



LICHEN RICHARDSON

# *Final Dispositions*

*a short story by* LINDA MCCULLOUGH MOORE

## *My family is deciding what to do*

with me. I am the oldest sibling. Always have been. I thought the years might mute the effect of that, but nothing so far. I have been, and I remain, the reason why the siblings take each new birthday with some measure of aplomb: *Well, I'm still four, seven, fourteen years younger than her.* My age, their comfort.

They hold disposition meetings. I am not invited, but during the phone calls that follow each conclave I read the minutes of the meetings in the awkward silences and odd questions: "How do you feel about Texas?" "Do you mind the cold?" "Do you have any special friend who lives in a big house [pause] with a trained nurse?"

I don't mind this actually. I am quite pleased at their level of involvement. I think there were decades when they forgot I was alive, or, if they remembered, they forgot I was their sister — or sister-in-law, a friendlier affiliation by a mile.

"Invite me to the meetings," I say to my brother Paul. "I promise not to voice opinions or spill my drink anywhere it will show. I'd like to know just what sort of arrangement might be under consideration."

"No," he says.

I like his style. My brother Freddie would have said, *What meetings?* Paul got whatever integrity was floating in our gene pool.

"I might be able to help," I say, encouraged by his candor.

"I don't think so," Paul says.

## *"Are you sure you've saved no*

money whatsoever?" This would be my sister Irene — I mean, Eileen — on the phone. I like it that I can never keep her name straight. It gives me hope.

"Zero money?" she says.

"Oh, no," I say. "I saved a bundle. It's. Just. That. I. Spent. It. All."

Each word seems worthy of its own personal sentence.

"Tom is coming over Tuesday morning. Please write that down. I'll wait," Eileen says. She pauses. Tom is her husband.

I mime writing, "Tooooosday, Dooooosday," on the palm of my hand.

"Tom's taking you for a ride."

"I'll be ready," I say. "Don't tell me what time. I like to be surprised."

"Ten o'clock. Wear stockings, Margaret," she says. "Wear shoes."

"Okey-doke," I say. "Okey-dokey."

People think that *crazy* is achieved when one day the gale-force wind makes a final, violent tear, and your little craft slips its mooring. Oh, no. It is achieved by you, who, one knot at a time, untie the tethers, whimsically at first, and then with some — or sometimes no known — purpose. You write a shameless letter to a friend who has blown you off once and for all and say, with no shame, "Why don't you like me? Did you ever?" You offer up tidbits that will be the stuff of ridicule for certain, and you pass them out to members of your family on a tray like peculiar, worrisome hors d'oeuvres.

## *My brother-in-law Tom rings the*

doorbell. My siblings would have done the same. To walk right in would signify an affinity they neither feel nor seek.

"Would you like any sort of carbohydrate?" I ask. He is still standing on the porch. He never comes in unless it is a national holiday, and then it must be one celebrated across the board, not just by Jews or Christians or the tree people.

"I'm good," Tom says.

"I have no doubt," I say, "but are you hungry?"

"Oh . . ." The question catches him off guard. He clearly doesn't know the answer. It is most often decided for him by Eileen.

"Why did you marry her?" I say while he is still busy with the last question.

"Who?"

"Oh, yes," I say. "I had forgotten. You were married once before Eileen."

"I wasn't thinking about that," he says.

"No," I say. "I wasn't thinking of her either. You never talk about her."

"Well, we should be on our way."

"Maybe I could go live with her — your first wife. Let's see: I'd be the sister-in-law of her ex-husband," I say. "Stranger things happen every day. A lot of them to me."

"Do you want a coat?" Tom says.

"No," I say, "I've got a closetful of them. But thanks."

He gives me a frightened stare. The man would not know humor if it wore a name tag.

“Well,” he says, clearly with no heart whatsoever for this project, “we should be on our way.”

He is so dutiful it makes his skin sag.

“Why are you doing this, Tom? This is your life. You could be dead by nightfall. A lot of people will be, and you could be one of them, as easy as the next person. Let’s forget about wherever Eileen wants you to take me. It will only be a waste of time. They won’t admit me. It will turn out they only take retired Presbyterian clergy. Or Paul won’t want to pay for it. Or they’ll have a waiting list. Or at the last minute I’ll kick the bucket. If this is the last day of your life, trust me when I tell you, you will want to have spent it some other way, no matter if you end up in hell or heaven.”

“I don’t believe in hell.”

“Well, there you go.”

It’s the first nearly interesting thing I’ve heard him say since he met my sister.

“What was she like?” I say.

“Who?”

“Wife One. Eileen’s predecessor.”

“I don’t remember,” Tom says. “I’ve been married to Eileen for nearly thirty years.”

“I’m sorry,” I say. I am, too. I always thought he was born this way, never thinking what it might do to a person to be married to Eileen.

“Why did you marry her?” I say.

“Oh, I was young.” He makes it sound a rather unusual thing to be. “And she was beautiful.”

“Eileen?”

“Janet Moyer.” His voice is just above a whisper. “Janet Helen Moyer. Look, we really need to go. Eileen has made an appointment for you.”

My sister is forever making things for people: appointments and decoupage; Rice Krispies treats and bright fabric snakes you’re meant to keep your plastic-bag collection in.

I grab my pocketbook and slam the door behind me.

“You want to lock that?” Tom says.

“I do not,” I say.

*It takes me fourteen minutes to* locate Janet Helen Moyer on Google. First I typed in “ex-wives.” Four million, one hundred and six results. Then I tried her name, which reduced that number by about four million. Turns out she illustrates books for dyslexic children, using words as illustration. She calls them “word pictures.”

It seems she draws words under the pseudonym Janelle Moy — not the most profligate use of the imagination, but I allow for the possibility that she makes the most of what she’s got, a habit I refuse to despise. I send her off an e-mail through her website to say my six-year-old dyslexic son, Leroy, reads her illustrations with great pleasure, as does his auntie Eileen Ferguson (just in case Janelle Moy is a woman given to putting two and two together).

I’ve issued myself a poetic license: I do not have a son named Leroy, or any other name, but if I let my childlessness

figure largely in every single e-mail I send off, I might as well downgrade to dial-up and be done with it.

A week later Janelle Moy (aka Wife One) sends an e-mail in return. She wishes me “every joy” — which strikes me as being a bit over the top, but I prefer it to a curse and let it be. At the bottom of the e-mail it says that she will soon be giving a reading at “a mall near you.” That is to say, near me. I click on the bar that says, *Find a Mall near you*, hardly troubling to fret that Mall is capitalized, only to find the Mall (maul?) is even nearer than I thought.

I call Eileen to arrange a little rendezvous with her hubby’s previous wife. Stir the pot a bit. The answering machine picks up. Eileen hasn’t answered her phone since that little fiasco the day Tom and I resurrected Janet Moyer, when he took me to the perpetual-care place. How was I to know she’d paid 140 bucks for the evaluation? How was I to know she’d sent me there to take a test? A person should be told these things. Now she’s terrified that no place will have me — as though I’d want to go anyplace where people are excluded on the basis of how strenuously they agree or disagree with statements like “I am not worried about the future.”

I leave a message for Eileen. “There is an author reading from a book, *The Idiot’s Guide to Nursing Homes*,” I say. “Tuesday night at seven at the mall in Coudersport. Could you drive me? I could take the bus, but I didn’t know if you wanted me appearing in public unchaperoned. Plus, if the bus crashed and I didn’t get killed, but only severely maimed and injured, we’d be even worse off than we already are.”

Eileen picks up just as I am finishing my final phrase.

“Hello?” she says.

“Hello,” I say.

“Who is this?” she says.

“Who is *this*?” I say.

And we’re off to the races.

*Eileen drops me at the main entrance* to the mall while she goes to park the car. I allow it. I really can’t walk as well when I am with her.

There’s an old man standing by the door with a collection can labeled in bright red FOR THE RETARDED, which I take as a sign he’s working freelance; the organized prefer “developmentally disabled.” I don’t know, though. *Retarded* seems more hopeful in some way, as if it were nothing permanent or cast in stone, but more a matter of speed than anything else. Timing. “His progress is only retarded, slowed a bit, delayed, but coming — oh, yes, coming certainly. Just not today.” *Retarded* gives a person something to look forward to.

*“Well, I must say that was a good evening,”* Eileen says. When I told her I’d read the listing wrong, her sincere pleasure at my having made a mistake was enough to sweeten the whole night.

Eileen and I are shut back up inside the brand-new Japanese container that we will travel home in — or, if not, that will

transport us to our long home. “Long home.” I say the words out loud. They sound portentous as we drive off together into the black night. “Have you ever heard the phrase ‘long home,’ referring to death — or, I guess, to where death takes us to?”

“Don’t talk about death,” Eileen says. “It’s morbid.”

“Duh,” I say, the word *duh* being one of the three innovations of the last half century that are really worth something, the other two being e-mail and all-day breakfast at fast-food restaurants. I don’t go to fast-food restaurants, but I like knowing that, if I did, I could get a fried-egg sandwich in the middle of the afternoon.

“I don’t know why you have to work death into every conversation,” Eileen says. “Don’t think I didn’t hear you mention it to that woman tonight, the one with those oxygen tubes in her nose.”

“The way she looked, it seemed to me it would have been impolite *not* to mention death. And don’t say you didn’t sense the general amazement that she was still alive when we went to get our coats. Trust me: death is on everybody’s mind at least four times a day.”

“Not mine,” Eileen says. “I concentrate on happy things, like the nice books that lady was showing tonight. Her word pictures were beautiful.”

I wonder would she be calling Janelle Moy, aka Janet Helen Moyer, a “lady” if she knew the author was the one woman in the universe she’d shared a husband with?

“What did you think of her?” I say.

“I thought that if she needed oxygen, perhaps she might be more comfortable at home than in a bookstore.”

“I didn’t mean her,” I say. “I meant, what did you think of the author?”

“Someday you will appreciate what I am trying to do for you, Margaret.”

“Don’t hold your breath,” I say. “Get it? It’s an oxygen-tank joke. But what did you think of the author?”

“Why do you care?”

“Because she was Tom’s wife.”

Damn. I wasn’t going to tell Eileen that — or, at least, not until we had invited Janet Helen Moyer to Thanksgiving. See, this is why I am no earthly good at card games. I cannot keep a secret for two minutes in a row.

“Tom who?”

She’s asking for form’s sake. She knows Tom who.

“Your Tom.”

“But Tom’s first wife’s name was Janet; this woman was named Janelle.”

“Uh, that’s not exactly DNA evidence.”

“You knew it was her. You brought me on purpose. You told me it was a book on nursing homes.”

“Eileen, what person in their right mind would drive twenty-five miles on a school night to get the author to sign a book on nursing homes?”

“I’m gonna tell,” Eileen says, and suddenly she is four, and I am eight, and neither one of us has even heard of Alzheimer’s or hip replacements or long-term-care insurance. The only thing we know of human tragedy is what goes on inside our family.

“Who you gonna tell?” I say, but already I am warming to the prospect of our reporting all the crimes committed on the planet to the proper authorities. I want to take Eileen by her thin, clammy hand, her diamonds hurting both our fingers in the tightness of my grip. I want to pull her out of the car and drag her down the street for blocks, calling out to strangers on the way, *Police station! Where is the police station? Is that it?* and pull her with me through the heavy doors and grab the sleeve of the first policeman we see and say, *Come quick. I need you to arrest our parents. They are scaring us to death, and when we are old women, we will put each other into nursing homes and into unnatural situations in bookstores in shopping malls. Malls — places where people go so they won’t have to think about death. Oh, never mind! Just come. You need to lock them up and throw away the key.*

“Remember,” I say to Eileen, in a voice gone hoarse from all the yelling that I should have done a half century ago, “remember the night you started to take Freddie downtown to the police station, to show them the belt-buckle welts, the places where the tip end broke the skin?”

“Oh, Margaret. That was in another lifetime.”

“No. No, it wasn’t. It was this same lifetime. This one we’re living in tonight. There is only just the one.”

“Well,” Eileen says, “I never got there. I met Grandma Chase at the corner, and I told her where I was taking him, and she told me to go back home and to never, ever tell another living soul, or God would punish me.”

A different God from that one crawls into the back seat as we stop for the light.

“I was just trying to help,” Eileen says. “I was trying to do the right thing with Freddie. I was just trying to save his life.”

*Tell her she did.* It’s God, in the back seat, talking.

“You tell her,” I say to Him.

*Nah. She’s gotta hear it from you,* He whispers in a raspy, smoker’s voice.

“You did save Freddie’s life,” I say, glancing over my shoulder.

God clears His throat and makes a “Go on” motion with his hand.

“I mean, look at him,” I say. “Look at Freddie’s marriage. Look at his kids. Look at their kids. He’s had practically the best life I know.”

“Yeah, well . . .”

“Yeah, well, why do you think that is?”

“Well . . .”

“Hello? Because of you.”

I know she gets it. When a thing is true, you don’t have to explain. I turn around to wink at God, but He’s gone. Off to save some other sisters. It must take Him all night just to do one neighborhood.

*(end of excerpt)*