

Turning Points

Sophia Berry

Grimethorpe, England

June 1973

The bugs buzzed in the air as a seven-year-old Reginald sat near the small stream. He was considering trying to catch more of the toads that lay in the cool shade near the water but decided instead to just go swimming.

He was just about to jump into the water, still frigid even in the heat of summer when a group of boys from his class came biking into the little clearing he'd been playing in.

Reginald wouldn't necessarily call these boys his friends, per se, but he'd gone to school with them for his entire life. He knew them well to say the least. They approached him, laughing amongst themselves, and the unofficial leader of the group, Charles, stepped out.

"Look, it's cry-baby Reggie! He's all by himself crying all alone. Where's your mummy and daddy? Did they leave you all alone?" He cackled and loomed over Reginald, who continued staring into the water. "What, you're not even going to look at me? You're too scared, are you? You're just a little baby."

Reginald then glanced up sneering at Charles. "I'm not a baby, you are! My mum says you're just a rude bully, who acts out because he doesn't get enough attention from his parents!" Reginald saw the open mouthed expression of Charles and the rest of the boys, who were shocked that Reginald had just claimed that an adult said that Charles' parents didn't care about him. He finished Charles off, "and even if I am a cry-baby, at least I don't wet my bed every night like you do. And at least my parents love me. I heard your mom tell my mom that you're just a big disappointment!" He spit out the insult like it stung his mouth to keep it in.

All of it was fake, of course. Reginald couldn't remember the last time he'd actually talked to his parents, or even seen them have friends over. But Reginald knew that Charles didn't know that. He also knew from watching his parents fight, late at night through a small hole in his bedroom door, that the insults that hurt the worst, the ones

that made his father drink, and his mother cry and slam the door, were the ones that attacked people's deepest, darkest, most personal secrets. And it was just so easy to figure out what that was, and to let the acid spew from his mouth and burn a hole right where it would fester.

The boys left after that, with Charles in tears after Reginald's outburst. He looked dazed and angry, but when he tried to retort, to give a smart riposte back at Reginald, he came back empty.

It's always good to know your enemy.

Cambridge, England

November 1985

The first day of midterms at Cambridge was always a hectic one. Worried students waiting outside in the courtyard to take their tests, bundled against the chill and damp. Students were dressed in dark coats and swaddled in scarves and hats and huddling in small groups, going over final details with fellow classmates.

Reginald, however, was sitting on a small bench in one of the open-air corridors reading a letter.

Dear Reginald,

I know that we haven't spoken since you left, but I wanted to let you know that your father hasn't been doing very well. His old cough has started back up again, and now with all the strikes he's out of work. If you could maybe come down and visit, or even send us a little money, we would greatly appreciate it. We don't have enough money to pay for the heating and I don't think your father's going to make it through the winter, what with his cough. I know that we have no right to ask you for this, and I won't be angry if you don't come, but, just don't forget about us. We're still your family, even if you try to pretend we aren't.

Mother

Reginald frowned, his brow knitting together as he mentally cursed his parents. They thought that after everything they had done, they had the right to ask him for money?

He could remember that last fight, the night after his highschool graduation. They'd already decided his future for him. "You're applying for work first thing in the morning." his father had told him with a strong hand on his shoulder and a proud smile on his face. "You'll be just like me. Two strong men, making an honest living." Reginald could remember the strong urge to recoil away from that touch. He could remember the stale scent of beer and the strong odor of cigarette smoke that clung to his father even heavier than the thick layer of grime that seemed to coat his clothes and cling to his skin.

He could remember the feeling of his thin, worn mattress, as he sat on it for the last time. The sight of his cramped childhood bedroom, barely even room. Their shed of a house was perpetually covered in a black crust that was part coal dust, part mould. No matter how much you scrubbed, not that anyone did, that layer would stay indelibly stuck to most surfaces.

Reginald would definitely blame the coal dust on his father, a miner, if that dust didn't cover everything else in the town, whether or not any miners were present. It was the town's plague, and it painted every surface a dull grey. The only places he'd ever seen free of that omnipresent grey were the houses of his slightly more well-off classmates, and the inside of the occasional run-down municipal building, half falling apart, but what they lacked in structural integrity they made up for with spotless halls. He was always filled with great discomfort at seeing places clean and bright. It was a jab that reminded him of what he didn't have.

He could remember the sight, sound, and texture of almost every square inch of that town. That town that perpetually felt too small to contain him. He could remember every room where his parents argued over his future. He could remember the feeling of his father's strong hand pressing down more and more as he heard that his only son was going to leave him. Betray him for a world that his son could be proud of. Betray the coal dark town that raised him, and seek brighter futures somewhere clean, and rich.

And here that son was. Sitting in the grey cloudy damp of the early morning, reading a letter from his mother asking him for money. Money that his parents had refused to pay for college. Money that his parents had either thrown away on cheap cigs and booze. He, an already struggling college student. He stared almost amazed at the

letter in his hands. Then, he glanced down at the skin of his hands, chafed and cracked from the long hours he'd spent washing dishes the night before at the local pub. His hands curled into a fists and he crumpled up the letter.

He had worked hard for the money he made. It wasn't glamorous work like he'd hoped it would be, but that would come later. And he didn't even have the funds to be sending home cash every week to a sick father, who hadn't even liked him in the first place. He had tuition to pay for anyways, he thought, and tried very hard to ignore the cashbox he kept in his dresser drawer for emergency funds. He just didn't have anything spare.

He got up from the bench and threw the letter away in a street bin. He had to go take his economics test. Hopefully Dr. Baldwin, his economics professor, would give him a good job recommendation after this semester. He was tired of working with his hands.

Surrey, outside of London, England

January 1987

There was no need for him to be here. Outside. Looking in. He felt like a small child at an aquarium. Banging on the glass begging to be noticed by the fish inside. Of course, he wasn't a small child. With grubby fists, crying eyes, and a wailing mouth. He was an adult. Nothing if not proper. Respectable. Proud. His clothes were neat, his hair combed, his suit pressed. Sometimes though, it felt like he got lost in the crowd of rich, young, upstarts.

Glancing through the door at the colorful crowd of dancers, he could hear the pride and wealth of the aristocracy in the tinkling of laughter and the swish of expensive cloth. He sighed and took another sip from his glass, holding the thin, fluted stem delicately between his fingers, as he had taught himself to. One did not roughly grasp a champagne glass in one's hand like a mug of beer. Reginald Brendoth was *not* a part of the rabble. At least, not anymore. He laughed humorously.

"Is something funny, Reggie?" a woman called over his shoulder, a smile in her voice.

"You know I hate that name," he said mildly, glancing briefly at the women approaching him.

“Maybe, but you don’t mind it when I call you that,” she said with what one could almost call a smug grin.

He smiled non committedly, and she frowned. “What are you doing here out in the cold?”

“Oh, just admiring the scenery.”

“You should come in and enjoy the company! Sir Wetherbie wants to talk to you about his stock portfolio. Plus, he heard that you squeezed your way into this tax bracket through your own cunning and he wants to know *all* the gritty details.”

“I’ll return inside in a minute, Sarah” He replied with a smile he didn’t feel, bristling at that last remark. “I’m taking a brief respite at the moment. The atmosphere is *stifling* in there.”

“Well I disagree, the guests are wonderful, but you have fun out here in the cold. And don’t forget about Wetherbie, he can get you interviews with anyone. I’m sure you could use that.”

‘I can get myself places just fine, thank you very much,’ he thought to himself as he replied a simple “Of course,” to the glittering socialite who had been bothering him all evening.

He didn’t come inside for another couple of minutes. The primrose blooming outside reminded him of his mother’s garden.

London, England

March 1992

Reginald sat in the empty boardroom with his head pressed to the cool wood of the large table. He had a headache.

Everyone had left after the lawyer had said they were filing for bankruptcy. They shuffled out in a solemn line. The disappointment hung over them like a cloud, blurring Reginald’s vision with grey.

The culmination of his life had led up to this. The countless hours he spent late at the office. The years he spent as low-level salaried employees trading stocks, just to have it all crumble down on him at the peak of his career. Left with nothing but the ruin of his career, he was back to square one.

Reginald sighed and pressed a hand to his forehead head trying to rub out the lines etched deep into his brow.

He could go home, back to his apartment empty, sans a thin layer of dust. He could go to the bar down the street with his fellow, angry, worried, and unemployed staff. Or, he could get back to work.

Invigorated with a new burst of energy Reginald sat up and decided to stop wallowing in failure and self-pity. He could do this. He'd done it before hadn't he?

Ideas for a new business flowed through his head one after another as he reached for a pen and paper to scribble them down before they flitted away. Names of investors he knew, potential business partners, and investment strategies appeared on the page.

He wasn't starting with anything. He was the former CFO of a Fortune 500 company who had just happened on bad luck. He wasn't a teenager, fresh from college starting at a new job destined to climb to the top. He was someone who had allies all across the globe, who might not have any physical assets left, like a job, but still had his brain and his experience. It wasn't hopeless. He would do anything to pull himself back up. Anything.

Reginald had an old friend to call, he just hoped that she would still help him after all the time he'd used her as a footstool to get what he wanted

"Sarah, love, it's been a minute, hasn't it? I was just wondering if your father could still get me in contact with that Wall Street broker fellow? I need another set of experienced eyes on something. I'm planning something big."

This wasn't the end of Reginald Brendoth. He was just getting started.

New York City, USA

October 2004

"You're firing me from my own company? You'll fail without me! I started this business and I'll take it down with me!" Reginald all but shouted as the security guards firmly escorted him through the front doors of the tall office building.

He shook the men off and dusted his coat off trying very hard to ignore all of the questioning stares coming his way from onlookers. He caught the eye of a startled

young secretary he'd never seen before and sent back a piercing glare. 'She didn't do anything wrong' he thought to himself. 'You don't have to be such an ass.' But he did, didn't he? He had to keep everyone at a distance, even strangers, because otherwise they'd just mock him and jeer.

After a long career in the financial sector, he'd learned not to trust anyone. Everyone on Wall Street was looking out for themselves. They didn't care about community. They didn't care about partnership. They didn't care about helping others. America was so self-centered.

Or maybe that was just his company. Maybe it was that his company had promoted those selfish ideals because those were what got you to the top.

Reginald sat down on a park bench to think. He'd spent the last 20 years of his life working towards his overarching goal of being rich and respected. He'd started out so well, climbing the ranks until he finally held a board position. But under his reign, the once prosperous company had quickly fallen on hard times. Sure, it wasn't his fault necessarily, the company couldn't recover after the recession in the early 90s, but it didn't make the failure sting any less.

And now, even after he'd started over fresh in a new country, he'd still failed. He'd ruined his chances with the drugs and the drinking. The fame and money had gone to his head and now he had nothing. He was back to where he started.

He was forty years old, he was never going to come upon a new business opportunity. Reginald Brendoth was past his prime. He couldn't very well start another new business this late in the game. And more than that, his name was surely blacklisted after the last stint that he'd pulled.

And the debt that he'd racked up with this last failed venture certainly wasn't going to go away anytime soon. He could call Sarah, and maybe ask her for a loan, but it was doubtful that she'd even pick up. He was out of ideas, out of luck, out of time.

Reginald Brendoth, not that that name meant anything anymore, was down for the count. This time, permanently. He would have to go somewhere where no one knew or cared about who he was or what he'd done.

Somewhere in the English countryside

February 2024

He supposed that it was surprising that it had taken this long. He honestly had assumed that someone would've tracked him down to pay off his debts or even made an attempt to kill him in earnest long before now. The details of his scandal had finally come to light years after the fact, and it was rather disastrous all things considered. He was almost offended at their delayed reaction. Almost.

Movies had always made it look so dramatic. Being cornered in a back alley, or at a fancy ball, or in your own bed. Such memorable places. Places where you'd *expect* to be murdered. Places where the camera could pan to, as the main character stumbled upon the dead body. Opening a closet door, slipping out of a bar to have a light. The usual cliches.

Of course, this wasn't a movie. This was real. Someone had followed him on his morning walk. It was broad daylight, but they had cornered him in a place he wouldn't be found. They knew his movements, and they knew his routine.

It wasn't a mugging, there was no mistake. Muggers wouldn't take one look at your I.D. and then stab you in the gut. Muggers wouldn't follow you out into the countryside, into the fen, where no one would hear your screams. Muggers wouldn't throw your wallet back to the ground, leaving your bills tucked safely inside.

This was personal.

It was cruel and it was calculated.

He lay there on the cold, hard ground. He could feel the ache in his old knees from where they had cracked as they hit the pavement. His body crumpled inwards. He was sure he looked as pathetic as he felt.

The blood thumped in his ears and burned in his stomach where the knife was buried.

'I was a coward and fool, for letting everything get so far out of hand,' he thought miserably. 'I should've known they'd retaliate. And now because of my oversights, I've been left here to bleed out into insignificance.'

He had shouted when the figure had stabbed him, well it was more of a groan, but that was the only noise he had made during the whole ordeal. At least he hadn't

cried. It had been years since there'd been a reason to cry anyways, no one left to cry for, and he certainly wasn't going to mourn his own end.

He accepted his death with a resigned sigh, it was inevitable anyway. All things must come to an end, for better or for worse. The bitter wind burned through him and his quiet dignity was the only thing that kept him warm as he met his fate. His breathing getting shallower and shallower until at last, all that was left of Mr. Reginald Brendoth was the crumpled slump of his bones in death