

Passing (Over)

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“I know you, don’t I?”

She was tiny (four foot ten barefoot), getting older (must be well over seventy now), still with the same coal black hair, tight lips, acid eyes, high-heels-hiding-the-four-foot-ten.

“Yes,” I said and walked away into the kitchen, without elaborating or saying who I was, or saying yes, she had known me since I was born. I walked away leaving an old lady confused and snubbed, and avoided recognising a tinge of smugness with a hint of revenge.

Instead, I turned to Liz, my aunt. “Anything I can do?” It was her husband’s funeral – Mum’s brother, John. He was a nice man, generally decent, kind and fair - except if you got him started on Margaret Thatcher, whose mere name seemed to flip a switch in his head from ‘calm’ to ‘incandescent rage’.

With Mum long gone, after my Dad, who would have tried his hardest, but been hopeless, and my Aunt Dilys, who would have tried her hardest and been some use, if I was in trouble I’d have gone to my Uncle John, who in all probability would actually have been the most practical help.

The last person I would have gone to was Aunt May, who I’d left standing in the front room wondering just who the hell I was and why I’d walked off, whilst I was standing in the kitchen wondering how to unpick this one.

“No thanks, love,” said Liz, “I think we’re all sorted.”

Bugger. No excuse to stay in the kitchen. Tea, sandwiches, separating the paper doilies – I’d have been your man; I could even see myself messing around arranging a pot of flowers for half an hour despite barely being able to tell the leaves from the petals. But no.

With hindsight, I should have seen it coming. There’s a certain sort of person that reads gender first and who you actually are second, so if you don’t present the gender they expect (as in the last one they saw you wearing), then they simply can’t work out who you are. It’s as if, having identified the person in front of them as male, they only look for a match in the “men I know” department of their memory and of course – well, in my case, anyway – they don’t find you there.

I’ve had it before – there’s a faint recognition, a sense that you look a bit like someone they know, but that’s as far as it gets. It’s quite different to people who recognise you as a person first, then they read all the gender stuff and realise – oh, right... and their face does a kind of accelerated Lambada as they process the situation; or the people who recognise you, but pretend not to because they don’t want to deal with the gender thing (surreptitious Lambada); or the people who recognise you, then think they’ve made a mistake (embarrassed Lambada, usually

followed by curious Waltz); or the people who just take it all in as a package, grin, and say “Shit, that suits you!”

No – this is typical of a certain kind of rigid thought and May, starchy-stiff matriarch of the Order of Rules, Conformity and Appearances, was always going to be that type.

But I hadn't thought that far ahead. So, I meet her for the first time since the last family funeral (Aunt Dilys – second on the ‘when in trouble’ list) and what do I do?

Do I say, “La, Aunt May, it is I, Simon, previously known as...”? Do I add, “You remember that phone call and letter a few years back after which you have deleted me from your Christmas card list, even though I am now happy and not the miserable sod that I was before”? Or do I skulk off into the kitchen and avoid the situation?

Mmm.

Births, marriages and deaths – the first two tend to be reasonably predictable. To be fair, Uncle John had been on his way for long enough for him to choose an eco-friendly wicker coffin, totter round Richmond Park looking for a place to scatter his ashes and give me one of his prized marathon medals.

But all too frequently, funerals catch you on the hop, and for those of us that transition, that means you can get caught mid-way between genders, like being caught mid-way across the kitchen floor at 2am heading for biscuits and ice-cream.

What do you do? Brazen it out? Pretend they're mistaken? (I was just getting a glass of yummy low-calorie water...to eat with this er, spoon). And what do you wear? It is not the time you want to be thinking “Does my bust look big in this?”

There might be people you haven't told mixing with people you have, or people you've chosen not to tell, or people you never expected to see again and so hadn't bothered to tell or, as in my case, people who haven't spoken to you since they found out.

All those people, relationships, feuds, he-said-she-said, slights and factions, compressed by shared loss, sparking with tight funereal emotions, a mix held together by a surface tension of politeness and with all the unpleasant potential of a bowl of cornflakes laced with a pot of chilli powder.

May, eldest and now last of four siblings – it seemed unfair and unkind to have the conversation right there and then with her, put her on the spot. More unfair than leaving someone else to explain who I was, though? What should I do? I wasn't going to stand there and let her verbally squash me when I had no way of standing up for myself that wouldn't make me look like a right shit. Having a go at an elderly lady at her brother's funeral wasn't on my agenda.

Nor was I going to invoke a situation where people felt they had to take sides. This was John's day, and Liz's day and their children's day and all sorts of other days, but what it wasn't about was me and my gender. Unfortunately, an altered gender presentation has a nasty habit of taking centre stage just when you don't want it to, and funerals are pretty much top of the Sex-Change-Gremlin's fun activities.

At my Dad's funeral, I really wanted to do the proper son thing and carry his coffin, but recent knee surgery made me rather nervous. Still, I figured he'd been really thin when he died – can't weigh much between four of us. The undertakers even managed to find three other five foot two male pall bearers – I have no idea where – they could've been Star Wars Ewok extras from Shepperton studios just up the road for all I knew.

It was only at the point where the coffin was sliding out of the hearse that I realised Dad might not have weighed much, bless him, but coffins weigh a ton. The short walk into the Chapel of Rest was a litany of panic – dontdropit-dontdropit-dontdropit-DONOTDROPHYOURDEADDAD.

On the plus side, it didn't leave a lot of room to worry about the who-knew-what about me until after the service. I was standing looking at the flowers when one of Dad's friends who I hadn't met before approached. "Greg had a daughter, didn't he? Is she here? I don't recall him mentioning a son...?"

Faced with a question, the honest and direct answer to which will out me, I have only three basic options: lie, tell the truth or evade the question. I've become fairly expert at combining the last two, largely because I'm completely hopeless at telling an out-and-out lie. "All Dad's children are here," I said firmly, hoping Dad would forgive the implication he had surreptitiously fathered a brood of extra-marital kids.

And then there was a friend's father's wake. I was passing well; I'd been on T for all of about 4 months, so I looked like an eighteen year old lad in his first suit, dutifully passing round the sherry and sandwiches on the instructions of the adults, but that was OK. OK until I was introduced as a thirty-something man to the little old blind lady who cocked her head to one side when I said hello and crumpled her face into an enquiry. I knew she was sure she could hear a woman, and I really didn't want to hear the question, so I left with indecent haste before she'd had time to grab more than a couple of crisps. Off to the kitchen, avoiding the confused and snubbed – and hungry - old lady.

Perhaps the moral of all this is just stay in the kitchen in the first place. It's bound to be easier. At least there are cupboards you can pretend to be looking for cornflakes and chilli in.

I peered back through the door to see what was happening with May. She was silhouetted against the window, mouth pursed in disapproval, the front inch of her hair spray-welded into a kind of cliff for extra height though the rest of it was flat. I looked down. How she still managed four-inch heels at seventy-odd I really don't know. I had a sudden vision of her barefoot, going around on tip-toe, her feet forever fixed into high-heel-shoe shape and wondered if she had high-heel slippers. Or if the hair-cliff caught the wind like a sail, blowing her round the shoe shops like a wobbly galleon, a flag of bright crimson lipstick run up to repel boarders.

Appearances; all appearances. I'm five foot two. I have flat hair and flat shoes. I think there are more important things. I think this is where May and I come unstuck.

But if appearance is so unimportant to me, then how do I rationalise those components of transition which are all about just that – how I appear to myself, how I

appear to others? And that's no small part. Getting the new wardrobe, new chest, new haircut, new watch, new beard, (new bald patch – bugger) – how much of this is reflecting my sense of self back out to the world through appearance?

I ducked out of the way before she spotted me. There'd been enough people in the front room who knew me to fill her in and judging by the pursed lips, someone probably had. Just for today, that could be someone else's problem. I wished I felt a bit better about it.

Her husband pottered into the kitchen and said hello. We chatted. Neither of us mentioned May. Or Sex Changes.

You know, they gave me the best presents when I was a kid – the sort your parents hate. A Bontempi organ came my way one Christmas, followed by a Bontempi accordion the next year and then, best of all, a Potter's Wheel. It made a sound like fingernails down a blackboard and flung soggy clay further than anyone might reasonably think possible on a couple of AA batteries. Outstanding.

Uncharitably, I wondered if those expensive presents were a dig at my parents who didn't have much money.

Perhaps that's what bothered me most about May - the way she illuminated what I like least about myself – everything negative, defensive, suspicious; my capacity to think the worst rather than the best. That I could feel so angry when she gave me one of 'those' looks and made low-voiced comments to her neighbour, the content of which I could only guess at. That her loudly unspoken disapproval could upset me so, make me feel guilty about being myself, about being happy. That I could end up fantasising about shouting at an elderly lady, about sneaking up with giant scissors and cutting her hair-cliff off out of sheer spite.

At the service, I went in with the main group and found a seat. May came in almost last (making her entrance?) (damn – done it again) and looked around. People were already standing two or three deep at the back; there was nowhere left.

I went to stand up. My wife, normally the kindest and most generous of people, whispered, "Let someone else..."

"No, love", I said. "She's old. It's her brother".

May took my seat, exuding an air of righteous contempt.

The wake was busy. John was kind and decent and well-liked. Margaret Thatcher was not invited.

I circulated and chatted and reminisced, negotiating past and present with one eye always on the conversation horizon for the next pronoun or gendered phrase. "When I was in the... local youth group" (do not say 'Brownies'), "the... outfit" (do not say 'dress') "was fucking awful". Shit. "Did I just say 'fuck'? Sorry..."

Eventually, I met up with May's husband again. Elderly as he was, his faded eyes still had a thin twinkle about them. I suspected he wouldn't mind if I said 'fuck'. After

a few minutes, he looked to see where May was and I followed his glance. Time to say hello.

As I began to make my way across the room, she saw me coming, pursed the crimson flag and scuttled away. Within two minutes, she'd gathered her husband and left.

That was the last time I saw her. I don't know if she's alive or dead. "I know you, don't I?" - that was the last thing she said to me.

Probably the last thing she ever will.

Pity it's wrong.