

The Party

The event was proficiently managed. Wilma sat centre stage, enthroned on a wool-lined armchair. Around her sat a circle of attendees, not all of them sure what they were doing there. Some had come from genuine affection and respect: members of the staff who liked her, people who didn't mind her relentless positivity, members of her church. Dorrie, her friend and fellow resident, beamed from among this audience, basking in the occasion.

The brothers were gathered on either side of Wilma, looking a little uncertain of their role or the order of events. Anthony, the oldest, was bemused by the confusion, making wisecracks now and then at the apparent erratic awareness of some of the residents. "Jesus Christ, look at that! She looks like she's about to fall off her chair!"

Alec, the youngest of the brothers, had already expressed doubts in his ability to handle the crowd and was starting to freak out. His face was a mask of shock, and in the few conversations he'd dared to engage in had begun to ramble, punctuating the discussions with wild and erratic diversions. At sixty, Alec was the youngest of the brothers, but his raging and sometimes erratic approach to life was beginning to take its toll. He was still doing a bit of dope, marijuana if he could get it, whatever else was around if he couldn't. Others of his acquaintance shared his attraction for such substances, and he was sometimes inadvertently caught up in the affairs of the underworld. Whether his behaviour could be termed rational or not was a matter of contention; but he'd certainly left a trail of bad feeling among many of the less desirable elements he'd encountered. His problem was that he was apt to reach his limits of tolerance quickly, beyond which he was apt to tell you to fuck off. Facing the crowd at the party, he was becoming increasingly paranoid, ready to crack.

Rod, his older brother, watched Alec nervously as he clutched the neck of his guitar, a bit uncomfortable about the mechanistic feel of the affair and anxious, now that he was so highly visible, to play the couple of numbers he'd rehearsed and get it over with.

Kit, the second oldest of the surviving brothers, took command. Over many years the brothers had developed a situational approach to command: whoever had the best credentials for leadership in a particular situation got the job. The decision was rarely if ever discussed beforehand, yet it generally had the authority of unanimous agreement. In this case it was Kit, who'd had some involvement in the arrangements. He began a brief, discrete exchange with Meg, the centre's Social Activities Director, at the end of which he turned on his heel and strode back to where the other brothers were gathered.

"Right!" he announced, loudly enough to make several of the older members of the gathering jerk visibly back to the moment. He went briskly through the formalities of welcome, acknowledged his mother's centenary with a brief summary of her life and offered her his personal good wishes.

After he'd finished, he stepped back. There was another short lull in proceedings until Rod stepped forward, placed a folder of music on the table and began to pluck at the strings of his instrument. In the hush that followed, he gave a brief dedication to his mother then began playing, a couple of songs he described as

‘secular hymns’. He hoped the songs might be sufficiently agnostic to appease the competing preferences of the old woman’s religiosity and her oldest son’s atheism.

In this he was only marginally successful. Anthony and his mother had long since parted company on the question of the existence of God, and relations between them had been touchy ever since. As far as Anthony was concerned, anyone too stupid to recognise the hoax being played upon them by the various religious hierarchies wasn’t worth wasting time on. He reckoned Wilma, who perceived the hand of God in everything, deliberately rubbed his nose in it, loudly proclaiming the Lord’s hand in everything, in front of whoever might be listening. The latest intervention she’d announced was the fine weather for the party; Anthony was really pissed off about that. The best Rod could achieve with the songs was an expression of grudging indifference from his oldest brother; Anthony stared fixedly at the floor throughout the performance, emphasizing his detachment with an occasional critical glance around the room.

His condition wasn’t improved when one of the centre’s residents, clearly aligned with the Christian element at the centre, shuffled forward on her walker and testified that Wilma had a guaranteed place among the angels.

Rod watched his older brother’s reaction nervously, half expecting to have to physically restrain him from accosting the elderly well wisher. He hoped he wouldn’t have to do it; if Anthony lost his cool, he’d take a bit of handling, and Rod wasn’t sure he could do it on his own. Kit would no doubt try to help, but he had his heart to think about, and Rod knew that Alec couldn’t necessarily be relied on to assist. Alec sided firmly with his mother on the existence of God, and in some of his more rampant moments he’d shown he could be quite zealous about it. If Anthony did anything anti-Christian, Rod realised there was no telling how Alec might respond; so while he watched Anthony, he also kept a wary eye on his younger brother.

The caterers saved the situation with a timely entrance: cups of tea all round, accompanied by an array of small sandwiches. Rod launched gratefully into a round of ‘Happy Birthday’, and Anthony’s expression returned to one of begrudging acceptance. The centre’s residents dealt with the offered fare in much the same way they did any offering at afternoon tea, seated around the common room behind their walkers and accepting the food with reactions that varied from neutrality to effervescent gratitude.

Meg fulfilled her role with professional pride, hovering around the perimeter of the circle, chatting with the residents and guests, giving timely direction to the catering staff as they sectioned and dispersed the large, beautifully presented cake. Regular staff of the centre provided the catering, and much was made of their coming in to work on their rostered day off. For the most part they accepted this inconvenience with good grace and rose to the occasion, although one or two performed their duties with conspicuous reluctance.

Wilma behaved appropriately, smiling at everyone who approached her, engaging them in conversation, sometimes sharing a laugh. Between these exchanges, she lapsed into a kind of blank passivity, staring at the floor or into space, her attention hijacked by some remote thought.

Among the guests was a reporter from the local paper. Rod’s stint on the guitar, with the brothers gathered around, had been a good photo opportunity, and the journalist had taken it eagerly. But he needed some background to go with the picture, so when the hubbub subsided he sought Wilma out and asked politely if she’d mind answering a few questions. When she agreed, he launched into his usual repertoire, confirming dates and getting a line or two of comment.

When he asked the brothers' names, Wilma listed them without pausing to catch breath. "Number one's Anthony - we call him Tony, but a lot of people know him as Jim; then there's Roger - Sam, Sammy Rogers they called him, he died last year; Kit's next - Christopher, Christopher John, but we call him Kit; then there's Rod - Robbity-Bob, Rodney; then Alec, Al."

The reporter was clearly struggling to keep up. "Anthony, Tony..."

Wilma laughed, clapping her hands in delight as she chanted: "Anthony Tony-boney Roger Sam Sammy Rogers Christopher John Kit; Rodney Robbity-Bob then Al Alec!"

The young journalist shook his head and looked helplessly across at Alec, who was sitting on the arm of the chair beside his mother. Alec laughed. "Don't worry, mate, I'll sort it out with you later!"

"He used to be a bad boy," Wilma went on, without any apparent frame of reference. "Been in jail, took a lot of drugs, always getting into trouble."

The journalist's pen, which had been scribbling on the notepad, stopped abruptly. "Oh?"

"Oh yes," the old lady assured him. "He was a drug addict for a while, you know; for quite a while, but he's not any more."

Alec's face had frozen in horror: she was talking to a *journalist*, for Christ's sake! Everything she said was true, except the last part: sure, he was still doing a few drugs, marijuana mostly, but it was the other stuff he didn't want anyone to know about. He'd blindsided a lot of people, including quite a few hoods and crims who might want a bit of payback. The drugs and adrenalin were raging through his system; his panic reflected in his flaring nostrils, bulging eyes and a tight smile fixed on his gaunt and bloodless face.

Kit interrupted to advise that the party was about to wind up; but the sense of confusion remained with Alec and grew stronger as the interminable minutes to departure elapsed. He knew better than to try to dissuade the reporter from saying anything; that'd be like a red flag to a bull. He tried to get above the funk, clear his head and think the thing through clearly, but he couldn't quite get there. He couldn't recall the exact details of the interview, only that the guy had his name.

Or had *a* name. The revelation came to Alec like a thunderclap. He glanced around the room and, spotting the young reporter by the door, quickly made his way over to him. "How'd you go, mate? Get some good stuff?"

The journalist nodded, a little warily. "Heaps." He smiled thinly. "Maybe a bit too much."

Alec wondered if he didn't detect a hint of threat in the tilt of the young man's mouth. "Yeah, I just wanted to check, see you got the names right - you know: Anthony Tony-boney, Roger Sam Sammy Rogers, Kit Christopher John Robbity-Bob Rod and that."

The journalist's grin faltered. "Oh, yeah... We were going to talk about it, right?" He reached into the pocket of his jacket, withdrew his notepad and studied it. "Umm... Anthony is Jim, right; then Sam, that's... Rod?"

Alec laughed and clapped the reporter on the back. "No, mate; you've got it wrong. We'd better go through it again."

The young man looked uncertainly at his notes, then nodded. "I guess so. I've got the names, I think, but I'm not sure who's who. You're... Alec, right?"

Alec shook his head and laughed again, guiding the journalist towards the centre's deserted office. "Nah; like I said, mate, you've got it all wrong..."

The paper came out a few days later. Kit got it first, and rang Anthony. By then, Alec had gone back up north. Anthony was left to gaze in shock at the glaring front-page headline, and the photo of himself staring sternly back above his younger brother's name.

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Word Count: 1,860