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At Last

Written by Edward St Aubyn

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EDWARD ST AUBYN

AT LAST

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For Bo

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‘Surprised to see me?’ said Nicholas Pratt, planting his walking stick on the crematorium carpet and fixing Patrick with a look of slightly aimless defiance, a habit no longer useful but too late to change. ‘I’ve become rather a memorial-creeper. One’s bound to at my age. It’s no use sitting at home guffawing over the ignorant mistakes of juvenile obituarists, or giving in to the rather monotonous pleasure of counting the daily quota of extinct contemporaries. No! One has to “celebrate the life”: there goes the school tart. They say he had a good war, but I know better! – that sort of thing, put the whole achievement in perspective. Mind you, I’m not saying it isn’t all very moving. There’s a sort of swelling orchestra effect to these last days. And plenty of horror, of course. Padding about on my daily rounds from hospital bed to memorial

pew and back again, I'm reminded of those oil tankers that used to dash themselves onto the rocks every other week and the flocks of birds dying on the beaches with their wings stuck together and their bewildered yellow eyes blinking.'

Nicholas glanced into the room. 'Thinly attended,' he murmured, as if preparing a description for someone else. 'Are those people your mother's religious friends? Too extraordinary. What colour would you call that suit? Aubergine? *Aubergine à la crème d'oursin*? I must go to Huntsman and get one knocked up. What do you mean, you have no Aubergine? Everyone was wearing it at Eleanor Melrose's. Order a mile of it straight away!

'I suppose your aunt will be here soon. She'll be an all too familiar face amidst the Aubergines. I saw her last week in New York and I'm pleased to say I was the first to tell her the tragic news about your mother. She burst into tears and ordered a *croque monsieur* to swallow with her second helping of diet pills. I felt sorry for her and got her asked to dinner with the Blands. Do you know Freddie Bland? He's the smallest billionaire alive. His parents were practically dwarfs, like General and Mrs Tom Thumb. They used to come into the room with a tremendous fanfare and then

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disappear under a console table. Baby Bland has taken to being serious, the way some people do in their senile twilight. She's decided to write a book about Cubism, of all ridiculous subjects. I think it's really part of her being a perfect wife. She knows what a state Freddie used to get into over her birthday, but thanks to her new hobby, all he has to do now is get Sotheby's to wrap up a revolting painting of a woman with a face like a slice of watermelon by that arch fake Picasso, and he knows she'll be over the moon. Do you know what Baby said to me? At breakfast, if you please, when I was almost defenceless.' Nicholas put on a simpering voice:

‘“Those divine birds in late Braque are really just an excuse for the sky.”

‘“Such a good excuse,” I said, choking on my first sip of coffee, “so much better than a lawn mower or a pair of clogs. It shows he was in complete control of his material.”

‘Serious, you see. It's a fate I shall resist with every last scrap of my intelligence, unless Herr Doktor Alzheimer takes over, in which case I'll have to write a book about Islamic art to show that the towel-heads have always been much more civilized than us, or a fat volume on how little we know about Shakespeare's

mother and her top-secret Catholicism. Something serious.

‘Anyhow, I’m afraid Aunt Nancy rather bombed with the Blands. It must be hard to be exclusively social and entirely friendless at the same time. Poor thing. But do you know what struck me, apart from Nancy’s vibrant self-pity, which she had the nerve to pretend was grief, what struck me about those two girls, your mother and your aunt, was that they are, were – my life is spent wobbling between tenses – completely American. Their father’s connection with the Highlands was, let’s face it, entirely liquid and after your grandmother sacked him he was hardly ever around. He spent the war with those dimwits the Windsors in Nassau; Monte Carlo after the war, and finally foundered in the bar of White’s. Of the tribe who are blind drunk every day of their lives from lunch until bedtime, he was by far the most charming, but frustrating I think as a father. At that level of drunkenness one’s essentially trying to embrace a drowning man. The odd eruption of sentimentality for the twenty minutes the drink took him that way was no substitute for the steady flow of self-sacrificing kindness that has always inspired my own efforts as a father. With what I admit have been mixed results. As

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I'm sure you know, Amanda hasn't spoken to me for the last fifteen years. I blame her psychoanalyst, filling her never very brilliant little head with Freudian ideas about her doting Papa.'

Nicholas's rotund style of delivery was fading into an increasingly urgent whisper, and the knuckles of his blue-veined hands were white from the effort of holding himself upright. 'Well, my dear, we'll have another little chat after the ceremony. It's been marvellous finding you on such good form. My condolences and all that, although if ever there was a "merciful release", it was in the case of your poor mother. I've become something of a Florence Nightingale in my old age, but even the Lady with the Lamp had to beat a retreat in the face of that terrifying ruin. It's bound to act as a brake on the rush to get me canonized but I prefer to pay visits to people who can still enjoy a bitchy remark and a glass of champagne.'

He seemed about to leave but then turned back. 'Try not to be bitter about the money. One or two friends of mine who've made a mess of that side of things have ended up dying in National Health wards and I must say I've been very impressed by the humanity of the mostly foreign staff. Mind you, what is there to do with money except spend it when you've

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got it or be bitter about it when you haven't? It's a very limited commodity in which people invest the most extraordinary emotions. What I suppose I really mean is *do* be bitter about the money; it's one of the few things it can do: siphon off some bitterness. Do-gooders have sometimes complained that I have too many *bêtes noires*, but I need my *bêtes noires* to get the *noire* out of me and into the *bêtes*. Besides, that side of your family has had a good run. What is it now? Six generations with every single descendant, not just the eldest son, essentially idle. They may have taken on the camouflage of work, especially in America where everyone has to have an office, if only to swivel about with their shoes on the desk for half an hour before lunch, but there's been no necessity. It must be rather thrilling, although I can't speak from experience, for you and your children, after this long exemption from competition, to get stuck in. God knows what I would have made of my life if I hadn't divided my time between town and country, between home and abroad, between wives and mistresses. I have divided time and now doth time divide me, what? I must take a closer look at these religious fanatics your mother surrounded herself with.'

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Nicholas hobbled off with no pretence that he expected any response other than silent fascination.

When Patrick looked back on the way that illness and dying had torn apart Eleanor's flimsy shamanic fantasies, Nicholas's 'religious fanatics' seemed to him more like credulous draft-dodgers. At the end of her life Eleanor had been thrown into a merciless crash-course in self-knowledge, with only a 'power animal' in one hand and a rattle in the other. She had been left with the steepest practice of all: no speech, no movement, no sex, no drugs, no travel, no spending, hardly any food; just alone in silent contemplation of her thoughts. If contemplation was the word. Perhaps she felt that her thoughts were contemplating her, like hungry predators.

'Were you thinking about her?' said a soft Irish voice. Annette rested a healing hand on Patrick's forearm and tilted her understanding head to one side.

'I was thinking that a life is just the history of what we give our attention to,' said Patrick. 'The rest is packaging.'

'Oh, I think that's too stark,' said Annette. 'Maya Angelou says that the meaning of our lives is the impact we have on other people, whether we make

them feel good or not. Eleanor always made people feel good, it was one of her gifts to the world. Oh,' she added with sudden excitement, gripping Patrick's forearm, 'I only made this connection on the way in: we're in Mortlake crematorium to say farewell to Eleanor, and guess what I took to read to her on the last occasion I saw her. You'll never guess. *The Lady of the Lake*. It's an Arthurian whodunit, not very good actually. But that says it all, doesn't it? Lady of the lake – Mortlake. Given Eleanor's connection with water and her love of the Arthurian legends.'

Patrick was stunned by Annette's confidence in the consoling power of her words. He felt irritation being usurped by despair. To think that his mother had chosen to live among these resolute fools. What knowledge was she so determined to avoid?

'Who can say why a crematorium and a bad novel should have vaguely similar names?' said Patrick. 'It's tantalizing to be taken so far beyond the rational mind. I tell you who would be very receptive to that sort of connection: you see the old man over there with the walking stick. Do tell him. He loves that kind of thing. His name is Nick.' Patrick dimly remembered that Nicholas loathed this abbreviation.