

The State of Prolonged Mutual Hostility – Paul Blake

The car sped up to eighty-five miles per hour as Jeff undertook the blue Nissan Micra, it had been in front of him for the past eleven miles, his frustration at the delay the slow vehicle had caused was exacerbated by what was happening in the back seats.

‘Jeff, aren’t you going a little fast?’ Sandra asked from the passenger seat beside him, her hands tightly clasped together, the knuckles white.

‘I just have to get past this Sunday driver; he’s been driving me mad going so slow for so long,’ Jeff said, ‘I’ll slow down in a second or two. Have to get away-’

‘Boys, quiet back there!’ Sandra shouted, tilting her head, ‘Sorry darling, you were saying?’ Sandra brushed a lock of blonde hair away from her face which had come loose from the movement.

‘Don’t worry about it, I’ve slowed now. Boys! Your mum has just told you to stop, listen to her!’

‘Michael pinched me.’ Thomas said, his voice whiney and tight.

‘You punched me first,’ retorted Michael, ‘Mum! He’s doing it again, make him stop!’ Michael started screaming with rage, banging his head against the car seat headrest, fighting the seat-belt restraint for freedom from his tormentor beside him.

‘Shut up, both of you! Any more and I’ll take away your iPads.’ Jeff threatened. It was a hollow threat as the tablets were the only thing that gave Jeff and Sandra a momentary pause from the chaos behind them. Michael stopped screaming instantly.

‘Mine isn’t an iPad,’ said Michael, with a matter of fact tone, ‘it’s a Kindle Fire.’

‘At this minute I don’t care, Michael. I am trying to concentrate on driving.’

‘You haven’t got an iPad because Mum and Dad don’t love you as much.’ said Thomas. Jeff heard a mouthed raspberry from behind him and then a wail from Michael.

‘Boys, let your Dad drive, it’s been a long day already and we’re nearly home.’

Thomas and Michael were twins, and had been together for the past six years, even in Sandra’s womb they bickered and fought, kicking her bladder, her ribs, her stomach and her spine. They never let up. Sandra had to be hospitalised twice due to their violence. Once born, the boys were identical in both appearance and in their hatred for each other. As babies they fought in the twin buggy meaning Jeff and Sandra had to buy them individual ones, they slept in different cots and refused to feed or sleep at the same time. As they got older the demands increased: their matching sandy coloured hair had to be styled differently from each other. They refused to wear similar clothes to each other, refused to eat the same foods, never wanted to be read the same story at bedtime, never wanted to watch the same programme on television. When they started school two years ago they were separated into different classes within a week. With the arguing, and the fighting, they were lucky not to be excluded from the school.

Jeff and Sandra had tried everyone: Their health visitor, the local GP, Social Services, even child behaviour experts. No one could help. Individually, the boys were the sweetest, most loving children you could ever meet. They were polite, helpful, very bright and well-read for their age; even their social worker praised their charisma and charm, she soon changed that opinion when she met them together. Together they were chaos.

This trip to Great Yarmouth was a chance for Jeff and Sandra to try and regain some control, taking the boys out of their environment. Somewhere new. Hoping the boys would be too excited to be their normal belligerent selves, but it had turned into a disaster. They had started before they had even left their street. Michael deciding that he wanted to sit behind his mum, where Thomas was sitting. Jeff pulled the car over and swapped the boys over. Thomas was so annoyed at being moved that he kicked the back of Jeff's chair the entire length of the journey. Two hours later they arrived at the holiday camp, rows and rows of caravans of differing sizes greeted their arrival. They stopped outside reception and upon leaving the car to check in and get the keys Jeff felt a twinge in his back, his knees buckled and he had to sit back down, Sandra went to the reception and got the keys, she took Thomas and decided to leave Michael in the car to keep Jeff company. Thomas was, of course, a delight without Michael; the staff in reception loved him and treated him to extra games vouchers and money off tickets for the camp's restaurant. It seemed to Sandra that she spent more time apart from Jeff, separating the boys, than they ever spent together. Surely, parenthood shouldn't be *this* hard. She thought.

The holiday went the way everything did with Michael and Thomas. The enclosed space of the caravan seemed to aggravate their worst qualities even more, resulting in each boy being banished to separate ends of the caravan. The sea air and running around the beach, instead of tiring them, seemed to give them an energy of malevolence they never had at home. There were instances of sand thrown in each other's faces, driftwood fights, cold, wet seaweed down the back of each other's t-shirts. The parents were exhausted. The children didn't stop during the night either. Laying in bed, praying for sleep, they could hear the boys through the thin caravan walls sniping and shouting at each other. Jeff and Sandra had a frank and earnest discussion during the early hours about how they were going to continue. They

couldn't go on like this. Their relationship had deteriorated so much, they were almost strangers, and it was not good for the boys to grow up in this environment either. They decided to cut the holiday short and return home early, they had some serious discussion to do when they got home.

'Mum, Thomas won't let go of my hand.' said Michael.

'Thomas let go of your brother's hand. Just leave each other alone.' Sandra said.

'I'm not doing anything,' Thomas said, 'it's Michael who won't let go. He's pulling my arm.'

'Mum, he's pulling *my* arm. Stop it Thomas.'

'Owwwww it hurts, Mum, help.' said Thomas.

'Jeff, I think we need to pull over to deal with this. I'll swap with one of them.'

Jeff indicated and slowed down waited for a gap in the traffic and moved to the inside lane looking for a layby where they could stop. Sandra undid her seat belt and turned around in her seat to look at the children.

'JEFF STOP NOW!' Sandra screamed.

Jeff pulled the car onto the hard shoulder of the road, the tires crunching through the rough stones, the car slowed to a stop. He undid his belt and turned to see what was happening behind him. He couldn't understand what he was seeing. The twins' arms were joined together, flesh and bone fused into one limb connected at the wrist, their hands slowly melding into one. The boys were straining against their seat belt restraints, their bodies

arched towards each other, the fabric strap dug deep into their chest. Jeff leant forward, reaching into the back seat to undo Thomas' seatbelt. Following his lead, Sandra opened her door and went to Michael's side, she opened the door and reached around Michael, trying to avoid looking at the horror unfolding, she undid the clasp and he was free. At the same time Jeff undid Thomas'. Clear of the restraints the boys flew out of their car seats, as though propelled by an immense magnetic force. Their forearms, stomach, chests and legs were touching, Thomas' left joining with Michael's right and vice versa. Their clothes tearing at the seams as their bodies joined.

Sandra was screaming, Michael was screaming Thomas was screaming, Jeff was screaming. The inside of the car was a cacophony of noise. The boy's faces edged closer together, their noses touched and stuck together, an unknown force pushing them together, their chests together. They stopped screaming as their mouths dissolved into one. Sandra turned away and vomited to the side of the car. Jeff shut his eyes to spare him from the terror he was witnessing. All screaming stopped; the sudden silence was punctured by the occasional wretch from Sandra.

An angelic voice came from the back seat, 'Mum, Dad, it's ok, we're together now, this is how it was supposed to be.'

Jeff slowly opened his eyes; he blinked a few times and shook his head.

'A- a- are you Thomas or Michael?' Jeff asked.

'We are both. We are us... Please don't cry Dad, it's good. We're not fighting now.'

the dark haired boy sitting on the back seat, between the car seats said, with a kind smile on his lips.

‘What? Why? Your hair? What?’ Sandra asked as she leant back into the car. Her eyes wide and tear stained, ‘What do we call you?’

‘We have decided we would like to be called Adam. That is, Mum, if you don’t mind.’ Adam said.