

Uncle Silas tells the truth

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A young boy visits his Uncle Silas after a long time and discovers the truth behind his uncle's estrangement from his father.

Published on
Booksie

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“I am not sending him to that evil brother of yours!” said my mother

My parents were arguing, again. Over the years it had become their nightly ritual.

“Come on Sylvie. There’s no one else who can take him, at such short notice.” said my father.

“What kind of example will he set him?”

“Sylvie, if we don’t get some time to ourselves, and soon, this marriage is going to be over. You said it yourself.”

“But Harold, remember what your brother did? Do you want a man like that involved in your son’s life?”

“That was thirteen years ago Sylvie. We need to move on!”

“That’s easy for you to say! It wasn’t you who was!”

“Sylvie! Please, let’s not go over this again. Come on, it’s for a few days, that’s all. We’ve tried everyone we know.”

There was silence. I listened in the dark for the next round. I thought about Uncle Silas. I had never met him or even seen a photo of him. All I knew was what mum and dad told me, that he was a reckless bohemian who lived purely for pleasure. Mum disapproved of him so much she forbid us from seeing him. But now Mum’s sister was sick and couldn’t take care of me the night before my parents were due to go away on what my grandfather had told me was their second honeymoon.

“I guess I have no choice then”, said my mother. And round two began.

We stood outside the round white house, surrounded by a stone wall and decorated with pink and purple shutters. A goldenknocker, shaped like a dragon’s claw hung on the door. Dad went to use it but before he had even touched it the door opened and a stout woman, Aunt Mo, with messy, thick ginger hair threw herself upon me.

“Billy! I can’t believe you’re really here!” she cried, her blue eyes devouring me. My hand vanished in hers as she dragged me through the hallway and into a large velvet laden room where a snoozing Uncle Silas sat in a plump armchair. He was a bald man with an unkempt beard and pale green eyes that sprung open on seeing me. He threw his arms in the air and roared in delight.

“My goodness, I finally get to meet my nephew!” he said before erupting in laughter. Once the laughter subsided, he acknowledged my father.

“Harold!” he said, “my little brother! Well, here we are, reunited after thirteen years! What would mother say? Hey?”

“Silas, you’re looking well,” said my father.

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“Well? I look great. A happily married man of leisure like myself has no need to look haggard, unlike you!” His words trailed off in a mumble.

Silas! hissed Mo, and then smiled at my father. Then, taking my hand, she said, “Let’s leave them to catch up”, and led me away.

At the bottom of the garden, a short mustached man with tanned skin, thick features and a crooked nose was trimming an apple tree. Red

apples lay at his feet.

Alberto said Mo.

He turned around.

“Hello!” Alberto said. “This must be Billy! And look at him. Uncle Silas as a boy. The same eyes, same nose, same knowing look.”

“Alberto is our gardener”, said Mo, brushing herself down.

“Is that all I am?” asked Alberto, running his finger along his nose. “Gardener? Not friend? Fellow resident?”

“Don’t get ideas above your station Alberto!” Mo laughed.

“It’s a beautiful garden,” I said, surveying the early spring bloom of yellow roses and white snowdrops close by.

“Thanks”, he said, “I try my best. Otherwise, I’d be...” He ran his finger across his throat and looked over at Mo.

“Oh, he’s just being polite,” said Mo. “Anyone who knows about gardening can see that more sunbathing and smoking goes on here than

actual work. Come on,” she said, looking at me, “let’s leave him to it.”

“You wicked woman!” laughed Alberto. Then, looking at me, he said, “Watch out Billy, she’ll have you slaving away, too. You’ll be up the chimneys.”

“Billy is a gentleman”, she said. “He is fit for leisure while you, and she paused to look him up and down, “are fit for....”

“For what?”

“For labor. Now do some work!” Mo grabbed my hand and led me to the kitchen where a tall skinny brown eyed woman wearing a purple

headscarf was mopping the floor.

“And this unfortunate woman is Lydia, Alberto’s fiancée.”

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“Pleased to meet you,” said Lydia.

“And you too,” I said. She was very pretty. I wondered what she saw in Alberto.

“Can you make some tea and prepare some biscuits Lydia?” asked Mo. “For four people.”

At that moment we heard the front door slam.

“Make that three,” said Mo, and hurried off to the Front room with me following behind.

Silas sat in his chair, red faced. Mo stood beside him, her arm around him.

“I tried to talk to him,” said Silas. “But he wouldn’t have it, not a word. He’s been brainwashed, you see, by that woman.”

“Shh Silas, ssh,” said Mo, looking over at me. I bit my lip. I didn’t like hearing them speak about my mother that way.

Lydia came in with a tray of tea and biscuits, laid it upon the table before Silas..

“Oh lovely!” said Silas, sitting up straight and nodding at Mo. “Tea! Just what was needed.”

We drank the tea in silence.

“I like your house,” I said, hoping my compliment might lift the mood.

“Oh thank you,” said Mo, smiling and looking around the room.

“Mo is very house proud,” said Silas. “Still, she could be a bit prouder. Those blinds look like it’s been a while since they were dusted.”

“Yes, that’ll liven you up Silas, another chance to deride your ever suffering wife,” said Mo, folding her arms.

“What else is a wife for but to suffer?”

He looked at me as if I should know. I shrugged my shoulders.

“Never marry Billy, hear me? Never!”

I looked at Mo. She winked at me.

“You heard him Billy, but whatever you do, don’t listen! You’ll be lost otherwise.”

It was late afternoon and Silas and I were alone, both of us reading. I looked up from my book and saw Silas staring out into space. He felt

my gaze upon him and smiled.

“Love,” he sighed.

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â What about it?â

â What is it?â asked Silas.

I scrunched up my face.

â I donâ t know eitherâ , said Silas. â Fifty four years old and still clueless. Best avoided if you ask me. Only causes problems.â

â I think Iâ m in loveâ , I said.

â How can you be? Youâ re twelve years old?â

â I only think I am.â

â Who is the lucky girl?â

I gulped. 'Just someone in my class.'

â Tell me how it feels.â

â I feel funny around...them. All nervous and, andâ lâ

â Well make sure you tell them Billy. Make sure you tell them and save yourself a lot of stress.'

'I can't tell them.'

'Show them then. See if they respond. Now, how about another game of cards?â he said, picking up the pack and shuffling. â Now Billy, tell me about school? What makes you tick?

I breathed a sigh of relief. I watched as Silas dealt the cards, his fat fingers nimbly flicking them my way.

â School isnâ t so good.â

â I can imagine. A sensitive, intelligent boy like you would be rich pickings for the louts.â

I sat up straight.

â I wasnâ t popular at school either Billy. But I didnâ t want to be either. Who wants to fit in anyway? Itâ s boring. Better to be an individual if you ask me. Your father was popular though, and your mother too. But she was very attractive so it was easy for her. As for your father, he had to work at it. He needed it. Thatâ s always been the big difference between us: His desire to be liked and my determination not to be.â

'I can't imagine my parents as young people,'

â They were not born the stick in the muds they are. They were fun once. Now, donâ t worry about school Billy. When you are older, you will be much cooler than anyone else, trust me. By the way, what do you want to be when youâ re older?â he asked.

â A writer.â

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â Indeed! Good for you! I was worried you were going to say an accountant or a Lawyer.â

Those were what my parents were.

That night I couldnâ t sleep. There was so much to think about: My parents and Silas when they were younger, my own youth, and my future as a writer. I crept downstairs to make myself a late night snack. As I passed across the landing, I saw Sylvie coming out a room. On seeing me, she gasped and ran back inside.

â Whatâ s wrong?â I heard Silas say. I stopped still.

â Billy saw meâ ;

But I didnâ t hear anymore. I was already back in my bed, the covers pulled tightly over me. How could Silas treat Mo like this? His devoted wife! And he seemed such a good man. Mum was right. She said he was as wicked as the devil and he was.

The next day, at breakfast, I sat in silence. Mo tried to make small talk with me but I couldnâ t bring myself to look at her, not when I knew

what Silas had done.

â Whatâ s wrong Billy?â she asked.

â He caught Lydia coming out of my room.â

â Ohâ , she said. â Itâ s OK Billy.'

â Arenâ t you mad? Why aren't you mad?'

â No Billy, Iâ m not mad at all. Silas loves me Billy. He doesnâ t love Lyd.â

â But if he loved you, he wouldnâ tâ lâ

â Oh Billy! Thatâ s your mother talking!â said Silas.

â Iâ m going outsideâ I said, getting up from the table.

â While youâ re thereâ , said Silas, â Ask Alberto where he slept last night.â

Albertoâ s nose twitched..

â What?â

I asked him again. He shifted from side to side.

â With Lydia.â

â You didnâ t!â I exclaimed.

â How do you know?â

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â Because Lydia slept with Silas.â

'Ah.'

â I caught Lydia leaving his room.â

â Ok. I slept with Mo.â

â I donâ t understandâ , I said. â What are you all doing?â

â What are doing?'

'Yes, Why are you all....'

'We have sex Billy. You know what that is, yeah?â

I nodded my head.

â Doing it with the same person gets boring Billy. Sorry to tell you this but youâ ll find out yourself. Ask Lydiaâ , he said reaching his hand out to his fiancÃ©e as she strode towards us.

â It seems this young man is a little confused Lydia, about what goes on here.â

â Look Billy, itâ s all just a bit of fun, thatâ s all there is to it.â

â Itâ s disgusting,â I said.

Lydia laughed. â When you are no longer a virgin, come to me with your opinions about sex. Until then, donâ t be such a judgemental brat.â

I ran back into the house, back into the dining room but I left as quickly as I entered. Mo was in tears.

â Heâ ll never be able to come and see us again,â she was saying, â not when he tells her what happened.â

â Oh that damn woman! Why canâ t she just forgive and forget?â cried Silas.

â You broke her heart Silas.'

'We didn't love each other!'

'You left her at the altar! Thatâ s not easy to forgive.â

â To be with you Mo! What a fine reason! And she got Harold, and Billy, what a prize he is.â

â Thatâ s not the point Silas.â

â Itâ s been thirteen years Mo! Itâ s time to move on,â said Silas, thumping the rest of his arm chair. Aunt Mo was still crying. I ran to my room and locked the door. Aunt Mo came up later and knocked on the door.

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'It's time for dinner,' she said.

I came out. She took my hand and led me to the dining room. Silas, Lydia and Alberto were all there. They were chatting and laughing. I sat down and Lydia poured me some water.

'I am sorry about before', she said. No one mentioned anything more about that morning's events. I did not say anything as we ate but just listened to them talking about the Alberto and Lydia's upcoming trip to Verona to visit Alberto's family.

â How can you all act like this?â I asked Lydia while I helped her clear away the mess.

â Like what?â she asked. 'We are not acting at all.'

'You act like it is all so normal.â

â It is normal Billy, what we do. People do it everywhere.â

I didn't understand. I knew people had affairs, and I had been told it was wrong. But here it was accepted. Here, it was different. I got used to it. Each day I would play cards with Uncle Silas and help Alberto with the gardening. Lydia would make cakes and teach me how to count in Italian and say the names of foods in the kitchen. Mo would take me for walks in the nearby park and ask me about my life. She told me it was important to always be yourself and tell the truth. She said I had it in me.

A week later, Silas drove me home. I was dying to ask him about him and my parents. Even though I knew the answer, I wanted to hear it myself because the truth was I didn't really believe it.

â Why don't you and dad talk?â I finally asked as we pulled up in the drive

â Oh, let's not go there.â

â I want to know. Why can't I know?â

â It's very personal Billy, and your parents wouldn't like me telling you.â

â I won't tell.â

â Promise me.â

â I promise.â

â Ok Billy. I was supposed to marry your mother. But I knew she loved your father so I did not turn up to the wedding.â

'You just left her there.'

'Yes. And I was ashamed.'

'And now?'

'Not in the slightest. I did what I felt was right. I was true to myself. Like you will be, Billy.'

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The car pulled up. Mum was looking out the window.

'I am going to say I had a great time,' I said.

'Good. And come back as soon as you can.'

I got out the car.

'And remember to show that someone you love him.'

I leaned over to Silas and kissed him on the cheek.

'Like that', he said.

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