

Charles Deemer

## AIN'T NOBODY'S BUSINESS

On the first and third Wednesdays of the month, Edward Simms would pick up his daughter Lucy for an early dinner at Angelo's Italian Cafe. After dinner they would go to Sunset Villa, an independent living retirement community, to listen to residents, including Mac, their dad and granddad, sing karaoke. The highlight of this show often was Mac's Sunset-related original verses to the old standard *Ain't Nobody's Business* (“Ain't nobody's business / if I don't play bingo / nobody's business but mine”). Afterwards they'd visit in the Social Room, and the evening would end around nine o'clock. This was usually the only visit to Sunset that son or granddaughter would make during the month, although both talked to Mac on the phone a few times during the period.

But on the first Wednesday in August, Lucy wasn't waiting as usual in the parking lot of her apartment complex. Irritated, Edward found a guest parking space and climbed two flights of stairs to his daughter's apartment. Lucy had been living there only for a few months, picking the location because it was close to the high school where she'd start teaching in the fall, following in her father's footsteps.

When nobody answered the doorbell, Edward banged on the door. The door of the adjacent apartment opened and a woman stepped out.

“Are you looking for Lucy?”

“Yes. I'm her father.”

“She went on a trip for a few days.”

“A trip?”

“She left me two plants to water.”

“A trip where?”

“She didn't say.”

“When was this?”

“Just this morning.”

Sitting in his car in the parking lot, Edward tried to make sense of this development. He couldn't. It wasn't like his daughter to do something like this without telling him. On the other hand, Lucy might still be furious over their argument last week when Edward admitted that he hadn't ruled out voting for Trump. Lucy had done work for the local Clinton campaign.

--Dad, how could you? Trump is a sexist racist homophobic con man!

--Look, I agree a woman president is far overdue, but sometimes you have to think outside the box and stir the pot. Hilary brings too much baggage. And brings a husband with even more.

--I can't believe you're telling me this.

--I'm just thinking out loud. I haven't decided who I'm voting for.

They hadn't talked since Lucy left in a huff. Edward wondered if this was some sort of punishment for his being candid.

Edward took out his cell phone and punched a number.

“I'd like to speak to Matthew.”

Matthew Couch was the director of Sunset Villa.

“Who shall I say is calling?”

“Edward Simms.”

Edward waited a moment.

“Edward, I'm glad you got my message.”

“What message?”

“I left you a message.”

“What number did you call?”

“Your home number.”

“That's the landline. I keep forgetting to check it. I should get rid of it. What's up?”

“Mac and your daughter never returned from lunch.”

When Edward got home, he found two messages on the phone. The other was from Lucy.

“Dad, I don't want you to freak out but I'm taking granddad on a trip for a few days. This is at his request. We won't be long. I still have classes to prepare. But this is very important to him, and he thought you'd get upset and try and talk him out of it. So don't worry. Everything's under control. I'll call you when I know more. And do some research on Trump, for God's sake! Keep America great, vote Hillary!”

Edward immediately called Lucy's cell but there was no answer. He figured she didn't pick up on purpose.

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The trip had been planned a week earlier. Mac had invited Lucy to lunch at Sunset, and they had taken a corner table for privacy. Lucy took this as a clue that something was up.

“I need a ride to Lewiston,” Mac said after they had ordered. “We can take my car if you'll drive.”

Mac's license renewal had been refused some months before. Mac had appealed and lost. The old man was grounded.

“What's in Lewiston?”

Mac leaned forward and lowered his voice.

“My high school sweetheart.”

Lucy laughed, mostly from surprise at hearing such a personal confession from her granddad.

This was not like him.

Mac pulled back, looking upset.

“I’m sorry,” said Lucy. “I didn’t think you were serious.”

“She’s very sick and I need to see her.”

Mac went on to explain that Heather, the woman, had been his high school steady. They had drifted apart after graduation and went on to live separate lives. But in retirement, he in Portland and she in Lewiston, they had found one another again and for months had been talking regularly on Skype. She had terminal colon cancer and was waiting for a free bed at a hospice.

“It’s only a six hour drive,” said Mac. “We can be there, visit, and back in two or three days.”

“When did you want to leave?”

“As soon as possible. I don’t think she has long to live.”

“It’ll take me a few days to arrange things so I can get away.”

“I thought you were off for the summer.”

“September is my first class alone. I think I’m over-preparing. But I could take a few days off and do this.”

“I’d really appreciate it.”

“Have you told dad?”

“I don’t think he’d approve of my leaving the confines of Sunset. Or my interest in a woman not his mother. Don’t get me wrong, I loved Mary very much. But she’s been gone for five years now. The heart has room for others.”

“Probably smart not to tell him. I’ll check in with him after we’re on the road.”

“Why?”

“So he doesn’t call the police on us. You’d be a missing person.”

“Right.”

“Let me get back to you on when we'll leave. And in my car.”

“You don't know how much this means to me. It will be nice to spend time with you, too.”

“Yes, it will.”

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The next morning Edward went to Sunset to speak to the director. Who were his father's closet friends at the facility? He wanted to speak to them.

Mac's closest friend was a man in his nineties named Fred. Fred had early dementia and could be difficult to communicate with. But the old man was in one of his more cogent moments and gave Edward a clue.

“Maybe he went to see his lady friend,” said the old man.

Edward had no idea his father had a “lady friend.”

“Why do you say that?”

“They talk on the computer screen all the time.”

From another friend Edward learned that the woman was in a retirement community in Lewiston, Idaho, and that his father had known her since high school. Her name was Heather.

“I think they were high school sweethearts,” said the woman.

Was the trip to visit his high school sweetheart in Lewiston? Did Edward's mother know about her?

Edward decided to check his father's apartment for more clues.

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“So tell me about this woman,” said Lucy an hour out of Portland.

“Well, her name is Heather and we went steady through the last three years of high school. We did everything together.. Especially outdoors. She loved to fish and hunt and--”

“She hunted?”

“Oh, yes. She got her first elk before I did. We hiked and rafted. It was hard to keep that girl indoors. Well, until we were close to graduation. Then she changed on me.”

“How did she change?”

“She wanted to get married and have babies.”

“Were you ready for that?”

“Not at all.”

“More wild oats to sow?”

“That wasn't it. I had an opportunity I couldn't turn down. An amazing opportunity.”

Lucy expected him to go on but he didn't.

“What opportunity was that, granddad?”

“You really want to hear about ancient history?”

“I ready do. I don't know all that much about when you were young.”

“Well, in high school I thought I was Chet Baker.”

Lucy didn't respond.

“Do you know who Chet Baker is?”

“Not really.”

“Art Blakey?”

“No.”

“I need to give you a jazz education, young lady.”

“I like Miles Davis.”

“Well, that's a start. Chet Baker was a trumpet player and vocalist who was getting attention then. I'd been playing trumpet for a few years, and always singing, of course, and he became my hero. I got good enough that I could sit in now and again with jazz bands that came to the University of Idaho or Washington State in Pullman. I got to be known in local jazz circles, small as they were, probably as much for my age as my chops.”

“That's so awesome, granddad! I had no idea.”

“Blakey's band, The Jazz Messengers, came to Pullman and I sat in at a jam session afterward. Blakey heard me and offered me a job. Then he found out I was only 17. He said to contact him when I was 18. That was only two months away.”

“You're right, what an amazing opportunity.”

“You can't imagine. Here I am, a kid from Orofino, which nobody can find on a map, and the great Art Blakey is offering me a job with the Jazz Messengers.”

“So you took it?”

“I did. But those two months, waiting to turn eighteen, were painful. Every day that got closer was like a dagger in Heather's heart. I wanted her to wait and see how it turned out, maybe I wouldn't even like being on the road, but she wanted to get married and start a family now, not later.”

“Did you consider doing that?”

“Of course I did. I loved her. But every time I did, I saw myself ten, twenty years later, wondering if I was good enough to make it, regretting not taking the chance I'd had to find out. I loved her but I also loved music.”

“That must have been an awful time for you, granddad. What did you finally tell her?”

“She told me. She broke up with me.”

“I'm sorry you had to go through that.”

“The first three, four months on the road, after I turned eighteen, I missed her so much. I wasn't sure I'd made the right choice. Then I met someone else. That helped.”

“Why didn't I know about this? It's an incredible story.”

Mac shrugged.

“And Heather is dying, you said?”

“Waiting for a bed in a hospice.”

“I'm so sorry. Does she know you're coming?”

“I told her I might. She said don't you dare. I'm assuming she'll change her mind when I'm there.”

“I'm sure she'll love to see you.”

There was a silence.

“Dad should have told me you played with the Jazz Messengers,” said Lucy.

“I'm not sure how much he knows. It's ancient history.”

“Did you ever cut a record?”

“Several with the band.”

“I want to hear them!”

“I'm not sure if I still have records. Probably do, in one of the boxes in Edward's garage.”

“Well, find it. This is so fantastic.”

“I haven't listened to them in years.”

“How long were you with the band?”

“Only a few years. Being a musician on the road isn't as glamorous as it's cut out to be. I quit and came back to Orofino.”

“Was Heather still there?”



“She'd married and gone to Seattle. She was already pregnant with her second child.”

“Did you regret what you'd done?”

“No. I had to find out if I was good enough.. And I was. I could've made a career of it. But I got tired of living in hotels real quick. I was more of a homebody than I realized.”

“You had a car dealership, right?”

“Selling cars was my first job back in Orofino. I didn't expect it to become a career.”

\ “Did you still play music?”

“Oh yes. Put together a little band, playing dixieland mostly. We played weddings, holidays, parties. We weren't bad.”

“I just can't believe how much you've done that I never heard about.”

Mac shrugged again.

“Don't you start singing Ain't Nobody's Business either. This is about family. I should have known about this years ago, granddad.”

“I guess we're a family that doesn't share much.”

“And that's terrible!”

\*

Edward got permission to enter the apartment. He knew his father had a laptop. He'd start there.

He was looking through his father's email, finding mostly junk, and a considerable amount of it, from solicitations for hearing aids, funeral services, all variety of pills and lotions for an equal variety of elderly ailments, to health insurance supplements and senior vacations, when a ding went off and a small window came on the screen for an incoming Skype call. Edward accepted it. A small white-haired woman appeared in a new window. She looked frail and sickly. Her voice also was sickly.

“Oh. I was expecting Mac.”

“I'm his son.”

“Is he there?”

“Not at the moment. Your name wouldn't be Heather, would it?”

Suddenly the window closed. Edward stayed in Skype and called her back. But no one answered.

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They arrived in Lewiston around dinner time. Lucy expected Mac to want to look up Heather right away but she was wrong.

“Let's get a room and freshen up. I'll call to let her know I'm here and see what time is best tomorrow.”

In the room Mac dialed Heather's number. He got voice mail.

“Hi, this is Mac. Have a surprise for you. You must be at dinner. I'll call again later.”

An hour later he tried again. And an hour after that. Mac went to bed unable to reach her and worried that something may be wrong.

He was right. When he dialed Heather's number in the morning, an unknown woman picked up.

“Hello?”

“Is Heather there?”

“Who is this?”

“Mac. I'm an old friend.”

There was a silence.

“Are you there?”

“I’m her daughter. Mother passed away yesterday.”

Mac was speechless.

Lucy noticed his change of expression and asked, “What is it?”

Heather's daughter said, “Are you mother's high school friend?”

“Yes, I am.”

“I wonder if we could meet. I really want to talk to you.”

“Of course.”

“Is everything all right?” Lucy asked. Mac waved her away.

“Could we meet at here? I'm at my daughter's apartment.”

“That would be fine.”

“Could you come now?”

“I'm on my way.”

“Oh my God,” Lucy said when Mac gave her the news.

“I'm too late.”

“I'm so sorry.”

Her daughter was named Carol, and Mac was surprised by how old she looked. Carol was the oldest of four siblings, who were on their way to Lewiston from various cities around the country..

After small talk, Carol said, “She killed herself, Mr. Simms. This is not like her.”

“I'm so sorry.”

“Are you surprised?”

“I'm shocked.”

“I thought maybe it was something you talked about. She seemed to talk to you more than anybody recently.”

“We talked about our high school days.”

“You never suggested anything to her?”

“Are you accusing me of something?”

“I'm sorry. I don't understand this. I'm groping at straws.”

“I know she was sick and often in pain. Maybe she just wanted to end it.”

“But she was only a few weeks away from a bed in the hospice. They would have made sure she was comfortable.”

“I don't know what to tell you.”

Carol seemed to be distrustful of him, and Mac was glad to get out of there. On the walk to the car, Lucy said, “She's looking for someone to blame so it makes sense to her.”

“I had a hunch she was near the end but I never imagined it would be this way. If I'd been able to see her first, to talk to her in person ...”

“Granddad, you can't blame yourself for any of this. People are complicated, who knows what led her to it?”

“I didn't have a clue.”

Mac was restless and wanted to head home right away. Lucy could tell he felt guilty about not seeing Heather before she died.

On the road, she found herself talking just to distract him but she didn't get a response until she brought up politics and the approaching election.

“Dad said he may vote for Trump. I couldn't believe it.”

“He's just trying to get a rise out of you.”

“Well, he sure got that. Who are you voting for?”

Mac didn't reply.

Lucy said, “No way, granddad. You can't be.”

“I didn't say anything.”

“I got a Trump vibe when you didn't answer.”

“Don't you believe in a secret ballot?”

“Of course I do.”

“What the hell good is it if everyone is telling who they'll vote for?”

Lucy had never really thought about it that way.

“Interesting point,” she said.

Mac said, half-singing, “Ain't nobody's business, who I plan to vote for, nobody's business but mine.”

“That's the first time that song ever depressed me.”

“Lucy, you have no reason to be depressed. Trust me.”

She studied him. He nodded

“Really?”

“Let me put it this way. I know the history of both candidates. And I have good sense.”

“All right!”

Mac added, “And if more people gave more than lip service to the sanctity of a secret ballot, the country would be a better place for it.”

\*

As they approached Portland, Mac said, “Can we stop by your apartment before you take me to Sunset? I'd like you to do something for me.”

While her grandfather took a nap on her bed, Lucy went on the Internet to find out what she could learn about the life of Heather. She wasn't optimistic because all she had was the woman's maiden name. In conversations with Mac, her married name never had come up.

But Lucy got lucky. She found an article about Heather's fiftieth wedding anniversary that had listed her maiden name and from that she got the names of Heather's four children. And soon she struck a gold mine on the oldest daughter's Facebook page, which belonged to the very Carol they had met.

By the time Mac wandered in, she had much to tell him.

Heather had married a man who became very successful in the regional lumber business. Her four children were happily married, or at least had not divorced, and the length of Heather's own marriage, fifty-eight years, also suggested a long, happy life.

Mac was delighted.

“I'm so happy for her. I was hoping you'd find something like this. Of course, we never know what people's lives are really like, do we? But I'm going to assume she got pretty much what she bargained for, children and stability and a long life. We shouldn't hold it against her that in the end she was just tired and in pain and wanted to end everything. Thank you for finding this.”

“No problem. It was fun. I felt like a detective.”

\*

Edward was furious with Lucy. He thought the trip was too risky.

“Dad, if something happened, I'm perfectly capable of rushing granddad to the hospital.”

“And if it happens in the middle of nowhere? A hospital could be fifty, a hundred miles away.”

“This was very important to him. His friend was terminal, and I think he was afraid he wouldn't make it in time. Which is what happened.”

“She died?”

“She killed herself.”

“That's not dad's fault.”

“I know. But he's taking it like it is.”

There was a silence.

Edward said, “I'm sorry his friend died but that doesn't excuse what you did. It was very reckless.”

“It was a favor. And actually a lot of good came out of it. I found out more about granddad on the trip than I ever knew. Why didn't you ever tell me he was a musician?”

“Because he played a trumpet?”

“Because he played with Art Blakey's Jazz Messengers. Because he's on some records.”

Another silence.

“I didn't know that,” Edward said.

“Why is this family so secretive?”

There was no reply.

Lucy said, “Granddad stored things in your garage, he said.”

“That he did.”

“Well, I'm going through it.”

Which Lucy did a few days later. She struck pay dirt, finding not only her granddad's trumpet, but three Blakey albums, a poster and several newspaper articles about the band, though none mentioned Mac by name. She gathered everything up to take home with her.

That night she decided what she was going to do with everything. A stand could hold the trumpet, displaying it horizontally, with something behind it to display the albums and poster, and a place for a plaque with something like, “Malcolm “Mac” Simms, Trumpet, Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers.” Done well, the display could be quite striking. A perfect present for her granddad.

However, making such a stand was beyond her skill level. At a new faculty get-together earlier in the summer, she had met the new Woods Shop teacher, who had flirted with her, and she almost had

flirted back. Her last two relationships, both brief, had been with women, and she was considering dating men again. At any rate, Lucy was sure the new Wood Shop teacher would help her if she asked. Her granddad's birthday was in late November, after the election, and she'd want to have it ready to give to him by then.

\*

On the third Wednesday in August, Lucy was waiting for Edward in the parking lot. They had spoken only once since her return from Idaho. Through dinner neither the Idaho trip nor the upcoming election were mentioned, and instead they talked about teaching. Edward assured Lucy that her nervousness before her first class was perfectly normal and that she'd do fine.

At karaoke, a great surprise awaited them. Mac let loose with a particularly long and amusing version of *Ain't Nobody's Business*, filled with references to Sunset and its residents, and he ended with the most surprising verse of all: "Ain't nobody's business / if I vote for Clinton / nobody's business but mine," although the last line was lost in the competing cheering and booing raised by the confession, with Lucy letting go with her best two-fingered whistle, and Edward grinning and enjoying it all.

On the ride home Edward said, "So dad came out and let the world know who he's voting for. Pretty surprising. Did you see that coming?"

"No way."

"I have a feeling you influenced him in some way."

"I have no sense of that."

"Coming out is a big step for him," said Edward. "A huge step. He comes from a different era. One of my childhood memories is of my parents arguing about whether a new friend was a Democrat or a Republican. It was inconceivable that they would just ask him."



“Really?”

“There were subjects you never talked about. Politics. Religion. Sex. So coming out as a Democrat is quite a large step for him. I'm glad to see it.”

There was a long silence.

“Dad? What are you implying?”

“Excuse me?”

“About coming out.”

“It's not something I saw coming from Dad.”

“And that's it?”

“Yes. Is there more?”

After another silence, Lucy said, “You know there's more, don't you?”

“Lucy, I'm not trying to put words into your mouth here.”

“It feels like you are.”

“Then I'm sorry. Truly.”

They drove a few miles in silence.

Edward said, “I might as well come out, too. I'm not voting for Trump.”

“Fantastic. I knew you'd come around.”

“But I'm not voting for Hillary either. I just can't. I'm writing in Bernie. Don't worry, it won't affect the election in the least. The new poll has Clinton maintaining a nine percent lead. That will feel like a landslide come November.”

“I hope you're right.”

“Nine percent lead, ten weeks to go, it's a done deal. You get to have quite a celebration on election night.”

“I so much look forward to having one.”

Edward pulled into the parking lot at Lucy's apartment. He drove to the entrance and stopped.

Lucy didn't get out.

“Dad, everything's more complicated than you realize. I'm not ready to come out yet.”

“Not my business.”

“How long have you known?”

“I'm your father. A long time.”

“I thought you'd be critical.”

“You're my daughter. I love you. You'll know when it's time.”

“Maybe soon. Election night?”

“Whatever works best for you.”

“Thank you. And for not voting for Trump.”

Edward said, “The first woman president of the United States. I must admit, it has a nice ring to it, don't you think?”

“Do I ever!”

“Ten weeks isn't too long to wait.”

“It will feel like forever.”

“All the more to enjoy it when it arrives. Goodnight, daughter.”

They embraced. Lucy opened the door.

“Keep America great, vote Hillary!”

“Ten more weeks,” said Edward.

“Ten more weeks! Goodnight, dad.”

END

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