

Matriarchy

After the service and interment, we drove back to the church for the reception. Stood in a receiving line, mourners shaking our hands and mumbling words of sympathy while we did our best to look suitably solemn. The church basement was airless, musty and full of old bones. Not unlike mother's coffin, I thought, and had to cough to cover an unseemly smile. I endured the well-wishers for as long as I could; it was a geriatric crowd, composed of brittle, dew-lapped dowagers, most of whom I'd known all my life. Some of them looked inclined to tousle my hair or chuck my chin. At one point I caught Edward's eye and nodded toward the exit. He took the cue and soon we made our escape, adjourning to a nearby bar to compare notes.

"Aunt Miranda still scares me," he confessed. "Her most of all. She was the only one who actually hit us." He reached for his pale ale, one of those watery micro-brews I detested. I'm a staunch Guinness man.

"You always blow things out of proportion. Miranda wasn't that bad."

He chuckled. "Right, Sonny, whatever you say."

I flared. "Don't call me that."

"Why not? It was always *Sonny* this and *Sonny* that. You were their favourite, let's face it. The golden boy." He took a sip of beer. "You never gave them any trouble. And it was pretty clear you were mom's favourite too." He lowered his eyes. "It was you she wanted around at the end."

“Ed, it wasn’t like that,” I lied. “She asked for you repeatedly. I called, left messages—”

“I was out of town. Buying trip to Chicago.”

I wasn’t sure I believed him. A deathwatch is a terrible thing, long hours spent counting each shallow breath, wondering if *this* is the last one. “Let’s forget it. She’s gone now and none of that’s important any more.”

I was glad neither of us had the energy to pursue the argument. Drained by our mother’s death and the ridiculously Anglican funeral rites; *Psalm 100* and the Aunts, dressed in black, sitting in a row, not even bothering to move their lips.

As if reading my thoughts, he said: “The sisters. Still an intimidating bunch. Remember how they took over after Pop left? He *begged* to come back, you know. Uncle George told me once when he was really juiced. And I think mom would’ve forgiven him, taken him back. Only they wouldn’t even let her speak to him. Can you imagine having that kind of power over a person? Those old bitches completely controlled her life.”

I couldn’t help glancing around, an involuntary reaction, ingrained by habit. “They’ll be looking for us. Mad we didn’t stick around with the old fogeys. Must keep up appearances.”

“Yeah,” he allowed, “they’re big on that. Aw, to hell with them. I’m not going back. They don’t even bother hiding the fact that they hate my guts. I’m too much like dad. That’s, like, a cardinal sin in their eyes.”

“You’re ducking out? Leaving me to deal with them? Thanks a lot, bro.” I glared at him.

“I’ll see them at the lawyer’s.” He glanced at me slyly. “While we’re on the subject, I have to confess I’ve been a tad curious about the, ah, state of the estate, so to speak. Can you--”

“You’ll find out soon enough.” I don’t know why I was goading him. Chalk it up to sibling rivalry. Plus I wasn’t exactly enamored with the notion of returning without him.

He grimaced. “Don’t bullshit me, *Sonny*. I have to know,” he added belatedly.

“Business a bit slow?” I teased. “Feeling the pinch?”

I saw from his reaction that I’d guessed correctly. “Retail is tricky nowadays. The bloody internet and the dollar. It’s a real crap shoot...I go from day to day not knowing if I’m going to lose a supplier or one of my managers is gonna take off for greener pastures.” He shook his head. “Let’s not get off topic. What’s the word money-wise? The old girl must have had a fair amount socked away.”

“You’ve been accommodated for,” I assured him. “Though not, perhaps, to the extent you might expect.”

He regarded me warily. “What do you mean?”

“I *mean* in her final months, our dear mama added a few new provisions to her will, including a healthy bequest to the city humane society.”

My brother looked like he’d swallowed a bug. “*What?* How could you let her... we’ll fight it, damnit. Claim she was senile, losing it. Diminished capacity. Have the whole thing annulled or whatever. We’ll say they threatened her with a rabid pitbull or something. We’ll—ah, *Jesus*, Derek” He slumped in his seat. “How long have you known about this?”

“Since last week. After the second stroke when I knew...she wasn’t coming out of it. I started going through her things. That was tough.” I decided against a second beer. Instead, surreptitiously popped a breath mint.

“You don’t seem very bothered.” He frowned at me.

“She did love her pets.”

“More than us.”

“Now, now.”

Something occurred to him. “Do the sisters know?”

I tried to hide my smile but wasn’t altogether successful. “Not yet.”

“In that case,” he stated, raising his glass in a mock toast, “I’m *really* looking forward to the reading of the will...”

He couldn’t be persuaded to return to the church with me. We stood outside the pub, hardly meeting each other’s eyes. “I’m disappointed, I won’t bother denying it.” He kicked a loose stone. “A parent has a responsibility to her children.”

“She did her best, Ed. I know you won’t accept that but it’s true. The Aunts poisoned her mind against Pop and messed things up royally but she still expected—”

“What? *What* did she expect?”

“To be forgiven, I guess. Damn it, Edward, she was the youngest, the rest of them always lorded it over her and once Pop was out of the way there was nothing holding them back.”

“But she *let* them take over her life. And when they’d punish us, she’d just stand there. Remember Miranda, those big rings of hers and the way she’d lay into us? Anywhere she could hit and Mom never *once* stood up for us.”

“And Pop abandoned us. Don’t forget that.” A couple passed by, on the way into the bar. “You weren’t the only victim, you know. You took off out east but I stayed. And I made my peace with her. Especially these past few weeks.”

“Good for you.”

I gave up. “I’m going back.”

“The dutiful son.”

“Yeah. Whatever.” I started to turn away but he reached out and touched my arm. I resisted the impulse to slap his hand away. “What?”

“You’re right. Staying was the hard part. You were the better son.”

“No, I wasn’t.”

“Better than me.” He sounded genuinely choked up. “I appreciate that you were there for her. And I honestly couldn’t get away.” He let his hand drop to his side.

“Okay, Edward.”

“You believe me?”

“Of course.” I even managed a smile. “You wouldn’t lie to me, man. You’re my *brother*.”

I hurried back to the church, worried that I’d been missed. I spotted Aunt Sheila outside the big front doors. She flicked a cigarette away as she turned to confront me.

“Where were *you*?”

“Taking Edward back to his hotel. He was pretty devastated. He told me to tell everyone—”

She interrupted me. “Your Aunt Miranda’s looking for you.” Her eyes narrowed. “Have you been *drinking*, Sonny?” I shook my head vigorously. Before she could pursue the point further, I moved past her, into the church. Once inside, I made a beeline for the basement, nearly bowling over my cousin Frank and some woman I vaguely recognized.

“*Oops*. Sorry, Frank.”

“No problemo, Sonny,” he responded, jovial as ever. “We were going out for some air. Kind of stuffy down there.” He leaned closer. “And I don’t mean the surroundings.” I had to grin. I’ve always liked cousin Frank.

The woman, Amy or Andie—we’d been introduced but I’m terrible with names—put her hand on my arm. “It must be awful losing a parent.”

One of those remarks that’s so dumb you don’t know what to say. “Well, she’s not really *lost*.”

“Excuse me?”

“We know where she is, right?” She recoiled from me. “Sorry, bad joke.”

“It’s a tough time,” Frank broke in, trying to salvage the situation. “We all have our ways of dealing with it, right, Sonny?”

“Absolutely.” Amy or Andi still looked like she’d bitten into a rotten apple. “Uh, Frank, you haven’t seen Aunt Miranda around, have you?”

“Back there.” He pointed down the stairs. “I think she’s giving the priest hell. Poor bastard.”

“I thought it was a lovely service,” Amy/Andie opined.

“That doesn’t matter,” Frank said. “Not to Miranda.”

“Is she the one--”

“Built like Khrushchev, acts like Hitler,” Frank replied, slipping me a wink as he said it.

I chuckled but the woman appeared lost at sea. He led her away while I descended, steeling myself for the ordeal to come.

“Sonny.” Miranda was an imposing woman, almost as tall as I am, her eyes clear and sharp as broken glass. “I’ve been looking for you.” She clasped a small purse in her hands. She had big hands. I remembered them well. And she still favoured heavy rings, topaz and some brown and yellow stones I couldn’t identify. “I could have used your help with that oaf minister.”

“I heard someone saying how much they enjoyed his--”

Her contempt was palpable. “He didn’t know Dorothy. I’ll bet he’s given that speech a dozen times.” She looked past me and I saw Sheila and Sally approaching. “He actually brought up his fee, the cretin. The nerve of the man.”

“I’ll take care of it.”

She snorted. “You mean the *estate* will take care of it.”

“Yes,” I conceded. “That’s what I meant.”

“I suppose you know she left you the house.” Her siblings had joined her, ringing me, hemming me in. “It should fetch a pretty penny, if you play your cards right.”

“I hadn’t considered selling it.”

“One mustn’t be sentimental about these things,” Sheila spoke up.

“No, I suppose not.”

There was a lull in the conversation. I saw them looking at each other. “We were by the house earlier,” Sally said. “We thought you might need some help getting things squared away.”

“Mother was quite good about organizing her affairs.”

“Ye-es,” Sally allowed. “But we thought, well...”

“We were looking for the will, Sonny.” Miranda got to the point.

“I assume that lawyer of hers, Johnson or Jackson—”

“We know she wanted you to have the house,” Sheila patted my shoulder, “and that’s only right.”

“But as to the other arrangements...” Sally prodded.

I was starting to weary of the interrogation. “It’s all with the lawyer, I’m afraid.”

“You keep bringing up this lawyer,” Miranda snapped. “But surely you must know—”

“Nothing.” As a child I’d learned to feign ignorance and that old trick came in handy once again. They had a dim view of men and I played the part to the hilt.

“Honestly, Aunties, I’m in the dark as much as you are.” Before they could press me any further, I edged away. “I guess we’ll just have to wait until Monday.”

They weren’t pleased with me but at that point I no longer cared.

My new dress shirt was soaked through. Forty-one years old and they still made me sweat like a pig. I glanced back and saw them huddled together, Miranda doing most of the talking. They’d squeezed me and gotten nothing for their trouble. Now they were

discussing tactics, preparing a united front. Miranda leaned in close and gave terse instructions, Sheila and Sally nodding as they received their marching orders. Clearly, plans were being made and something was afoot.

But mother was beyond their reach now and no amount of scheming on their part would bring her back. In life she had never defied them, never spoken against them. When I read her will, I'd wept for the first time in a long while. Not because of her passing, I was glad her suffering was at an end. I cried at the effort she'd expended to hurt them and because I knew she did it for us.

End

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