

Henry's Relations

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I

My cousin stopped talking.

Though Henry had nothing to say for himself he continued to carve words into stone.

Thy will not mine O Lord.

He called goodbye as he left the house, and in that morning routine his mother saw no warning. As weeks of silence passed she spoke with increasing ease of a chat over breakfast and the farewell kiss – detail unlikely to be exact, since Henry had been known to grunt if necessary over toast, to hate any questioning early in the day, and to shout “bye” as the front door shut behind him. It was, however, probably true that there was nothing that morning to alert Aunt Faye to the fact that she would not hear Henry speak again.

“Until this struck, as if I hadn’t had enough, he was good company and a loving son,” became a mantra for my aunt. She’s a widow, and Henry her only living child, so who could contradict her now?

Henry carried on working as if nothing changed. He was silent but continued cutting *Even so, Father, it seemed Good in Thy sight* on a stone to go over a young wife and mother.

His work is beautiful and continues to improve. Even his mother must admire what he can do but Henry was supposed to be a wonder child and Aunt Faye had high ambitions for him. Stone appealed to Henry, who knows why, it just did, and he began collecting when he was small. He learned what he could about rock and I wondered at the time if he might throw off his mother’s idea of making a barrister of him and become a geologist. It was a shock when he apprenticed

himself to a stonemason instead. Aunt Faye took to her bed. "But manual labour?" she sniffed. "How could you, Henry, after all that education?"

Henry probably suffered while she remained ill, yet for once didn't give in.

Mr Gamble is entirely deaf, but values skill, and it's clear he and Henry get on. Henry became a partner within a year. After Henry stopped speaking they got a secretary in each morning to talk to the bereaved. Henry has a portfolio of his work to show and nods, smiles and seems fully attentive, but his silence spares him that bit of the job he found too difficult. Right from the start it was anguish to him that he didn't know what to say to those who needed his work.

I would once have said I knew my cousin well but now he's baffling.

At first we assumed something must have happened. My aunt tried everything and insisted he write notes. Henry just shook his head and hugged her. Or that is what she said.

Aunt Faye called in experts but Henry is not a child. He refuses pills and what is a counsellor to do with a mute?

Plenty of people have something to say about Henry, as if agreeing to some explanation might make it more comfortable for us all.

Sometimes I think Henry is forcing us to accept he can't say what matters. Perhaps silence is better for him, since he seems more alive and alert now. And that is where Aunt Faye finds herself outwitted. The only way she can claim it is an illness is if she has him certified. One doctor was prepared to oblige. He called it a particular form of catatonia, another diagnosed autism but neither makes sense. Since it is unimaginable to Aunt Faye to have madness in the family, she can't push 'treatment' on poor Henry. Besides she has to accept he functions surprisingly well and he never went in for much small talk anyway.

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I don't know how Faye can bear it. His silence is creepy. It's like talking into a bag of dough. Her first response was to summon our brother, Henry's godfather, who declared cheerfully that having fewer people speaking must make for less deception, then couldn't take more than a day of it. Typically he was off again.

I never imagined Henry would be the one of that generation to make such a stir. You always expected too much polite behaviour from him, instead he makes you feel a fool. You chatter on and on, while he just nods, and in the end you get self conscious and start to wonder what on earth you are saying. All the fun of a good natter is gone.

True, Henry was pretty quiet as a boy. Perhaps I shouldn't have sent Lois over there as regularly as I did. That house was too like a morgue. Spotlessly clean and ordered as if life had already

finished, or not yet begun. Growing up Faye and I weren't close. Just too different. She readily took offence at my exuberance, fertility and heaven knows what else, and never forgave me for flirting with Arthur once before she married him. Believe me I wasn't a quarter serious, not for a second! And apparently I drew too much attention on her wedding day.

She thinks I was spoilt because I was the youngest, and that our parents were absurd to be proud of my high spirits. When she made it too obvious she expected me to do something unseemly, I nearly ordered "Mother" in bright flowers to go along the coffin on the spot. How she got to be a snob I don't know. She certainly has no faith in my judgement. "How can you marry him?" she asked just because my man enjoys a drink and likes to gamble. At least he's full of life.

But Faye hasn't gone soft and flabby. She has a streak of iron. I might have been the lively, pretty one when young, but all my babies have taken their toll. Faye's still got a firm figure, though you feel she's holding herself in, waiting for something worth having.

Things haven't been easy for her. She had several miscarriages, then I got married and fell pregnant immediately. By the time Henry was born in the middle of fireworks for Guy Fawkes, I already had two boys. She was bedridden for ages after the birth but I was up and about the day after Lois arrived some months later.

I had my second girl around the time of Faye's horror. Probably that is why I let Lois, then only a toddler, go as much as I did.

When Arthur died of cancer, Henry was fourteen. The boy stepped up, as Faye expected him to do, and tried to be the man of the house. That was when Henry first went to Jack Gamble's business. It seemed peculiar at the time that he took such interest in that stone for Arthur's grave. Eventually he chose *The Memory of the Just is Blessed*. What a thing for a kid to select! I suggested *A great dad* or *In loving memory* would be better. But Henry was in earnest and knew what would please his mother.

Then he and Lois began meeting up to go around looking at old stones. It became a bit of an obsession of his but I didn't like to keep Lois away. She was his main companion. I'm fairly sure that was when they came across the tiny grave. No one had ever told Henry what had happened, but he must have had some sense a baby had been expected.

Faye now seems to hold something against Lois. Maybe that she's done well. Faye got all the serious gene in our generation but it went down to Lois and flourished as she began spending entire weekends in that sombre house.

At first, when she was still afraid of the emptiness and the huge soft bed, I thought she should stay since Henry and Faye were troubled and her presence seemed to make a difference. Later I

couldn't keep her away. She went there for holidays as well. And Faye made Lois some lovely clothes. I admit my sewing is bad and nothing hangs as it should, and Lois got fussy under Faye's influence. One Christmas Faye made her a nightdress that's too good even for a wedding night. Lois still has it, wrapped in tissue, though it's far too small.

Faye is not an extravagant woman and not given to much generosity, yet she must have stitched for months to do something that would barely be seen and the girl would outgrow in no time. When I first saw the purple pansies embroidered round the hem I was sure they were real. They had tiny flecks of gold and white. The fabric was the softest mauve lawn. I'd given Henry a cheap book token and then there was this embarrassing gift. Lois loved it.

Faye and Arthur had more money of course, and a car to collect Lois. She took all her homework over there, saying she couldn't do it properly at our small, crowded home. I sometimes wish my boys had half her determination to do well. Faye's ambition rubbed off on Lois and now she's the one in a respectable profession.

Faye was certain Henry's silence must be an illness and grew furious when Lois wouldn't use her contacts to get the best experts. Lois, just back from medical school, was doing her first hospital job. Faye can be formidable but she never overwhelmed Lois the way she did Henry when he was little. The poor mite used to say, "Do we like this, mother?" when his grandparents offered food. He's still living with Faye and is dutiful in many ways. Yet he completely shuts her out. I don't know why he didn't just go off and join a silent order. That would have been easier on the rest of us. But he helps round the house and his earning makes a difference to her pension.

It's not like Henry to be so inconsiderate. Though he does have the self-centredness of an only child. His refusing to speak is unnerving for everyone but Lois takes it particularly hard. He showed no sign of being this odd before, although he was always a bit strange. Not that you could put your finger on it, except for that other time he stopped talking.

Faye wouldn't hear of any connection. She bit into my suggestion with such ferocity, I don't dare mention it again. She's jumped at me before for loose talk, words that flop about going nowhere, or for gossiping to pass the time. She seemed to think I was sitting in judgement, and she would have none of it! Lois is nearly as touchy.

We've all become less carefree in what we say, whether Henry is present or not. I never thought Henry could make our talk seem silly.

He has fight in him. He used to seem Faye's puppet in his immaculate boy shirt and suits, but he has her steely streak.

Anyway, his silence this time is entirely different. You don't feel he is flattened. You feel you have his full attention and believe he is listening, which makes it worse. You squirm under the scrutiny and think you'd better find something worth saying. We could all end up talking like his gravestones.

*Her toils are passed, her work is done
And she is fully blessed.
She fought the fight, the victory won
And entered into rest.*

My neighbour had this done for his mother. He was delighted, but I can't stand these stone declarations. What is wrong with the modern name and dates?

When he went subdued and quiet as a tiny boy it was just sad. Lois was three then, so Henry must have been four. Our parents took him for the birth, and had Lois over as well, and that was the beginning of their special connection. Faye had a terrible labour, as she did with Henry, but this time the baby was deprived of something. It survived, but only for a few weeks. Faye couldn't face Henry while she waited for her little girl to die. Then she collapsed.

When Henry eventually went home his mother was not as she had been, though a cleaner kept the house and him tidy. I think we assumed he was too young to understand, so it could hardly matter to him. Probably it was frightening for him: his mother was no longer reachable, and she'd been fine till then.

What was he to make of his mother's depression when his return to her didn't cheer Faye as we'd hoped?

He became quiet. He sat around, unengaged, like an old man in a nursing home. He looked utterly bewildered and nervy. He barely ate and barely spoke. I felt for Faye, and felt guilty that my new baby girl was fine. If the only thing I could do was to let Arthur collect Lois each weekend so she could give them company, I agreed. These days I wonder if it was the best thing. Lois can't help Henry now. Nor Faye. And when I see her tight face close against me, I see too much of my sister.

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I wish Mother and Aunt Faye wouldn't push me to explain Henry to them.

What I do know isn't for them, though occasionally I suspect Aunt Faye guesses. Mother hasn't a clue.

While I was growing up I didn't find I could say much to them, though perhaps I felt more connected to my aunt. On good days, despite what Mother thinks, Aunt Faye was attentive and

could be fun. She had time to make things special. She took an interest where Mother was always busy, and she helped me with school projects. She got me started with routines and discipline. I appreciated Mother's appetite for life and the energy in our home, though she never seemed to see the point in privacy. If you told her something special it would be broadcast to all.

I was glad I didn't live with Aunt Faye, but I did tune in to her somehow. When I was small I sensed how readily she prickled around her own darkness. I didn't get near her exactly, but I knew when she was absent, claimed by her own black cloud. And I knew it wasn't just personal. Her moods weren't about me. That was what Henry couldn't get. Even in her kindness towards me I sort of understood I was a substitute. Not that anyone ever told us what happened. Henry and I worked some of it out, but it was only after Arthur died that we found the baby's grave.

I still walk in graveyards but now it's to find Henry's work, which stands out. Most people aren't paying for his superior craftsmanship, only a few recognise it.

It brings me comfort and tells me something is all right with Henry. I like my work but I wish there was one thing I could do with the dedication and skill Henry has for his.

But he also forces us to see something is not ok. And we can't get closer to it.

From when we were small, I half realised something was wounded in him but he also had a gentleness I wanted badly.

I imagined the pair of us were the babes lost in the wood and must stay together, irrevocably tied. I didn't feel anything like that with my brothers, but I assumed I could absolutely rely on Henry. Now I can't.

One day we met by chance on a bare street and that delighted him. This day, as usual, I did most of the talking. We were both going to the bank. He was there to sort out a loan for his business. I was moving my account as I was back from medical school.

After two beers, I dared mention his living at home, in a house that is stiff enough to visit these days, and must be stifling to stay within. I also asked if he had a lover, of either sex. He looked rueful, or so I thought. He said he expected to die a virgin. As matters stood, he could hardly ask any girl to offer herself when he couldn't give heart and soul. I didn't understand what he was saying, but knew he spoke a truth. Henry was like that. He occasionally spoke things which you saw jumped out directly from the guts of him.

Also he was beginning to talk like his gravestones. And I thought of giving him a present. While my older brothers gloated to accomplish more than "a girl", and jeered when I got anything wrong, Henry was prepared to show me whatever he knew. Perhaps I could teach Henry now. We'd

played in childhood, at husband and wife, and Henry could make me feel tender. He had mild ways but, sometimes, a forbidding eye even then. There was an intensity in his gaze, as if he saw through to the darker things.

I had a dream of Henry I still remember. He was an eagle. I knew that it was him, and while he rested on a branch beside me, I saw inside his wing. There was an injury. But then, quite suddenly, Henry took off, flying. He flew straight up from where I sat, and I clapped and clapped him for that, feeling pride that my Henry, injured or not, would still be flying.

When Uncle Arthur died, I was scared by the thought that it had been too much for him. He seemed never quite good enough for Aunt Faye. It made me fear for Henry. When I first heard of his silence I thought, “now Henry, too, has escaped Faye Chalker.”

But he also escaped me.

At our chance meeting, he promised to come and see the flat I’d just found. I offered supper and he agreed he’d come as soon as Her sun set while it was yet day was complete. But I didn’t go out for food, I went instead for scented candles.

I hope Henry didn’t tell Aunt Faye what I did. But he told her little enough when he was speaking, and he’s hardly likely, now, to carve in stone that his cousin seduced him. I didn’t tell because what began lightly took a different turn and I don’t want their fingers over it. Besides, what would I say? It will take me ages to make sense of what happened.

I certainly don’t know what that week with me meant to Henry. He eagerly took seven days off work. Perhaps because we’d agreed on restriction, we abandoned ourselves to sex, and to each other. On our last night, Henry took my face in his strong hands, fingers which can hold any stone to know its worth, gentle hands which taught me my own body.

He stroked my chin and kissed me. He called me ‘cousin’ from the door. And then he left.

Maybe I am implicated in his silence. I wish I knew. But Henry was the one who was absolute, that we must give each other only one week, then never be lovers again or see each other for three months. I went to visit him at work the day our three months were up and he was working on a stone for a wife of forty-nine.

*Gone from me but not forgotten
Loving thoughts shall ever linger
Round the spot where thou art laid.*

“Where do people find these lines?” I asked and Henry said. “It’s from an old stone. All of them are.”

Two weeks later, Henry stopped talking. Some mornings a dark oppression comes down, squeezing my head with conviction that something must be done for him. I imagine it would bother Henry to think I felt guilt around him. I wonder if he wonders what I think? Does he know I live in dread no other love, or attraction, will obliterate my hunger for him? About once a month I take my day off work, to go and watch him. He carves *In the midst of life we are in death*, and smiles. But he never touches me.

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