhaust. "My former father-in-law had a valve replaced too," I volunteered.

"And how is he doing now?" Liz asked with interest.

"Good, as far as I know. At least he recovered well from the operation. It was actually to replace a leaky valve that had been put in a few years before." I had taken a hand from the steering wheel to point to my chest. "Anyway, he was active last time I

saw him.” I looked in the rear-view mirror and changed lanes to overtake a tractor. “It takes a while, you know,” I added encouragingly. I felt a sense of relief, almost lightness to be lost in such details. Here, in the charnel house of family ailments, we were safe inside neutral territory. This was a quiet place where my mother and the rest of the family did not exist. I wondered why it should all seem so familiar.

“Yes, well, Jack doesn’t grumble at all,” Liz sighed, “but he would have liked to have come to your father’s funeral. I didn’t think it was a good idea.”

“No, I think you’re right. It was three months before Angela’s father did anything too strenuous. What kind of medication is Uncle Jack on?”

“Just blood thinners,” Liz replied, “and nitro but only if he needs it.”

I nodded, then felt a sudden burst of nerves as the sign for the turnoff whooshed passed.

This journey used to last so much longer, it seemed. I felt as though I had hardly started and was already nearing the end. As though sensing my unease, Liz was silent as we merged with the highway leading into the town. The reddish slate of the roofs seemed toy-like under the noonday sun. Soon the river bridge came into view, its blue painted girders like a piece from a leggo set. Everything was a miniature version of how I remembered it.

I slowed and took the sharp bend onto the bridge. The metal vibrated under the tires. Aunt Liz pulled her purse closer. Front wheels first, then back, reached the tarmac and there was quiet once more though my ears still tingled with the steel.

I touched the indicator for the final turn, waited for the mini van to pass, then swung into Warbury Street. I turned into the driveway, slid into park, then shut off the ignition. Pushing the air from my lungs like an athlete approaching the starting block, I pulled on the handbrake.

“Here you are,” declared Aunt Liz.

I turned to her and found her pale eyes searching me closely. The lines around



her mouth seemed to form a sympathetic smile.

“I’ll get your suitcase,” I said. I got out and tramped around the car to the trunk. I lifted out Liz’s suitcase and brought it to where she was now standing, by the passenger door. We both gazed at the house for a moment.

The breeze skimmed over the flowerbed. The red hot poker nodded at us and its leaves danced a cautious welcome. But the windows were dark and inscrutable.

“I’m glad we spent that little time together,” Liz said quietly. “You’re the one that reminds me most of your father. I never saw much of him, you know, after he got married.”

I nodded and sighed.

A curtain moved behind the front room window but no face appeared.

Liz was right to question my plans, I realized. I was that oyster, opened and about to be stirred up. This was no mere bump in the road.

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