

Fiction

"Pomp and Circumstance"

October 31, 2018 | Aimée Lehmann

Mel's graduation gown billowed up in the face of another faculty member, one he didn't recognize, disguised as they were today in their gold and scarlet renaissance gear.

He tried to flatten the gown against his butt, but in doing, he so dropped the front flap of his robe and heard the clunk of bottle on shin.

First casualty of the day.

"Sorry," he said, not really meaning it, climbing over Thompson or Tompkins—the new lady professor in his department. New hires were barely worth his time with all their "working from home" and skittering off for coffee instead of doing the actual hard work of academia: chairing lugubrious committee meetings or reading egotistically-long tenure packets. And don't even get him started on the newbies' research. What with everyone linked to Wikipedia these days, Mel wasn't sure they could be bothered with actual research anymore.

He straddled the next two sets of knees, climbing over with some effort, wondering why they'd placed the folding chairs so damned close together. Seating space—as with everything at Kent—had gotten more miserly over the years. His university administrators blamed it on a shrinking endowment but Mel had seen that new indoor pool. That thing surely cost more than a COLA increase. But it was probably what the college needed, to bribe the next coddled generation to Kent.

Finally reaching his seat, halfway down the row, Mel collapsed. More clunking.

Wheeler, in the row ahead, turned round. "Pockets the Academic Clown! You came prepared, I hope?"

"How else would we get through it?" Mel drew out the first bottle.

"What's on tap?" Wheeler didn't waste time, which was something Mel appreciated about him. That and how he understood the horrifying slip of standards at Kent; he and Wheeler went way back. Through induction ceremonies, convocations, commencements—from back in the day those things still meant something.

"I've got Barbancourt, Casamigos, and a vintage Glenlivet," said Mel.

"Only three?"

Mel shrugged, bearing the criticism the best he could. He'd used to stock four options but as the pockets went, so did choice. It was all he could do to offer three. In a moment of panic last night, he'd taken out his robe from the back of the guest room closet only to notice that the third pocket was flapping. That's just how the fourth had looked before he'd lost. Back then, he'd asked Marge for help sewing it back on, explaining the problem he'd have with complaints about a diminished supply.

But she'd said she couldn't care less about that pocket; that the whole business of drinking at graduation offended her; that *she* took such rituals seriously and that *he*—as a professor, of all people! — should have some respect for the crowning glory of academic achievement.

Last night, in protest (and guilt), he'd dragged out her old sewing box, finding the only needle still threaded—a garish yellow he couldn't imagine Marge ever wearing—and tacked on the wavering pocket himself. As he forced needle through fabric, like a time-punch clock, he'd thought back on that. And on his own graduation, how enamored of it all he'd been. The pomp and circumstance. Its promise of a privileged life.

Broken promise, as it turned out.

"Hey Mel, you got La Frog?" Harrison, from Classics, tapped him from behind. Mel shook his head. He'd stopped serving Laphroaig a few years ago, after that rookie prof in Econ egged him on with it one year and they'd both poured home from graduation in the back of a cop car. Marge had given him hell. Threatened to leave him. She'd made him promise never to drink that much again. Of course, that year, there'd been other reasons, too.

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"I can give you Glenlivet." Mel passed the bottle to Harrison.
 "Good man."
 A low, panicked voice erupted from the aisle. "Mel! Mel Hermann!"
 Mel looked down the row and saw President Hinchey, looking as he always did on graduation: a bit ruffled, but earnest.
 "Morning, sir," said Mel. "Imbibing today?"
 "Mel, I need your help."
 "I've got three choices—"
 "Not that kind of help!" Hinchey twitched. "Could you step out so we might have a word?"

One look at Mel's seat-mates convinced him that he wasn't the only one who found that a bad idea. "I'm afraid I'm a little hemmed in, Sir." He noticed Hinchey's graduation tic had returned; a finger swab under his eye every six seconds; Mel had timed it one year. "You sure you don't need a tippie?" He remembered his own heatstroke year—must be twelve years back. Back when they were still a family of three. Before Marge stopped coming. Before he drank too much, and everything else. "It'll be a long day, sir..."

Hinchey leaned into the row. "Mel, it's Harold! He's had a stroke. And he was supposed to introduce Professor Miles!"

Mel sank back. Leave it to Harold to find a way to shirk graduation duties. "That is a problem." He reached for the returning Barbancourt, glancing down the row at the new lady professor. If he knew her name, he'd suggest her for the job.

"Mel, could you do it? You're the only full professor here from your department."

That figured. The only sucker left; all his colleagues out, either enjoying themselves—or even more likely, busy at their computers, padding their CVs for a better job somewhere else.

"What would I say?" Mel hated this sort of thing. "I don't know the guy."

"I'll give you his bio. Just pick out the highlights!"

Mel shrugged, which Hinchey must have taken as a 'yes' because he bolted back down the aisle, running towards the legions of black-robed graduates gathering at the entrance gate with their colorful, hoodwinked professors.

"Bum luck," Wheeler called back.

"Don't I know it." But Mel's words were drowned in the brassy flourish of the band, announcing the entrance hymn. Lortimer, from Music, used to call it "Pump Room Circumstance" and had devised a drinking game, one swig every time the G chord sounded, to get them through procession. He and Mel got mighty drunk that year of the double class, after Kent absorbed the neighboring (and previously failing) women's university.

In memory of Lortimer—now settled in Ivy-er pastures at Cornell—Mel tipped one back.

Tradition dictated that faculty rose as the Seniors entered, but Mel stayed in his seat, humming and sipping. DRINK, da da daa da da, DRINK da da daa da.

"Stand up, you old goat." Wheeler tugged Mel's shoulder, stiff at its gathered corner.

He groaned, but stood as the graduates floated past, cheering, waving, flaunting the product of their four years' education: a cheap polyester gown and a cardboard hat with words masking-taped across the top. 'Hire Me!' 'Thanks Dad!' 'This Hat Cost Me 100,000 bucks!'

Mel noted that the price had gone up for a Kent U education.

As usual, the pre-vet students brought up the processions' rear—appropriate, Mel thought—waving three-foot-long medical gloves, blown up like multi-headed balloons instead of stuck up some poor horse's ass.

Every year the same.

He took a drink out of sequence. Why did he bother coming?

The average grads took their seats on the football field as the academic superstars filed onto stage, their long yellow tassels proclaiming them Better Than All the Rest, probably convinced—as he'd once been—that they were standing at the precipice of greatness.

He'd been so proud for his own turn on that stage, searching out his parents in the crowd: Father in his slim-ribbed corduroy jacket and Mother, in her worn-out Sunday best. Celebrating the first family member to graduate from college.

A short tradition, as it turned out.

Hinchey grabbed the microphone before the last of the students had even shuffled across the stage; it squawked eerily, sending all the old folks jumping from their seats.

Mel chuckled, thankful for his marinated reflexes.

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"Congratulations families and future Kent Alumni!" Hinchey was in fine form, knowing that today was the U's best chance to enrich its coffers; goading parents into Giving Back to the institution that had managed to make something of their marginal sons and daughters.

His blah, blah, blah went on—the same speech every year—as Mel savored two more swigs of rum. This was the lead up to the announcement of the year's brainiest graduate; some overachieving nerd, as Mel had once been, who would impart his or her Wisdom on the crowd, pretending, at twenty-one, to know anything of life.

He'd gotten it wrong on his turn, that's for sure. Quoting Emerson and Kant, promising his classmates a bright future based on hard work and independence of mind; the start of new and shiny lives.

Total crap.

A tap came from behind, offering him the Glenlivet in trade for the rum, which meant that Mel was mid-swig in the heat of a fine malt when Hinchey announced this year's Valedictorian.

"Charlotte Sinclair."

His head jerked forward, his hand not as fast, so when he looked up to see Charlotte walking across the stage, he had scotch dribbling down his chin.

He'd lost track of time.

It had happened before, in that full gut-kick the universe gave him every now and again, wrenching his insides out, taking his breath away.

The last time it happened must've been four years ago, when Charlotte had appeared on the attendance list in his Freshman Biology course. The same Charlotte Sinclair of pony tails and braces who'd whispered and giggled with Liz in the backseat of their car all the way to California and back on their family vacation. Their last one.

Liz had been eleven and highly resentful of getting dragged across the country just so he and Marge could notch off another ten states on their map, so after a round of negotiations, they'd invited Charlotte along as Liz's backseat companion. The two girls sang, fought and complained their way across three weeks of the Wild West. At the end of the trip, when they handed Charlotte back to her parents, Mel confessed his relief that he didn't have two daughters. He didn't think he could survive it.

He'd discovered since how much he can survive.

He stared up now, at this version of Charlotte Sinclair, surprised that she seemed even more compact and serious-looking than her freshman-year-self, but still evidencing signs of the eleven-year-old she was. Liz's best childhood friend.

He stopped; catching himself, qualifying her age like that, as if she'd had any other.

He capped his bottle, blindly lining up groove and thread, not taking his eyes off Charlotte. He'd keep his promise to Marge today.

He'd kept track of time passing, of course: Liz would be 13, she'd be 16, 17, but when Charlotte the Freshman appeared in his Bio lab he realized how he'd lost all track of what happens with age. How the years don't just add up, but how they add up to something new: new experiences, new friends; new scars, new habits, new hobbies. With trembling hands, he'd marked Charlotte "present" that day and every Tuesday and Thursday all semester long, trying not to imagine who Liz would have become.

Bleary-eyed, Mel watched Charlotte pull the mike towards her as people in the crowd still chattered. He wanted them to hush; to pay attention, to take this seriously. Someone tapped him on the shoulder with a bottle, but he waved them off.

Her voice shook. "Welcome graduates, families and friends."

"Charlotte, we love you!"

Mel turned, searching for the voice, and finding it in the stands, he saw Charlotte's brother, the 'brat' of younger years, known mainly to Mel through the girls complaints—his attack on their tent in a backyard camp-out; or locking them in Charlotte's room for the better part of a day (pre-cell phone years); or on the multiple occasions when he'd let the air out of their bikes, so they'd get in trouble for being late.

Still something of a rascal, it seemed. His father, Charlotte's dad, pulled him back into the aluminum seats.

Mel recognized Charlotte's father, too—though this was a balder version. They used to hang out together at block parties or school open houses; at pick up time or after a play date. They'd even coached basketball together one year—doing a fairly good job of it—when the girls were in the fifth grade. Dad Colleagues. A relationship that ended, of course, when Mel lost that particular job.

He kept staring at the family, studying them in the way he remembered doing with the Jane Goodall tapes during Liz's fourth-grade primate phase. Noting their verbal and nonverbal

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communication proving they were a family unit. That they belonged. The hand of one falling idly on the forearm of the other; the tilt of heads inward, arms draped casually across the others' shoulders.

If circumstances had been different, Mel would be part of today's pomp. Not just sitting in the field with his fellow loser academics, but up there, in the family stands with Marge, searching the black caps in the field for Liz's message, trading stories with Charlotte's parents: about grad school applications or job interviews, fickle new boyfriends or promising sons-in-law. Maybe even bemoaning the possibility of boomerang kids moving back.

He'd already imagined this day—some version of it—the way you do as a parent, starting when your kid is still in diapers—parsing options ahead as you watch others glide past to pick up their Best Player award or perform their first solo or take the lead in a school play. Imagining how your own child might do this or that; the possibilities. The choices. And so many times, during this yearly ritual, that's what Mel had imagined.

Wind whipped across the microphone.

"...for today we celebrate the end of one journey, the beginning of another."

Mel shushed the person next to him.

"Years of sleepless nights, worry and debt all end today—well, maybe not the debt." She paused, letting the laughter fade; allowing the silence to linger.

"But today, what we're celebrating most, is perseverance." She looked down, at the field, at the professors, at him.

"For over the years, we've learned how to accept our failures and move on. To look forward, not back. To keep going."

"Mel, you're on next!" His aisle-mate elbowed him, but he shrugged them off.

In his own graduation speech, he, too, had covered adversity—how to overcome it, move beyond it—convincingly, if you'd asked him then, drawing on his own life experience as a farm kid, third-generation, whose roots were not necessarily indicative of a life of academic pursuit.

Her voice cracked. "...and to accept the times when luck, or fate, or a bad diagnosis spins us into a vertigo of exhaustion or depression or doubt, making us lose our way."

Charlotte struggled after Liz's death—Mel knew that from Marge. It had taken her a couple of years to bounce back—years that Marge kept in touch. "Junior High is difficult in the best of times," she'd say, after a visit. "Imagine when you've just lost your best friend." But he didn't want to. He was better at avoidance—which is why he never spoke to Charlotte or her family, not at either of their funerals. It's why he'd eluded her in his Bio lab, too, even when she hung around those first few classes, looking like she might want to talk.

Marge had kept up with Charlotte's family—going to their birthdays and graduation parties—she certainly would have been invited today. But he veered away, saying he didn't want to be mistaken for a stand-in grandfather.

Fate had blessed them late with Liz—and then cursed them early with her absence.

"Mel, it's time." Wheeler faced him. "If you don't go now, you'll be stuck here once she's done."

He looked up, imagining the silence that would follow Charlotte's speech if he wasn't there for the introduction.

So he rose, starting the climb over his neighbors' limbs, barely noticing when the lonely Glenlivet tumbled to the ground. He stepped over it.

Charlotte was still speaking as he trudged his way to the front. About the importance of connections. About holding on—and how to let go. About imagining a future that none of them could envisage now but from where, at a later time, they would look back and say, this is where it started.

If Marge were here, she'd be in tears by now. Holding his hand, squeezing hard.

She'd told him, as often as she could after Liz was gone, that it wasn't his fault. But he knew better. He could have demanded another round of chemo or searched out another drug trial—he'd spent whole days and nights reading studies, sending letters, emailing or calling doctors. But Liz had asked—eventually pleaded—to let it stop. So, after the third round of treatment, her eyes hollowed out, he'd let her go.

"...because it's our turn to make the decisions now," Charlotte was saying. "Ours, to decide what our journey will be. And we ask, those who love us, to give us this responsibility."

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His fingers gripped the bottom of the bannister as something in him moved to stillness. He tasted tears in the back of his throat before he felt them on his cheek.

To great applause, Charlotte took her seat as Mel crossed the stage to the mike.

He cleared his throat, finding Hinchey's notes, and adjusted the microphone. He'd done this sort of thing a hundred times before and a hundred times it had mattered nothing.

But today, for *her* sake, he wanted to get it right.

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