

Bright Boy

Marie Louise Cookson

HER LAST NOTE may have said something like this: *Goodbye, Anderson. The meatloaf should be good for a couple more days yet.*

Or simply:

You will remember to feed Copenhagen, won't you. No question mark after the 'you.'

Meredith Henry did not like question marks.

Or even:

Our marriage has reached a state of maximal entropy. And you never did make the maple syrup like you promised. Yours once but not anymore, Mer.

OK, it is highly improbable Mrs. Henry would have written about maximal entropy in her goodbye note. She didn't really ever talk like that, at least not when I was around. To me, she would post cryptic, pass-agg notes like: *Good day, Terri. I enjoy the sporty look on you but wearing a belt could really help to flatter your boyish figure. Could you please ask your son to watch his speed. Thanks.* My thirteen year old, Ryder, is something of a speed demon and once careered straight into Meredith outside her home one afternoon, or outside 'Entropy Central' which Ry later took to calling the Henry's house.

"What on earth do you mean by that?" I asked him.

"Just take a look over the fence," he said.

It seemed to be the boiling part of the sap-to-syrup procedure which was causing Anderson the most trouble. My son told him that you have to heat it up outside or you'll just end up with a sweat lodge for a kitchen. Almost every single day, even on New Year's Day, he was out there in his back garden attempting to build a fire. Ryder and I asked him if he wanted any help with this but he just replied: "No thank you, folks. I got it." Mr. Henry hadn't got it at all and couldn't even stay awake long enough to stop the liquid from burning. That was the first time we saw him really lose his temper, too. It was as if all the life was gradually being siphoned out of him. I did not cry though, absolutely not; I quit crying long ago. And I swore that if he hadn't got it together by Valentine's Day, I would just have to wish for some kind of devilish little leprechaun to come along and sort things out.

"Welcome to the neighbourhood, Ma'am," Anderson called out in a voice that sounded surprisingly young for seventy four. This was the first thing he said to me when Ryder and I moved to this area, almost seven years ago. "I'll bring you and the little newt a batch of New Hampshire's finest Henry Syrup next spring." Anderson coined the nickname 'Little Newt' for my son that day because he was small, wriggly and curiously cool-blooded. The shape of him may have shifted since then of course but Ryder has retained that chilly, amphibious-like touch.

Just as Mr. Henry said this about Ry, I caught my first glimpse of Anderson's wife when she opened the front door and stepped onto their porch. She was wearing a tangerine-coloured, wide brimmed hat and the angle at which she had placed it on her head meant that I could only see her right eye. This eye seemed to be watching Ryder and me intently. She did not come over to say hello but instead stood for a moment longer before going back inside. How strange, I

thought; so un-neighbourly compared to her husband. “Thank you,” I said to Mr. Henry. “We’ll look forward to it.”

“You won’t be disappointed. Is that a British accent I hear?”

I smiled and nodded. Mum and I swapped old Manchester for new Manchester when I was a teenager, and, well, Ryder was born just a few years later. “Afraid so.”

“Nothing to be afraid of here, Ma’am,” he said, winking at Ryder. “Now, let me ask you something, Little Newt.” Anderson eased himself down to my son’s height with such supernatural grace that I wondered whether he might have been a ballet dancer in his earlier days, rather than, as I learned later, a post office clerk. “Do you know why -?”

“- Do I know why they’re called silver maples?” Ryder interrupted, mimicking my English accent.

Mr. Henry looked at my son aghast. “Well, yes, that was going to be my question but how could you have possibly known I was going to ask you that?” Before we split up, his father and I used to joke that our boy may not be one hundred percent human and could actually be from the planet Ork.

“I just knew,” Ryder said, grinning and returning to his native New England voice. During this time, his teeth were growing at alternate speeds and the top row looked like one side of a jigsaw puzzle piece. “It’s because the bottom of the leaves are silver.”

“That’s right.” Anderson said, straightening himself up one silken vertebra at a time and gazing at me with his lichen-green eyes. “You’ve got yourself a bright boy here, Ma’am.”

“Yes,” I said as Mr. Henry began to mock-fight with my son like they were twin brothers inside a play pen. “It can be quite hard keeping up with him sometimes, that’s for sure.”

I was looking forward to that batch of syrup but it never came; nor the next spring or the spring after that. Poor Anderson just couldn’t seem to get it right. His entropy kept going up and up and up and then his wife walked out and left him for a man twelve years her junior and there was nothing but more disorder all around him. Or so I thought until I caught him by the lake last Halloween tapping one of the silver maples with his small wooden peg. I bet Anderson had been talking it over with Copenhagen and saying things like: ‘I’ll make the syrup and then she’ll come back to us. Don’t you worry your pretty little fins anymore, Copen. Order will soon be restored.’ But this didn’t seem at all possible. Anderson was getting more and more frail; his syrup making was chaotic and utterly disorganized. Never mind Entropy Central, Mr. Henry was living in Entropy City.

“Maybe it could be decreased.” My son interrupted. He was lying face down on our carpet, enveloped in the fabric of his new red sweatshirt.

“What was that, Ryder? Been reading my mind again, have you? Just how many of my thoughts did you actually intercept this time?”

“I got the one where you called Mrs. Henry a pass-hag.”

“I did not say, or think, pass-*hag*, I said pass-agg; it means passive aggress-”

“- Mom, I know what it means. I’m no *dummy*.”

“Please don’t use that term, Ryder,” I said. “And what exactly do you mean ‘maybe it could be decreased?’”

“Old dude Anderson’s entropy,” Ryder said as he rolled over onto his back, and peered up at me with his fizzy cola brown eyes. “You don’t know about the demon?”

“What demon?” I asked. “You’re the only gremlin around here, young man.”

Ryder let out a heavy sigh and stole a sideways look at his phone. “Maxwell’s Demon. He was able to sort shit -”

“- Language, please.”

“Sorry, I mean, sort *stuff* out.”

“Not sure I understand what you mean, honey,” I said. “What sort of stuff, exactly?”

Checking his phone once again for messages, Ryder said, “I gotta meet Jaden at the pool in like a half hour.”

“Have you finished your homework?” He shrugged as if to say, ‘Duh. I did it in, like, 30 seconds.’ “Well, just give your old mum five minutes, at least. I’d like to hear about this demon.”

Another long exhalation of breath before my son at last began to enlighten me. “So there was this Scottish dude in the 1860’s or whatever and he came up with this theory. He wanted to know if it was possible to violate the second law of thermodynamics.”

My mind shut down completely for a moment. “Yes,” I said, finally. “I know that law, of course I do. Heat can only flow from a hot to a cold body and never the other way around.” He

was staring at me, waiting for more. “And entropy! Entropy, entropy, entropy - disorder – always increases in the end.”

While Ryder considered my energetic reply, he wiped his nose with the sleeve of his new sweater. “You sure about that, mom?” He asked, inspecting the impressive assortment of snot.

“Use a handkerchief next time, Ryder, please. And yes, I am sure.” I was not at all sure. Ryder knew that I wasn’t, either.

“But if you’ve got a demon that can, you know, get in there with the molecules and, like, infiltrate the system, then order might be restored?”

I still did not understand. “But how? How would a demon, a mythical non-human being, be able to do such a thing?”

Ryder swept his thumb left to right across the screen of his phone. “If I just tell you this one more thing, can I go?” I nodded yes. “Say you have a container of gas with two parts; let’s call one part Ged and the other Ken -”

“- Wait. Don’t you mean Jed and Ken?”

“No, mom, just go with it. Ged an’ Ken. Or you can say it all together: Gedanken. It’s a German word and it means thinking or thought or something.”

He’s teaching himself German now? Or did Ry just wake up this morning fluent in another language? “I understand,” I said, lying. Ged an’ Ken. Ged-an-ken. Gedanken. I repeated this word over and over. “So, in this container are -”

“- Yeah, in there are, like, gazillions and gazillions of gas molecules, some are fast and some are slow and what this demon wants to do is sort out the molecules so that all the slow ones are in Ged and all the fast are in Ken and to do this he uses a -”

“- Whoa, just a minute, Ry.” He was talking at such a rapid pace, I could not keep up. “Hold fast on those...story molecules of yours for a second, please?”

“O. K. Mom. I. Will. Try. To -”

“- Ryder,” I warned him. “Anymore of that sarcastic tone and you will not be going swimming at all.” He may be smart but I was still the boss around here.

My son sighed, brought the hood of his Hades-red sweater up over his head and finally began again. “The demon has this trapdoor that only he can open. He knows when a fast molecule is getting close to the door so when it does, he opens it and it shoots through to Ged. And visa versa for the slow ones getting through to Ken. A gas’ temperature is only an average speed of its molecules. Right, mom?”

“Yes...you are absolutely right, Ryder.”

“Even a hot gas has some lazy asses letting the side down and even a cold gas has a few speedballs. The demon would let these off-the-wall kinds of molecules through to the other side, which would mean the temperature difference between them, would get even greater. Kaboom! That is it. The demon has just busted the second law of thermodynamics and caused heat to flow from a cold body to a hot one.” Ryder’s soda popping eyes bore right through to mine. “Hasn’t he?”

Hasn't he? Why did I feel as if I was under surveillance right now from my own son? Was this a trick question? "Yes," I said. "Or at least, I think he has."

"Yeah, I guess. Maybe he has."

"Maybe? But I thought you just said -"

"- Maybe he has and maybe he hasn't. Just think about it, mom. Look, I gotta go," Ryder said, sliding up onto his feet. "But, you know, if he *has* then maybe Mr. Henry's ever increasing entropy can be reduced; decreased. Do. You. Under. Stand. What. I Am -"

"- OK, that's enough," I said. "You're free to go. And be back by 10.30," I called out to him but he had already slithered away.

Old man Henry was always a cool buddy of mine. Mom had it right though; his entropy just kept going up and up. I didn't really get how such a super-ace dude like him could have been so sad about a pass-hag like Mrs. Henry leaving him but he was. Real sad. Mom said it was as if his heart was on the outside of his body and she could actually see it breaking more and more each day. My mom does have kind of an intense, over-active imagination but I got what she meant. She also said that the sight of him out there in his garden trying to boil up the syrup and failing every single time made her want to cry. And she did cry. A lot. Jaden's mom was always crying too, even when she just said hi to me. I don't get why mom's do that. Anyway, I guess you might be surprised to find that I've taken over this story but I really had no choice. I couldn't keep on pretending to be my mom for too much longer so it's going to be me from here on in.

I really wanted to help out fine man Anderson. I think he was the oldest person that I ever met. I know he wasn't because that's always a chick in Japan. Sorry, *woman*. My mom doesn't like me saying 'chick.' 'Don't say chick, Ryder,' she says in her weird accent; you know how she talks. 'The word is woman.' Before Mrs. Hag Henry left Anderson, he didn't seem that ancient but all of a sudden it was like he became a hundred and eight or something overnight. It was sad. I didn't cry about it but it did get to me in a really small, infinitesimal way. He was going to die soon. I knew it and my mom did too. That's why we wanted him to make the syrup so that he could at least go kind of peacefully and let Mrs. Mer Henry know what a good egg he was. So we came up with a plan. I was due to go stay with my Dad for part of the Easter holidays and do you know what my Dad's neighbor has in his garage? A reverse osmosis machine. This baby speeds up the whole sugaring thing. After sneaking into Anderson's place and lifting out his sap, it would mean that within a few days he'd have some of his own sweet-tasting Henry Syrup. Yes, sir. Meanwhile, mom agreed to distract old Henry by inviting him and Jaden's mom, Clara, over here so they could all talk about the First World War or something. Just kidding, my mom was born in the 80's so she's not that past it; not as much as Jaden's who's from, like, the 1960's. Anyway, that's what we decided to do to help out old man Henry.

We were all watching this documentary about salamanders at Entropy Central, I mean, at Mr. Henry's house when it happened. It wasn't really a big deal or a miracle or anything but I should probably tell you about it seeing as I'm the one who's in charge of the story now. My mom and I decided that this would be the night when we would steal Anderson's sap from his refrigerator. I figured that if we were all around at his place and it got kinda' late then he would be asleep in no time especially if we were going to watch a TV show about aquatic and semi-

aquatic amphibians. It was actually pretty interesting but there was nothing in there that I didn't already know. Yet my mom, she just loves those kinds of things. She goes nuts whenever she sees one of the teensy orange ones (red-spotted but I already knew that) when she's out for a walk. She's got, like, hundreds of pictures of them. 'Oh gosh, Ryder,' she says. 'They're so gorgeous, aren't they? I can almost hear them chin-wagging with each other.' And then that crazy, bright, British brain of hers would be off again. Old man Henry was already starting to drop off before we'd even got to the part about some salamanders being able to regenerate their own limbs (totally the best part).

"Why don't you take Anderson upstairs to his room now, Ry?" My mom whispered to me from the sofa. I was lying on the floor, like I always do. Sofas are where all the old people like to sit.

"Yeah, if you want," I said. I am a lot bigger than her so it made sense that I should be the transporter. "Then you can go get his sap from the kitchen."

"You got it," said my mom. She almost made it sound like she was American but didn't really nail it.

As mom patted Anderson on his arm a little to let him know we would put him to bed, I went over to the TV to switch it off. Then I heard him mumble something like, "Where are you, Meredith?" That was kinda' sad. "Are you OK?" My mom said to him. "You feel a little hot. Would you like me to get you a cold flannel for your forehead?" Old dude Anderson was burning up. Mom went to get a thermometer from the upstairs bathroom and after she returned and placed it in his dribbling mouth, the temperature read 101 degrees Fahrenheit.

“OK, mom, you gotta go and open all the windows so we can get the air circulating,” I said.

“I know what to do, honey. I am a mum, remember,” she said. “Let me get a flannel or a cold sponge.”

“Nah, that’s not always so good -”

“- Well, it worked for you whenever you had a fever.”

“I never had any fevers. I’m a newt, remember? You must be thinking about one of your other kids.” She gave me one of her famous Medusa stares, then. She likes to do these every once in a while (my gran has an even better one, it’s a British thing) and sometimes they can last about ten whole minutes. “I’m kidding, I’m kidding,” I said. “Maybe go get him a Popsicle or something like that?”

“I don’t think Mr. Henry has any ice lollies in his freezer but let me just run home and pick one up from our house,” she said. “I’ll be back in two minutes.”

While my mom was gone, I broke my own no-sofa law and sat down next to our good neighbor. Mr. Henry took hold of my hand and held it. That was weird. I think he must have thought I was his wife because he kept murmuring “Meredith, Meredith” again and again. He felt real hot and his skin was so thin but also sort of rough that it kinda’ reminded me of one of those Pink Wafer cookies that I have whenever mom and I go visit her home town back in the UK.

“Hey, Mr. Henry,” I said. “It’s Little Newt. Remember me?” He didn’t say anything for like an entire minute but just squeezed my hand harder.

“Ah, Newt,” he said eventually. “There’s my boy; my bright, special boy.”

“Yeah, that’s right. You feeling any better?” No response. “You want a glass of cold water?”

Anderson shook his head. “Just sit with me a while, Little Newt,” he said. “Just sit with me.”

So I did. We sat together, holding each other’s hands until my mom returned. She brought Clara back with her because we didn’t have any Popsicles back at our place. I guess Jaden must have been at the pool or something which I was real glad about because if he’d have seen me holding old dude Henry’s hand, I never would have heard the end of it on Twitter. They were both being all mom-like and fussing over Anderson, asking him how he felt and everything. Then my mom took his temperature again. It had risen to 103. She turned directly to me and said, “Did you give him a hot water bottle or something?”

“No,” I said. “We just sat here.”

“But he’s even hotter,” She said before switching her touch from old man Anderson’s hand to mine. “And you’re even colder.” My mom ran her fingers through her croppy, spiky hair. “What have you done, Ry? You’re making everything worse; have you got tiny devils inside your pores?” No, of course I hadn’t. But that’s my mom for you; the simplest explanation is never true. I had done nothing, I swear, yet she and Clara practically yanked me up from the sofa and threw me out the door. I infiltrated my way back in of course because I had to get the sap; I had to make this god damn Henry syrup if it was the last thing I ever did for old man Anderson.

The answer is no. For the demon to utterly defy the law, he would have had to sort out all of those molecules using, like, zero energy and zero work. But he couldn't have done. He had to have some super-knowledge about their movements and their positions to help get them into either Ged or into Ken. How would he have been able to open the door? Telekinesis? Don't crack me up. And you think I could have just made Mr. Henry hotter purely through the touch of my skin? A coincidence; pure and simple. You can't cheat the principles of nature but you sure can have fun trying

For a while, it seemed as if my mom and me had cheated the death out of old Mr. Henry. We made jars and jars; no, I am talking casks, barrels and vats of his maple syrup. We literally lined his hospital room full of the stuff. It did get kind of dangerous because a few of the nurses even tripped over them but they weren't seriously hurt. Anderson's last few weeks were pretty good ones and he talked a lot about he and Mrs. Henry getting back together again. Mom even helped him write her an email but she only wrote back saying, *I loved you, Anderson. I really did. It just became wearisome being thought of as the Wicked Old Witch married to the mature Prince Charming. Did you ever really love me as much as you loved our neighborhood?* At least she included a question mark this time yet that mark pretty much sent my mom over the edge. She kept saying how she must try to curb her fiendish imagination; that she had possibly misjudged Anderson's wife all this time and Meredith really wasn't so bad. I don't know. Mer Henry had almost smiled at me once, though she might have been trying to get something out of her teeth.

From there, everything else started to fall apart for our good neighbor again. The Henry's goldfish, Copenhagen, was found dead in his tank but goldfishes never live that long. I don't know why anyone bothers with them; they're kind of pointless so he really shouldn't have taken that death so personally. Yet when I said this to my mom, she just bawled and bawled. And then when poor old Anderson Henry actually died, she cried for, like, three whole days. Jaden and me had to take our sleeping rolls and go camp out in the woods just to get away from our crying mom's.

In the end, the arrow of time only points one way for all of us. People get old. People get sick. People die. But the Henry Syrup? That's still going strong. My mom and I were drizzling some of it over our breakfast waffles just the other day. I think it is so awesome how it sinks into the square voids of the waffle so you can't see the gaps any more; it looks really ordered and uniform. Although do you know what my mom did then? She took hold of my fork and smashed into it so that the syrup spilled out all over the plate and the waffle just got utterly demolished. Then she started mimicking my voice and saying things like, 'Before I destroyed it with a fork, this waffle was low entropy and now it is high entropy – kaboom!' She did manage to pull off how I sound real well, actually.

But then she has been getting better at pretending to be me.

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