

**Even at Infinity**  
Curt Eriksen

We had arranged to meet, my daughter and I, between trains. Liz was on her way back to Leeds, where she was studying Communications Theory, and I was on my way south, to London, where I had a no-frills flight out of Luton that I had to catch late that same evening.

As I sat at the rail of the upper level of the train station, at a table provided by the snack bar Liz had suggested as the most obvious point of rendezvous, I used my pen to scratch the dates on the back of a pamphlet someone had left behind. Then I did the math: we hadn't seen each other in seven years, nine months and sixteen days.

As far as I was concerned, there was nothing cryptic in this coincidental arithmetic:  $7 + 9 = 16$ . Neither was there anything remarkable about the night I had walked out of my daughter's life, slamming a front door in Didsbury forever behind me. Or at least nothing that I meant to rake over, once again.

But while I sat there and watched the other busy people come and go below me, I did recall how still the empty streets that I had wandered until dawn were. And how chillingly indifferent too, those same familiar lanes that I had long called home, just a few days shy of Christmas, with merry lights twinkling in some of the frosted windows. Shortly before dawn it started to sleet and I was tempted to go back. I got as far as the porch, where I stood under the awning and took out my key. But the silent reproach of that closed and bolted door was far more scathing than any curse Liz's mother might have uttered. So I turned away again.

Of course Liz and I had been in touch since then. Eventually Sue calmed down and successfully remarried and Liz and I indulged in some sentimental correspondence for a while—

between her fourteenth and fifteenth birthdays—before she lost all interest and went silent on me. I couldn't blame her, so I didn't. Angie, my new wife, told me to be patient: "She'll come around."

And so she did. Right before she graduated from MHSB, where Sue sent her with her husband's money, Liz called to tell me that she had been accepted at Oxford.

"But I'm not going to go there," she said.

"It's a pretty town," I offered, amazed to hear her voice again, a voice that still contained some trace of the childish matter-of-factness that I had known. "I've driven through it a few times."

"That's the problem. I want something a little more exciting than Saturday afternoon punting from pub to pub in Port Meadow."

I was going to say that she might not have much time for excitement at Oxford, but Liz had already thought of that.

"I need a break, Dad. Leeds has some good night life."

And obliquely she brought me around to the point of her calling me in the first place.

"Reynolds says he'll buy me a second-hand car, for graduation, you know. It's a Ford Fiesta 1.4 Flame. So that much is settled. But the insurance is really pricey, what with me being a Learner and all."

I couldn't say no so I didn't. And Angie figured it was a pretty good deal.

"Think about it this way," she said. "What would it have cost if you'd been paying child support all these years?"

I glanced at my watch and saw that Liz was late but didn't give it much thought. She was returning from her boyfriend's gig in Liverpool and hadn't been able to confirm precisely which train they would catch. I had a two-hour layover and would have liked to have wandered around the city, to see how much Manchester had changed since I had moved away at the turn of the last century. But it wasn't often that I got a chance to see my only daughter, so I bought a sandwich and a pint of bitter and decided to stay put.

When Liz called and we arranged to meet I asked her about the car—why didn't she use it to go to Liverpool?

“In case you haven't noticed, Dad, petrol's pretty dear. These things don't pay, you know. And besides, I don't want to leave any more carbon footprint than I have to.”

Angie had to explain that one to me, but at the time I said, “I suppose it would be quite a hike from Leeds to Liverpool and back again.”

Already though I was trying to figure out why she wanted to see me.

“Maybe it's because you're the one she needs,” said Angie.

“What could Liz possibly need from me? Reynolds has got enough clout and dosh to get her out of any mess she gets herself into. And now she's got this boyfriend, some sort of *troubadour*.”

Angie just rolled her eyes then, like she does whenever she thinks I'm being thick on purpose. So I was left to ponder the mystery on my own.

§

After I finished my sandwich, I opened my briefcase and studied the profiles of some of the other companies that would be attending the trade fair. Quite a lot depended upon my securing as many deals as I could in Düsseldorf: as much as thirty to forty percent of that year's

commissions. But I couldn't concentrate on the other manufacturers or potential clients of industrial safety equipment, on who might be challenging our latest line of stylish eye protection or interested in buying crate loads of our breathable rubber gloves. So I put my papers away and looked at the pamphlet that had been left on the table.

Like most Mancunians, I didn't even know that Manchester Piccadilly had been built in 1842, or that it was originally called the London Road station and that it handled over 55,000 passengers a day. Or that the "highlight" of the expensive renovations, over £27 million, carried out right after I took the job and escaped with Angie to Newcastle, was "a brand new station roof over the platforms which involved replacing over 10,000 individual panes of glass."

I looked down and saw that this improvement had indeed "transformed the platforms into a much brighter, drier and"—perhaps—"safer environment for customers."

But for all that light, I couldn't see my daughter anywhere.

§

But then it had been so long since I had last seen Liz that I actually worried that I might not even recognize her.

"You've got to be kidding," said Angie.

"Well she's nineteen now. And the things they wear—or prefer not to—today. Her hair could be any color you like, or shaved to the nub, for all I know. And what if she's got a ring in her nose, and another one in her tongue, eh? What then?"

Angie could never have kids so she wasn't very sympathetic to these outrages in fashion. She lavished all her affection and understanding on the dog, an inbred Cocker Spaniel named Crocker, who got bathed and combed weekly at the vet's.

“You know I have trouble remembering faces,” I said. “My memory isn’t visual, like yours. And I can’t see as well as I used to. Seems like every year I have to increase the damn prescription on these lenses.”

“You’re just making excuses.” And then Angie laughed so loud the dog lifted his head. “You’re afraid of her, aren’t you? That’s it!” And she snapped her fingers like she always does when she thinks she’s figured it out. “You’re afraid she’s going to demand something of you that you’re not prepared to give.”

§

But Angie was always twisting everything into a psychological knot. She thought that if you came down with the common flu it was because your mind was telling your body that it had to stop and take a break. Angie didn’t drink black tea, like the rest of us, but preferred hers green, or even white. And whenever she felt a little ache somewhere, or just the hint of a cold coming on, she took these horse tablets made from the pressed leaves of a plant called echini-something or other that were supposed to boost her ‘defenses.’

Still, even when I thought about it, I didn’t believe that I was afraid of seeing Liz again. How could I be afraid of meeting my own daughter?

§

Half an hour after sitting down at the table I stood up to stretch my legs, though. And that’s when it started to annoy me that Liz hadn’t been able to tell me exactly when she would be leaving Liverpool.

“Can’t you give me some idea?”

“Well, when are you getting in?” she asked.

I consulted my ticket and said that my train arrived at 15:47 and the next one left two hours later. I told her again that I was flying out of Luton, not Heathrow, late that same evening, and that it was a charter flight and there wouldn't be another one after that and that I had to be at the Messe Convention Center in Düsseldorf at nine a.m. the next morning.

“Then that's when I'll be there,” she chirped.

“When?”

“The same time you get in,” she said.

“But which train?”

“We don't have our tickets yet, Dad!”

I was still trying to get accustomed to hearing her use that term of filiation again, and she didn't bother hiding her exasperation with me.

“We'll just buy our tickets when we get to the station.”

“Right,” I said. “So I'll wait for you at the Terrace Sports Bar?”

“That sounds great. See you soon.”

§

I was standing in a long queue that wound out of the pisser, as a large group of retired locomotive engineers took their own sweet time admiring the renovated toilet facilities within, when I heard Liz call, “Dad!”

There was something of that old squeal of delight in her voice, and as I turned my head I half expected to see her standing there in a pink and white Easter bonnet.

But instead she was sashaying towards me, walking barefoot on the frayed leg-ends of her jeans, her hips swinging as something bright glittered in her bellybutton. It was the same

face though, smooth and chipmunk-cheeked, smiling eagerly at me, only fringed now with hair that looked like dirty blonde strands of twisted rope.

A couple of the engineers who were still standing in the line were also staring at Liz, and one of them elbowed another in the ribs and leered, “Wouldn’t mind if I do.”

“Which one?” said the other.

And that’s when I noticed the tall skinny lad standing behind Liz, grinning like it was his birthday and he had just been invited to blow out the candles, his hair every bit as long, dirty, blonde and ropey as hers was.

§

Like Angie they took their tea green. The lad, whose name was Benny, asked the girl behind the counter if she had any certified organic pure cane sugar, but she didn’t even understand what he was talking about. So he did without.

We sat down with our backs to the lewd group of aging engineers, noisily scraping our chairs as we took our positions at the same table where I had been sitting earlier. Benny blew on his tea through pale chapped lips and I picked up the discarded pamphlet and turned it over in my hands. I was just about to ask them if they knew that 1,000 trains a day passed through this station when Liz took the initiative and told me about Benny’s performance.

“It was fantastic, Dad. You should have been there. Benny interpreted three prose poems, and the best act was the one he composed himself.”

I looked at Benny’s long narrow—and yes, feminine, though rather horsey—face, and he smiled amiably at me.

“What was it called?” I asked.

“Oh,” he said thoughtfully, “I’m still working on a title.”

I didn't know what to say to that, so I said, "Are you?"

"Well, you see," and he leaned towards me without brushing the ropery bangs out of his green eyes while he lowered his feathery voice another octave, as if he were inviting me to do something improper. "This sort of work is *alive*, Mr. Cooper. That's what makes it so *real*, and full of energy. And every time you interpret a piece, it changes, see? Because it's *alive*. Just like you and me."

"I understand," I said, sitting up straight and glancing at my watch.

§

While I stood in the toilet relieving myself I wondered why I had agreed to meet Liz in the first place. It was another hour until my train left, a space of time that I had considered insufficient before I arrived in Manchester and now regarded as eternal. I didn't want to judge Liz, and I reminded myself that I didn't know her any more and could make no claims upon her allegiance. But I couldn't see where she was going with this guy. Sure, Benny was nice enough, and he did have a fine voice, but neither of these attributes would get him anywhere in a world where they couldn't be priced.

When I returned to the table and they noticed me, Benny and Liz interrupted their conversation.

"Oh, don't mind me," I said, annoyed at having to apologize.

I sat down and glanced at my watch again and Benny said, "Do you always do that? I mean, check to see if you're late?"

I was going to ask him if he had ever once in his life had to be anywhere on time, for example, to attend a lecture, but a constable strolled up to our table and told us that we had to vacate the premises.

“Come on,” he said, lightly tapping his baton against his leg. “Collect your gear and get along.”

Another constable was moving from table to table and a rumor was already spreading behind him. Benny casually scooted his chair back and asked one of the engineers what it was.

Once he had received the news he said to us, “Some bloke’s on the roof and he says he’ll jump.” He looked at Liz. “We’ve got to go.” But neither of them made a move to stand up.

I got to my feet and twisted my neck to look up at the arched roof, made from more than 10,000 glass panels. It would be a hell of a fall and I thought of the new kernmantle rope and harness we were marketing, but I figured that if the fellow were serious about jumping he wouldn’t be interested in any of that.

Then I looked down at my daughter and her boyfriend, neither of whom had budged. My hand was already resting upon the extended handle of my trolley bag, where I had fitted my briefcase.

“Well?” I said.

Benny looked at Liz again and she said, “Oh, okay.”

He waited and she finally stood up, hitching her jeans while she shook her bum to wriggle the waist band over her hips. Then she bent over to pick up her satchel and the jeans slid down again, revealing a slice of pink knickers.

“Just some loon,” muttered one of the engineers, as they shuttled past me.

“Must be,” agreed another.

And Benny said, in a voice that rose a little, like the twittering of a bird: “Oh, I think I left my wallet at the counter.”

Liz hoisted her satchel onto one shoulder and looked at him as if she had heard all of this before.

“We’ll wait for you downstairs,” she said.

And Benny leapt to his feet.

§

On the lower level no one seemed to have taken any notice of the threatened suicide. We were the last to go down the escalator and once we got off the police finished cordoning the access to the upper level with luminous orange crime scene tape. Other than that there was no indication of a human drama being played out on the glass roof of the Manchester Piccadilly train station.

As we walked away from the escalators Liz kept glancing back, at the railing where we had been sitting, but she didn’t seem to be concerned in the least about Benny’s wallet. I wondered if she paid for everything, with Reynolds’ money, and then I remembered that Benny hadn’t paid for the teas, I did.

“Where do you think he could have left his wallet?”

“He’ll be okay,” was all Liz said.

§

We sat down to wait for Benny at the Starbucks and this time Liz ordered a coffee. From where we sat we could still see where we had been sitting earlier, at the railing. The pair of constables were pacing together on the upper level, walking in and out of view, but other than that we couldn’t see any activity at all.

“Someone’ll talk him down,” said Liz.

I turned to look at her. She was drinking her latte through a straw.

“I thought you didn’t like coffee.”

“Only when he’s not around.”

“Oh,” I said.

“We don’t see eye to eye on *everything*, Dad. It’s not necessary. And besides, neither did you and Mum.”

I thought I detected an accusatory tone, but I might have been oversensitive.

“I don’t think your mother and I are the example you ought to follow.”

“No?”

Liz was leaning on the table with her elbows spread wide enough to allow her to drink the coffee through the short straw without picking the paper cup up.

“Whose then?” she asked, chewing on the straw.

“Well, I don’t know.”

I thought of Reynolds and her mum. I had never met the man so I couldn’t say I knew him. He’d done alright for himself, though, and didn’t have to travel about like I did trying to sell people things he himself wouldn’t buy. But other than that he was a complete stranger to me.

“Not you and *Angie*,” she said, cocking her head and raising an eyebrow.

“You’ve never even met her!”

“You’ve never invited me to do so.”

Liz slurped the last of the coffee and pushed the empty cup away, sitting up in her seat. Then she nestled her slender body into the molded backrest and lifted one foot and placed it on the other thigh. I could see the flat scuffed sole of the sandal now.

“Well, of course you’re welcome,” I exclaimed. “You’ve always been welcome.”

“But you never *invited* me to Newcastle, Dad.”

She dropped her eyes and studied her toes. She had painted the nails some shade of red but the varnish was flaking. I couldn't think of anything to say.

“Not once,” she added, without looking up.

I rubbed my chin and noticed a spot I had missed when I shaved that morning. I hadn't expected a grilling, but then it had been naïve of me to imagine that Liz might not bear any grudges.

“Well,” I blubbered. “I certainly meant to. I mean, you were always welcome. There was no question about that.”

And then I added, a little too hastily, “But that wasn't the point at all!”

“Oh, don't get excited, Dad!”

Liz looked at me and her blue eyes sparkled. She waved a limp, dismissive wrist.

“I'm only teasing.”

And she smiled her chipmunk smile to prove it.

§

About twenty minutes before my train was due to leave, Liz's cell phone rang. It took her a while to fish it out of her satchel and while she did I recognized ‘Lara's Theme,’ from *Dr. Zhivago*.

“Oh, yeah?” she said.

While she listened she took the straw out of her cup and began to trace drops of white coffee across the tabletop. She seemed more intent upon what she was doing than the conversation, dipping the straw into the cup again and again in order to flesh out her monochromed watercolor while saying nothing other than “mmmm” or “uuhu.”

I wondered who she was talking to, but didn't want to pry. And with a stab of regret I realized that none of her business was any of my business, and never had been. At least not since I had become besotted with Angie and moved away with her to Newcastle. I was about to get up and leave the table, in order to provide Liz with a little privacy, when she said, "Fine, whatever you think is best."

It was the same thing Liz's mother had said, when I called on that first Christmas morning from a pay phone and told her that I thought it might be better if I didn't come by for Liz after all. It was raining hard and I couldn't see anything through the fogged windows of the booth and there was no emotion whatsoever in Sue's voice and I knew she was only pretending to agree with me. Liz must have been in the room with her mother when the phone rang, and Sue was naturally determined to protect her from my cowardice and inconsistency.

These were the sorts of memories I had conveniently misplaced over the years, anything that might have incriminated me. At the time of my separation and divorce I talked to Angie at length in terms of Liz's welfare and she was indulgent enough never to contradict me. But we both knew how selfish my decision to leave and every other that followed upon it was, and how concerned I was solely with my own comfort and wellbeing.

"Me too," said Liz and she frowned just a little, enough to wrinkle her nose and remind me of Sue, before she snapped the phone shut and put it away.

We sat there for a while without saying anything, close enough to have touched. But I knew that there was no chance of my reaching my daughter. I thought I had accepted this fact long ago, but Angie was right when she said that losing someone is always bearable even though you never really get over it.

"That was Benny," Liz said.

I waited for her to tell me more but instead she became pensive, chewing on the straw while she gazed at what she had done to the tabletop.

I looked at my watch and said, “My train’s...”

And she looked up at me and said, “He can do it. I know he can.”

§

When I found out that Benny was up on the roof talking to the man who wanted to jump I couldn’t believe it, but Liz assured me it was true.

“He’s good at that sort of thing. It’s like a gift. Didn’t you notice his voice? When he was a boy he used to sing in the choir. He was what they call an innate tenor. But he was practically sodomized once and that put him off music altogether. He’s still working on that, you know, forgiving the priest and all. That’s what his poems are about, forgiveness.”

“*Nearly* sodomized?”

“Listen, Dad,” Liz said, lowering her voice and infusing it with a conspiratorial urgency. “I know you’ve got to go soon. And you’re probably wondering why I wanted to see you in the first place.”

I had almost forgot about that. I could hardly keep my eyes off the roof. I kept expecting to see Benny’s long legs come crashing through one of those 10,000 panes of glass.

“It’s still a secret, Dad.”

I was looking up again, I couldn’t help it.

“What is?”

“I only just found out a couple of weeks ago.”

Liz clenched her jaw and held me with a bold determined look in her eyes.

“I mean, confirmed it. That’s why I called you.”

But instead of carrying on she looked away. And with this sudden withdrawal of the confidence that she had just offered me, my absence from her life seemed to yawn before us. During the hour or so that we had spent together she had made me feel less like the unknown quantity that I really was, but now that illusion dissolved. I remembered then what a sensitive child she had always been, so quick to feel the prick of pain and crawl into her shell.

“I haven’t told Mum.” She coughed to clear her throat. “Or Benny.”

She twisted her body in the plastic seat and stared at me while she bit at a hangnail. “You can imagine why.”

But I couldn’t.

“I need to tell *someone*, Dad. Someone...”

And she frowned again, while she searched for the words she wanted to use to say whatever it was she wanted to tell me.

“Well, someone who both knows me and doesn’t know me. Someone like *you*, Dad.”

“Sure,” I muttered. “Whatever you need...”

§

I was still in a daze as Liz escorted me along the platform. I kept my eyes level and stared straight ahead, at the dozen pairs of burnished steel rails that converged on their way out of the station. It was all I could do to keep from glancing at Liz’s naked belly or up there at the roof where the father of my grandson—or granddaughter—was engaged in volunteer police work.

“You see, Benny’s a great guy, Dad. He really is.”

Among the confused notions that were clamoring for my attention was that of trying to figure out whether this made any difference to me, if I would ever know the child, or whether Liz's life and my own would continue along tracks that would never meet, even at infinity.

“And I love him, I do. I mean this is definitely *love*. And I'm really genuinely happy to be pregnant, even proud. But it's not *his*. Do you see what I mean?”

I stopped then and turned abruptly to Liz. The sensation was that of a lifeline suddenly going slack. I wasn't sure I had heard correctly.

“No,” I said, trying to think.

“No?”

She was looking at me expectantly, but already the hope was draining out of her eyes. Behind her I could see the clock over the platform exit and it said 17:45. There were a few other late passengers hurrying along the platform and the ticket taker was walking along beside the train, making sure everything was ready to go.

“No,” I repeated. “To be honest, I don't. I mean. See what you mean...”

“I want to keep the baby,” she said, placing a warm hand on my forearm. “I want to go ahead and keep it, Dad. But I'm just not sure about Benny.”

I felt cornered and very nearly demanded of her why she hadn't told me any of this as soon as she had arrived. It was far too much to cope with in the space of a couple of minutes. But maybe she had planned it this way, to let me know when there was no time left to react. At any rate, it was hardly my concern. All I had to do was get on the train and go. Leave like I left that first time. But I didn't want to part with a reprimand. I didn't want to leave in anger again. So I kept my mouth shut.

“Benny’s really good at some things, you know.” She shrugged. “Like talking down suicides.”

We both looked up at the glass roof and the train lurched forward with a clanging of couplings. I made an involuntary motion to turn and Liz grabbed my wrist.

“I just don’t know if he’s mature enough to handle being a dad yet, that’s all.”

“I’ve got to go,” I stammered. If I missed the flight out of Luton I would miss the first and most lucrative day of the trade fair.

Liz let go of my wrist and stepped back, away from me.

She stood there with the satchel hanging from one shoulder, her head tilted to that side, a wistful smile on her lips. There was something in her sky-blue eyes that I had never seen before, if only because I hadn’t been around to watch her become a woman.

Then she put on a brave face and stepped briskly forward to kiss me on the cheek. “Go on, Dad. You don’t want to miss your train.”

I could have jumped on just then, it was still moving slow enough. I looked at the ticket taker who was standing on the steps leading into one of the last cars of the train. He was a man like me who made his living on the road and I wondered if he too had spent his entire adult life running away from all the challenges he couldn’t face. As he rolled past me our eyes met and I lifted a hand towards him, as if he might help me out of this. But he shook his head and my ears were filled with the sound of the wheels churning, as the train gathered speed and pulled out of the station.

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