

Family Reunion

The sea was choppy that day. There were more than a couple of folks who leaned over the side and came back up with their hands to their mouths. The ferry was large enough to fit multiple passengers and their cargo, but not large enough to fully absorb the energy of the waves. The ferry carried on cutting a swath in the surface of a textured ocean. The ship persevered undaunted by the task.

Henry Boseman had made the journey on the ferry to meet for the first time his grandfather. The boy grew up in New York as the son of a mother who had fled the family in hopes of a life unfettered by greed and intrigue. She desired a life of caring and connection for her and her son.

He had waited long hours for the trip. Henry had been summoned by the lawyer of the family patriarch and hoped to reconnect with his roots. His grandfather had paid his passage to the family country retreat.

The young man rode on the ferry with ostensibly a group of businessmen in business suits. Their destination was the same as his, they sought the magnate, Reginald Thornton. Reginald had taken a small inheritance from his father and built a rather extensive empire in the buying and selling of oth-

er businesses. He was regarded (behind closed doors) as the king of the hostile takeover.

The boat pulled up to the dock and the captain yelled to the deckhand to jump out and tie her down. The drizzle made the wooden pier slippery, so the boy had trouble navigating it. The pier extended down to the great basalt towers that soared to define the cliffs above.

What ancient catastrophe had occurred to build this island lay as mystery to the group. The falling of night gave the cliff an otherworldly quality. The scene was one of eerie circumstance.

The passengers from the boat began their debarkation. There were carts arrayed by the dock house at the end of the dock for luggage. The passengers placed their bags here. They would be dragged up to the mansion above by the gardener, who waited patiently nearby. Henry eschewed placing his backpack there. He would carry it himself.

The climb to the top where the mansion lied, however, was the job for every person. There was no elevator, only a slender stairway carved in the side of the cliff by an unknown and unnamed people of yore.

Henry offered his arm to try and help one of the aging businessmen from the ferry manage the rain-soaked steps they must use, but the gentleman pushed him away maintaining that he could do it. He looked back at Henry. "Climb it like Everest, one foot in front of the other!" Henry followed the old codger, one step at a time. He kept a safe distance, but close enough to catch the old man should he falter.

Thornton, the owner of the mansion and their host, had chosen the Outer Hebrides for his summer house. The air was clean and crisp in summer without all the bother of heat and humidity that plagued the climes to the south. Here he could relax and enjoy the peace that came with isolation. Here, there was no one to bother him. There were no phones and no internet, save for a small office area. Thornton insisted on that.

The crew of the boat made ready to return to the mainland. They made this trip every other day, weather permitting, to bring the various foodstuffs and accoutrement that were needed to keep an island habitable. They were anxious to get back to their families and friends, now that the cargo had been safely transported. A storm was brewing to the northwest. They would make haste on the return not to get caught in its potentially hazardous grasp.

The passengers, huffing and puffing as they approached the great oaken door that granted access to the mansion, paused as they beheld the beauty of the house itself. The mansion boasted of 21 bedrooms, a solarium and a bowling alley. The residence occupied a large portion of the level ground of the island and had been built in the style of the ancient Scottish castles. The stone edifice was an imposing sight with its grand turrets and gargoyles posed to sit in protection of the manor.

The short businessman with noticeable girth stepped forward and, using the large brass knocker designed for such a task, alerted the staff inside of their arrival.

The giant oak door creaked open and a middle-aged man in formal attire greeted the party. This was ostensibly the butler.

“Won’t you come inside.”

The invitation was welcome to all as the slight drizzle had started to increase in intensity and the gentlemen were eager not to ruin their businessman hairdos. The short well-fed man pushed past the others and shook the butler’s hand.

“Crowley, how good to see you again.” He shook the butler’s hand with such ferocity that the butler had to disengage the shake before it was completed. “It’s been awhile, no?”

“Why yes. So good to see you as well.” Crowley motioned with his right hand for him to enter the drawing room to the right.

Henry stepped forward and introduced himself to Crowley. “I’m Henry, Camelia’s son. Mr. Thornton arranged my trip here.”

“Oh yes. Mister Henry.” Crowley extended his hand in a friendly shake. “I’m afraid there’s bad news.”

“Bad news?”

“Yes. Mr. Howard and his son, Carson won’t be making the trip this weekend. It seems they have been called away.”

Now Mr. Howard was his mother, Camelia’s, brother and Carson was Henry’s cousin. Henry had been looking forward to meeting them. “That’s a shame.”

“Of course, Mr. Thornton himself is here. He has planned some time with you tomorrow.”

“That’s good.” Henry was a bit relieved he could relax a bit before meeting the great man.

The drawing room was furnished in a style congruent with the majesty of the mansion’s façade. There were overstuffed chairs and a sitting divan. The coffee table was made of cherry wood with a marble inlay. There was wood paneling everywhere from the floor to the ceiling. The floor was covered with a plush garnet and gold carpeting. A great unlit fireplace adorned the room’s end, the tile work exhibiting a Moroccan motif.

“Please enjoy an aperitif while we make your rooms ready.” Crowley pointed to the array of liquor and cordials adorning the drinks cabinet by the stained-glass window.

Henry poured a cup of tea. He felt now might be a good time to meet the other guests. He approached the old man and introduced himself. “Hello, I am Henry Boseman, Camelia’s son.” He smiled.

“Hrrmmpphh.” The old man returned to his drink without acknowledging the lad.

Henry was a bit put off by this obvious shun. The other men in suits didn’t look any more friendly than the old man, so he decided to enjoy his beverage in peace by himself in the seat by the window.

The drawing room was furnished in an older style with overstuffed chairs and oil paintings adorning the wood paneled walls. There were two great windows in the room. The one where Henry was perched held a spectacular view of the

grounds behind the mansion that one could not see from the sea approach.

The back housed a beautiful well-manicured garden with hedgerows and rose beds. Beyond the formal garden was a pasture and Henry could just make out a few white spots there. The spots were moving about. A closer look revealed the spots to be sheep. Henry marveled at the bucolic splendor of the scene as it stood in stark contrast to the stony sterility of the cliffs upon which the pastures were sitting.

The businessmen were getting louder and louder now in their administrations about this and that buyout or these and those labor unions. There was talk of EBIDA and pension obligations. There was ample fodder for lulling a young man to sleep, but Henry kept his wits about him. He whiled away the time trying to guess who the old people in the paintings might be.

The conversations in the room were interrupted by Crowley opening the doors to drawing room. "Gentlemen, your rooms are ready."

The group followed Crowley and the housekeeper to their rooms. Henry would refresh himself before dinner.

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Dinner was served in the great hall in the middle of the mansion. The ceiling soared above the oak table spanning the length of the hall. Great woven tapestries graced the stone walls of the cavernous room with two fireplaces warming the

area from either end. The housekeeper and Crowley bid Henry to enter and be seated.

“Mr. Thornton regrets he will not be dining with you this evening.” That was all the explanation Crowley would offer.

Henry took his seat at the head of the massive table. “Aren’t any of the others joining me?”

“Food has been taken to the conference rooms for them.”

The housekeeper brought over a silver tureen filled with a soup. Crowley ladled out a generous portion into Henry’s bowl in the place setting in front of him.

Henry regarded the concoction swimming in his soup bowl. The broth looked familiar but there were some rather alien bits floating about. “What kind of soup is it then?”

“The cook’s specialty. Coquille and tripe.”

Henry had no idea what a coquille was, but he didn’t like the sound of that tripe thing. He decided to take a taste anyway and to his surprise the soup was remarkably delicious. He finished the entire serving.

The main course was something much more recognizable, roasted lamb and vegetables. Henry’s dinner ended with a preparation called ‘Sticky Toffee Pudding’. Crowley poured heavy cream on the dessert. One spoonful of the heavenly sweet and Henry would be forever a Sticky Toffee Pudding fan.

Crowley recommended a glass of cognac in the solarium as an after-dinner enjoyment. The combination sounded good

to Henry and so he took his snifter of the aged distillate of alcohol and headed for the solarium.

What awaited him in the solarium was a verdant garden of plants from all over the world. 'The gardener here is a bit of a genius.' Henry whispered the words as his eyes took in with amazement the symphony of horticulture that they beheld.

Henry took a seat by the giant windows that fed the solarium its sunlight. He watched as the coming storm advanced over the sea beyond, its lightning punctuating its movements in a display of unbridled violence.

The savagery of the storm outside lay in contrast to the melodious opera that the two canaries in the banyan tree behind him were warbling. The combined effect of this overload to his senses and the alcohol from the cognac produced a rather profound peace in his soul. Henry was content. He wanted for nothing.

Except maybe sleep. He was quite jetlagged.

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The morning dawned and Henry popped down to the kitchen for some coffee. The cook was busy prepping some kind of dish over a steaming pot on the stove. Henry spied the coffee pot in the corner and helped himself.

"Some eggs with that coffee?" The cook took a break from stirring the pot to ask.

"Just coffee, thanks."

"Some toast then"

“No, I’m fine. Thanks.”

Henry sipped the black liquid and contemplated his day. Today was the day he would meet his grandfather. After all this time not knowing he even existed it would be a major event in his life. He sipped some more coffee.

Crowley entered the kitchen carrying a bunch of flowers. “Lots blooming even now.” He left the blooms on the kitchen counter ostensibly for the housekeeper to arrange in the house. “Oh, Mr. Henry! Almost missed you there.”

“Good morning!” Henry toasted the butler with his cup. “Today’s the day!”

Crowley folded his hands and approached Henry. With bowed head and lowered tones Crowley gave Henry the bad news. “I’m afraid Mr. Thornton isn’t going to be able to see you today.” Crowley looked skyward. “He’s got a bit of a crunch going on with the other guests, I’m afraid.”

Henry was crestfallen. He slumped on the stool upon which he was perched. “Well, I guess there’s always tomorrow.” Henry smiled a halfhearted smile.

“Indeed. Indeed.” Crowley left the kitchen for other destinations in the mansion.

Henry was not about to waste the day. Having returned to his room and fetching his backpack, he set out for the gardens and beyond. He wanted to explore this magnificent island that housed them. He checked his pack for his art supplies.

“You’ll want a slicker.” The cook picked up a grey raincoat from the hooks by the door and tossed it to Henry. “We don’t know what the weather will be, but we do know there’ll be rain.”

Henry donned the frock and exited the massive stone structure into the formal gardens. The designer of the garden had laid it out in a structured pattern that spoke more of geometry than botany. The hedges were closely cropped and the walkways pristine of weeds. Henry’s walk in the garden was one of quiet meditation as he appreciated the work that been put forth to exact such order out of the chaos of nature.

Reaching the end of the garden, Henry ventured forth to the more wild and untamed parts of the island. Here wildflowers bloomed amid a sea of grasses. There were very few trees but quite a few bushes. The sheep had free rein, they wandered about as they wished.

Henry walked to the edge of the cliff and looked down to the pounding surf below. The sea was still rough from the storm of the night before and the waves crashed high when they hit the immovable rock of the island. Henry was tempted to sketch here, but something caught his fancy out of the edge of his vision.

Henry followed the cliff’s edge to a place that was filled with little birds flying in and out over the cliff and into the sea and back. Creeping closer and closer the birds appeared to be part waterfowl, part parrot. They had orange webbed feet and the body of a duck, but the rounded orange beak much like a parrot. In between was a coat of black feathers on the back and white on the belly. The head of the beast had two flattened ar-

eas on each side of the head. These areas were covered in white with a black eye in the middle. Henry had never seen anything like these birds, and they began to fascinate him.

Henry positioned himself near the rim of the cliff with his sketch pad in hand. The little birds would fly up from the sea (probably fishing he suspected?) and then proceed to waddle past him into their small nests they had hollowed in grassy ground. The little buggers didn't seem to notice Henry, or if they did, they were not concerned.

Henry sketched the birds using the sea beyond to mark the scale in the composition. His fingers flew as pencils came out from the backpack and scratched the off-white paper on his sketch pad. Finally satisfied with the drawing, Henry pulled a tin of watercolor paint and a brush from the pack.

Looking around for water, a light drizzle began to fall. 'Perfect timing,' Henry whispered his good luck. He collected the water in the lid of the tin box and began forming great swatches of color across his sketch of the birds. In time he was satisfied. The work was completed.

He was just putting away his art supplies when he heard a great whooshing sound coming from the sea. Out in the Atlantic Ocean a small dot appeared that began to grow in size. The noise grew in volume.

The noisy dot turned out to be a helicopter that landed on the other side of the mansion from where he was drawing the birds. Henry decided the rain was heavy enough he would go back inside for the day and so he headed back the way he came.

Before he reached the house, the helicopter took off again and vanished from sight. It must have been something important, Henry postulated. His understanding was that most folks came to the mansion by the ferry.

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Dinner that night came with more bad news.

"I'm afraid Mr. Thornton has been called away." Crowley tried to break the news slowly. "It will be quite some time before he returns."

"Oh, that must have been why the helicopter..." Henry was putting the pieces together.

"Indeed, yes." Crowley offered Henry some caviar.

"Not sure who the first one was to eat a fish egg, but he must have been brave!" Henry tried another halfhearted smile.

Henry ate his dinner in silence. He was beginning to see why his mother might have left for New York. He would have to return home, without meeting anyone. "I guess I'll have to take the ferry back then." He turned to Crowley with inquisitive eyes.

"I'll radio them. They can be here in the morning."

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The boat arrived and Henry gathered up his belongings for the trip home. He stopped by the front door as Crowley was busy fluffing up the flower arrangement on the table in the middle of the foyer.

Henry unzipped his backpack. "Here. Will you give this to my grandfather?" Henry tore the painting of the birds out of the sketch pad.

"Why, it's quite good. You have a brave hand with the brush." Crowley held the painting up to the light to get a better look.

"It may just be his only chance of ever seeing them." Henry referenced the birds there. He zipped his backpack and headed out and down the stone staircase to the dock.

"Take care, Mr. Henry!"

The boat was already loaded when he arrived. Two businessmen were seated. Henry guessed that they hadn't been important enough to make the helicopter. The one sitting behind the luggage looked like a puker for sure.

Henry decided to sit on the front. Upwind.

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