

Burdens

Matthew Hisbent

“I am preparing to die.”

Jet lag, eye-lids sag, mind flags.

“You flew 10,000 miles to Australia to tell me this?”

“Reconciliation requires an effort. You might never have picked up the phone. Call it killing two birds with one stone,” I joked.

“Reconciliation? Two birds?”

“Australia was home till I was three. I have never been back, and I wanted to tell you face to face.”

“Why? We haven’t talked face to face since mum’s funeral. Fifteen years in case you weren’t counting, mate.”

“True. But. Now?”

“What? This is different? How? You tell me what you want; I agree. That’s the way conversations between us always went. Until I put half a planet between us.”

Uncomfortable festering truth. No denial.

“So?” he persisted, though his tone suggested boredom. Did he care?

“Roderick, I am exhausted so I’ll be clear. I wish your written agreement to neither impede me nor take retribution against my helper. That’s all. Experience tells me you hold grudges.”

“You think I’ll dash the poisoned chalice from your lips Johnny? How little you understand. Do you know how often I have wished you dead big brother? Why in God’s name would I stop you now?”

Dumbstruck. He hates me?

Little brother chuckled. I hate that, and he knows I hate that.

“Well Johnny, if dying is your aim there is choice aplenty here. Swim in a river with the crocodiles; get too friendly with a snake or stick your hand in a spider’s nest.”

“The ‘Beware of the Snakes’ signs are off-putting I admit, but you left out the sea.”

“Look at the beach behind me mate. The Cottesloe surfers are on the waves every day. Can’t let fear completely paralyse your life.”

“Exactly.

Little brother went quiet. Finally, I had punctured his disinterest. We are so different. He is taller and now much broader, but he is also bald. He married late and has two young boys. (I would say lovely but I have never seen them.) I never married; never wanted to marry. Never met anyone. He runs from problems. I meet them head on.

“The closer I come to death the heavier my age weighs on me. Once upon a time I was a different man who asked ladies if he may help them with doors and suitcases. In January of last year I was diagnosed with terminal cancer and can now barely rise from my bed or tie my own shoe laces. One year on, one more year left. Terminally, fatally old.”

I paused. My cancer was news to Roderick. Nancy knew, obviously, but I had sworn her to secrecy on the life of her sacred Stieff teddy bear. I gave him space to assimilate.

“Since I am now near the end of life I think often of mortality. I lied to the insurance company and airline about my medical condition just so that I may endure much discomfort to speak with you. From what I have seen over the last forty-eight hours, I must say, you have a lovely lifestyle. I had no preconceptions about Perth, but I can think of no nicer spot than this to speak again at last.”

“It isn’t Paradise Johnny.” From one moment to the next his Aussie twang fluctuated. Perhaps my presence was corrupting him. “Most everything that bites is deadly, more or less.”

“Well, under the circumstances, I prefer more. Sorry, poor joke.”

He didn’t bite.

“I didn’t guess this was your news.”

“Roderick, I am only sixty-five but I no longer work, play no sport, avoid the theatre and I neither have nor anticipate having sex again. None of these things I miss, but I am also losing my sight and going deaf. Imagine. No music, no sunrise, no sunset, no twilight, no laughter, no crying. Just darkness, more darkness, tiredness and unending pain, despite the drugs. What would any life be worth with those burdens and without those experiences to savour?”

He looked straight at me. Sadness creeping over despite his anger.

“No, you are right, I cannot imagine.”

“What are you thinking of?” I asked. As if he would say.

“My two boys, laughing. Cheering on the Eagles. No, I won’t imagine a world like the one you describe. So, how?”

The Engineer, logical, as ever.

“Sleeping pills to make me doze; painkillers to stop my heart. I got the technique from the Internet. GP confirmed it would work.”

“Really? Is that legal?”

“Probably not, but Arabella has been my GP for twenty years and witnessed my deterioration first-hand. She understands. Question is, do you”?

That one he dodged. Maybe I was asking too much of one conversation.

“When?”

“Next month, on my birthday.” He didn’t ask when that was. Nice.

“Where?”

“Here. Australia fair on the Indian Ocean. Where I belong. Any problems for you, as a relative?”

“How would I know? I’m no expert on assisted suicide. Besides, you are asking me not to interfere, not give you the drugs, yes?”

“Yes.”

“Nancy is your helper?”

I nodded.

“I thought so. A devious pair of buggers, always.”

“There is no deception now Roddy.”

“You have a paper for me to sign?”

“In my pocket.”

“Rip it up.” He paused and I waited while the cogs turned.

“Really?”

“Yes, really. You don’t need that. I get it. I won’t interfere and I like Nancy.”

“I must say, you surprise me.”

“Good. You always were too smug. Let’s go have a beer and talk.”

“Nancy too?”

“She’s in that car over there?”

I nodded, fighting back tears.

“Thought so. She is staying on too?”

“We are here for two months, the last family holiday.”

“Okay. You’re paying. Probably the first time.”

“Probably the last time.... *sorry.*”

Then he really surprised me. An arm round my shoulder. True, we hadn’t faced down the terrible, abusive truth of our rift, but he hadn’t rejected me.

It was a start.

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