

The Cool Aunt

by Laura Ellen Scott

You never forget your first mouthful of monkey stew. The hot aroma of Thanksgiving turkey had filled every room of her mother's house, yet Isis's thoughts drifted to bush meat and curry. Because she was useless in the kitchen, always had been, she'd been sent upstairs to find the holiday linens. However her latest, probably-gay fiancé (a Latvian!) was a godsend, mashing the potatoes by hand because that's how they did it back home. Isis's mother appreciated the chance to sit and smoke a cigarillo while Karlis pulverized and chattered.

Her mother's beagle was fat and insistent. Even upstairs, even over the sounds of TV football and uncles coughing up their lungs, she could hear the tick-tick dancing of that dog on the kitchen tile. Her mother had shelled out more than \$4200 dollars on two MRIs and a spinal operation for that fat dog. Now it sported an oozing seam down its chest, and it owned the whole damned house. To keep it from scratching at the stitches, the dog wore a boy's white t-shirt, knotted in the back.

The tick-tick dance was never-ending, like a conjurer's dance or a warrior's dance. Last New Year's, Isis had danced emancipation dances in the Sudan while a marginal rock star paid cash for the freedom of dozens of enslaved children. Afterward she and the rock star eluded his meager entourage, jalooped into the Congo, and nearly lost their lives. That was fun.

Now Isis found herself in darkest Pennsylvania, on her annual mission. *What's good? What are you thankful for?* Now 39 years old, Isis gave thanks for what she did not have—cancer, HIV, her own little family. She opened one cupboard in the hall and failing to locate the tablecloth at once, became distracted.

There was the year she'd missed Thanksgiving because she was in Germany. That season her family had repeated the words "in Germany" so many times, with so much mysterious emphasis, that the kid cousins began to doubt their sense of geography.

Isis heard her mother laugh downstairs, and from a distant quarter a male voice, devoid of passion: "No, Ruthie." And he said it again a couple more times.

Rain, of course. All that remained of the early snow were clumps of icy dirt and grease. From the guest room window she recognized her brother's Escalade splashing down the long drive. Currently, Ricky was a Parents-Against-Bad-Books advocate, and remembering that always made Isis smile. This particular sanctimony of his was pure because it was utterly unearned. They didn't even bother fighting about it any more.

Ricky's SUV swung wide, spitting up wet gravel as he parked it between Uncle Rod's new Dakota and Uncle Dick's old Blazer. The doors slid open with an organic hesitation, and Ricky and his new wife stepped down from the vehicle simultaneously, like holiday operatives from the CIA—*oh shit, her name, her name again . . . Michelle*. Ricky and Michelle were trying to get pregnant, but she was 42 and it just wasn't gonna happen. 14 year old Paul, a fag-hating-sports-loving jackass, hopped out of the side looking taller, broader, and more hormonally red-faced than Isis had expected. Paul was an adolescent horror and easy to mess with, so she loved the hell out of him.

She bought him books for Christmas. She especially liked giving him books that appeared on his Father's PABB list. The real fun was not in confrontation, but in slipping one by. Not only did Ricky rarely read, he hardly knew what was on the banned list, except for *Harry Potter*. Last year she gave Paul *The Joy Luck Club* and *The Name of the Rose*. As he removed the foil wrapping, his bewilderment was truly satisfying.

Two years older, Paul's sister Amy had inherited some of her mother's brittle intelligence. Isis always gave her niece cash because that drove Paulie bonkers.

Isis didn't see Amy exit the Escalade, but a dark scarf bobbed into view from the other side. Her family didn't wait for her to catch up. Ricky, Michelle, and Paul moved as a unit toward the front door.

Soon Amy made her way around the back of the vehicle. She was wearing a charcoal gray caftan and a black burqa.

"Ah," Isis said out loud.

Of course she could only assume this individual was her niece. The only exposed part of her face was a thin window across the eyes. The young woman's hem dragged in the puddles as she carefully sought a drier path to grandma's door. Isis heard the commotion of entrance on the first floor, but remained at the window, fascinated by Amy's procession. It was definitely her niece—despite the fact that her family treated the girl like a stray dog they were trying to elude.

Isis ran downstairs. She stopped when she saw her brother's anger, his fierce wet eyes. Appropriately, Michelle appeared tight with worry. Paul, as ever, was just stupid.

"We're gonna win," said Isis. Not even hello. Isis's mother and Karlis emerged from the kitchen all smiles and ignorance. Newly aproned—*Don't Fuck With The Cook*—Karlis grinned and reached for Ricky's hand.

Ricky accepted the handshake. But as soon as his grip released, he hauled back and tried to slug Karlis in the side of his head. A natural dancer, Karlis easily evaded Ricky's assault. Isis's mother cried out, but then everyone was quiet.

And everyone was still, too. Ricky stared at the wall.

Isis explained, "They had a bad car ride."

As Amy crossed the threshold into the foyer, Karlis murmured a sincere "I'm sorry." To date he had proved himself the most human of Isis's lovers.

Isis threw her arms around her niece and squeezed her. "Yessss," she whispered. The fabric of the burqa was rough and emitted an unexpected chemical odor, like it was fresh from the burqa factory, not broken in yet. Amy snuffled a little and hugged back.

Amy's brother snarled, "You are such an asshole, Amy."

"Paul," cautioned Michelle.

"She is."

No one could dispute this. Not even Amy. She was now the biggest asshole in the family, having seized the title from Aunt Isis. Isis could feel the shift, the transition of power. Her fertility commenced shut down procedures. Isis toyed with the idea of body-slamming her nephew against the wall. She could do it.

Amy held out her arms to her family. A breathtaking gesture, quiet and shocking.

She said, "Coats."

Michelle was the first to respond, laying her coat across the child's arms. Then Paul tossed his Steeler's jacket at Amy's head, but in such a way that it slid down into her embrace. Ricky added his to the pile but wouldn't look at his daughter. Thus loaded, she attempted to scamper up the stairs, as she had done every Thanksgiving since she was three years old and commissioned as Captain of the Coats. This year her scamper was compromised.

From the den, a voice: "No, Ruthie."

Isis's mother tried to make sense on the spot, but didn't really succeed. She said to Michelle (because she might listen), "I had a great-great-great uncle who was out riding and couldn't find a tree, so he tethered his horse to his ankle. He was going to have a smoke but as he struck the match . . ." she shrugged. "He lingered for a few days. Horrible agony." Karlis took this opportunity to disappear back into the kitchen.

"Uncle Boyd was brain damaged," said Isis. "It's not relevant."

"He couldn't help it is what I meant."

Amy took a long time with the coats. She would have taken all day if the baby cousins hadn't followed her up to torture her. At first they were frightened by her gloomy, floating reticence, but when they saw how Amy recoiled from intensity, they began to screech and tug at her garment. She pleaded with the babies: "No, no, no," and not one of their parents interceded. She was getting what she asked for.

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The old uncles tested Karlis, teased him, and threatened to make him carve. They kept his glass full, first with wine, then with rye. Unconvincingly, everyone kept saying "No, Ruthie," to Isis's mother's

fat beagle as it truffled among the chair legs. Sometimes it disappeared under the table cloth to softly wheeze and cry.

Amy opted to sit with the kids and only then, with her back to the adult table, did she remove her head covering. Her hair was still short, damp with sweat, and her neck and cheek flushed pink. She looked like she'd just come home from trick-or-treating, perspiring and finally free of her mask. She didn't let anyone but babies and kids see her face full on.

After awhile it got to feeling normal. Isis was disappointed that the new tension had given way so easily to the old ones. Family conversation turned to familiar pressures, and the depressed ghosts of ancestors took their accustomed seats at the table. Karlis's potatoes were heralded, and Ricky pontificated. Isis didn't pay close attention, but somewhere along the line Ricky had linked boom cars to moral decline. Isis had the sudden insight that Michelle and Ricky weren't going to finish the year together.

That's when Isis called Ricky a bigot, and that's when Thanksgiving was returned to her. This was not a command-the-table altercation, but it was a brother-sister fight that slopped over the sides. Satellite clusters of relatives sustained their own conversations, and the Isis-Ricky thing was only moderately distracting. Karlis, the foolish outsider, attempted to leaven the dispute, but he was ignored. Ricky's and Isis's mother was oblivious; she'd heard this same argument on several occasions and it just didn't excite her anymore. Paul ate pie. Michelle excused herself from the table. Amy ate pie. She kept her back to the adults.

"No, Ruthie."

The argument petered out, nobody won. Those who still had sharp ears could hear vomiting echo in the half-bath off the den. In a movie that would mean that Ricky's wife was finally pregnant, but Isis knew it only meant that Michelle hated her life, this man, his asshole children, his asshole family. The honesty in Michelle's sickness might never be achieved with words.

Unnoticed, Amy re-hooded. She began to clear the kiddie dishes, dragging her sleeve into gravy and green beans. The phone rang,

and they all knew it was Jen. The official reason for her nonattendance at the family Thanksgiving was that she lived seven hours away, but everyone knew that the real reason was the heat between Jen's husband and Isis. And everyone knew that the risks intensified with each passing year. Isis could never leave a thing unacknowledged.

Amy in her burqa, loading the dishwasher. Amy in her burqa, starting the Nemo video for the kids. Amy sending IMs on grandma's computer. While a disembodied Jen was passed among family members, Isis watched Amy hover among them, silent, nervous.

Someone gave Isis the handset. "So what do you think?"

"About?"

"Amy."

"Amy?"

"How many people have you talked to so far?"

"I don't know. Five or six."

"And nobody mentioned that Amy's wearing a burqa? The whole deal, too. Slit for the eyes."

"You're shitting me."

"Not at all. She looks like she's hiding a kalishnikov under there—"

"*Now* who's being a bigot?"

Isis sputtered. "You heard about that, but not about Amy. What the hell?"

Jen started to laugh. At the expense of everyone, apparently. "I'm *sooo* glad I'm not there. Love ya bye."

Isis followed Amy into the den where most of the baby cousins had passed out in front of the video. The two who were still conscious were on their way to dream town, playing slowly, like mini deadheads. An uncle who was supposed to be watching the babies snored in the lounge, setting the rhythm. Once in a while someone would look in at him and say, "Now he's got the right idea." Ruthie waddled in and slammed her body down, falling asleep almost immediately. Someone had changed her white t-shirt to an orange

spaghetti strap thing. As Ruthie heaved over, grunting, the *Hooter's* logo stretched across her ribs and belly.

Amy checked on the babies, and Isis said, "So what's a girl gotta do to get some attention around here?"

Fat Ruthie started to snore. Soft palate issues on top of everything else. Amy said, "I'm not looking for attention."

"Okay, yeah. Except Rick looks like he's about to stroke out."

"You shouldn't fight with daddy."

"I've been fighting with my brother for 35 years. Why should I stop now?"

Amy knelt to the carpet next to a sprawled, dozing toddler. She began to pick up crayons and pieces of crayons. "I don't know. Give someone else a turn?"

Isis considered this for a moment. Then she said, "What's funny about the get-up is that it gives you gravity you haven't earned. I can't see your face, and what you say seems profound because of it."

Amy nodded. "Like a song with French lyrics. It sounds better because you don't understand it."

Isis laughed but not really. "Oh, I understand you all right."

"This is real, Aunt Isis."

"It better not be. You think you're the first freak this family's ever seen?"

"What do you mean?"

"I'm just saying that this has happened before."

Amy peered at Isis in silence. There was no way to know what the girl felt, what she understood. But that was the point. "Slightly different circumstances," said Isis. "But they have a game plan, tried and tested. You have to be careful."

Still nothing from Amy.

Isis sighed. "Amy, please. Come upstairs with me. I've never been to Germany."

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"No, Roo-dee," said Karlis as he assisted Ricky in picking good meat from the turkey carcass. The men attended their task with great seriousness, knowing that the alternative was doing dishes.

Allied at last, they sat in the bright kitchen, working to fill a tupperware container. Ruthie was awake again, and spry: dancing, dancing, dancing in her *Hooter's* shirt. No one had yet found the regurgitated wing skin behind the couch, so she was still everyone's sweetheart. Paul had been persuaded to haul the beer bottles out to the recycling bin to reduce the alarming appearance of the counter tops.

Up in the guest room Isis waited for Amy to appear. After five minutes she grew bored, pulled a chair up to the window and opened it. By the time her niece finally showed, a third of the joint was already blown.

Amy pulled up a second chair. Isis did not offer her a hit. She puffed out into the wet, cool air, making little perfumed clouds that sailed on a lateral plane, dissipating slowly. "How long do you plan to stick it out?" asked Isis.

Pretending to misunderstand the question, Amy replied, "We'll hit the road at seven I guess."

Isis let it slide. "There are easier ways to go about this. Did you know that in '83 I used to be a Krishna chick?"

"I heard about that. You were trailing some guy, right?"

"Some guy? My husband, yeah."

Amy's silence was smug.

"You're making my point for me. There's always a guy with these things. I mean let's face it, women don't independently convert to Islam."

"Please stop."

Isis waited.

Then Amy explained, "He deserves this."

Isis was a little surprised, but not confused. Wrongly, she had assumed there was a boyfriend angle, but devotion and punishment so closely resemble one another.

He deserves this.

"Okay, maybe. But you don't."

The child did not respond.

"In case you haven't noticed, Islam is the new homosexuality. That

veil might cover up your pimples, but you're just not safe wearing that thing."

Amy shrugged, which looked all wrong; a burqa makes an uneasy frame for certain attitudes.

"Oh for fuck's sake, Amy."

Amy stared out the window, tracking a little pot cloud as it floated into branches. "Did you know Daddy used to be in the Klan?"

"He wasn't *in* the Klan. He and Louisa liked to hang out with some sketchy friends." Isis pinched the end of the joint and slipped it back into a stained blue satin pouch. "Yeah, I knew."

"I found snapshots."

"Of what?"

"Nothing. Just dumb stuff. Dress-up and posing. I had to think about it for a long time. Then I borrowed this outfit from my friend at school."

"I applaud the gesture, I do. But I've been there, and you have to trust me when I say it isn't worth it."

"I'm going to ask this Salvadoran guy to the prom. The black boy in my class is going steady with someone. And I ordered my own caftan and stuff online. There's special underwear. The web site shows customer quotes, like: 'my burqa makes me feel protected and free.'"

"That's a riot," growled Isis. "But you can't do it this way. You'll be hurt."

Amy shook her head. "I don't think so. This is working."

"You're fooling yourself. My thing turned out pretty bad."

Amy scratched her scalp hard through the black fabric.

"Is it tight?"

"It's supposed to be."

"Great. I don't like where I have to go with this, but since you aren't taking me seriously—"

"You should take *me* seriously."

"Ugh. Save the pissy stuff for Ricky. Look, when I did my thing, this family struck back hard. There was a guy who came to get me, and I was in this hotel room for days, and christ, he kept talking to

me, praying at me, and working on me, and he wouldn't let me sleep—"

Amy's eyes widened in the slit of the veil. "They hired a deprogrammer?"

"Not a real one. Just an enthusiastic deacon from Mom's church. I think he saw a 60 Minutes report about cults, and that was the extent of his training." Isis's chuckle was dark. "I would have dumped my husband and that Krishna shit anyway, but I didn't get the chance to do on my own terms. That was damaging to me. After it happened, I had to take a time out."

She headed off Amy's question with, "None of your business. The point is that there are more of them than there are you. You'll always lose. There are so many ways to get under your Dad's skin, so many ways to attack him without him even knowing what hit him."

Amy's tolerance was merely polite: "So what do you suggest?"

"Oh god, the choices. I guess a tongue piercing isn't too creative anymore. How about if you get a prison pen pal? Or go vegan? That would work great for *next* Thanksgiving."

"Or I could change my name to Athena, *Aunt Kimberley*."

"Smart ass. Oh hey, of course, I got it—convert to Judaism, not Islam. That'd be sweet."

Amy giggled. The fabric puffed in and out over her face.

"I don't think I know any Jews, Aunt Isis. How do you convert?"

"Beats me, but I'm sure it takes more than a costume change."

The door creaked open, and Karlis poked his head in to report that Ricky had announced his family's imminent departure. "Wow Amy," said Isis. "You didn't even make it to sun down."

Karlis sniffed the air and said, "Baby, don't smoke the pot on Thanksgiving."

Isis shook her head. "You've been here for two years, and you still don't understand our customs."

That made Amy laugh openly. She stood and retrieved her family's coats from the bed, cradling them across her arms, arranging them so that the collection resembled a deflated, limp body in her

embrace. Everything Amy did carried the weight of ceremony and bloated melancholy.

Isis asked, "You know the saying, 'hate the sin, love the sinner'?"

Amy nodded.

"That's how I do it now. That's how I get through the shit. You should try it."

"I don't know," said Amy. "I don't think I can just give up like that."

Isis was stung, but she didn't show it. The feeling passed quickly.

Karlis stood by to hold the door for Amy, which was unnecessary. He too reeked of ceremony, but an easier kind that had mellowed from habit and an ancestral load of orthodoxy. He gave the child the sweetest of his gazes, and even though she didn't notice, on a cosmic level his kindness mattered a great deal.

When Amy was gone Isis asked him the classic Thanksgiving boyfriend question: "So now you've met my family. You still wanna marry me?"

Karlis smiled broadly. "Hell no. I want to marry *her*. She is a handmaiden of God. With her by my side, I go to heaven for sure. If I cannot have her, then I want your mother. Big time."

"Sorry, babe. You came with me, you're leaving with me."

"You? You're just for flirting."

Downstairs the shouting started.

Women's shouting and men's shouting all but obliterated thin, teenaged pleas for understanding. Isis and Karlis stayed put, safe and isolated in the guest room. Karlis lifted his chin as if the sense of the argument could be extracted from a draft floating slightly overhead. Isis hugged her knee and tucked her chin to her chest.

A scream and a slam. The house rattled.

Karlis joined Isis at the window and they watched together as Ricky's family left Thanksgiving. Paul and Michelle kept their heads low and made for the Escalade, undeterred by the puddles in their way. Ricky followed, with Amy hoisted over his shoulder, fireman style. Her covering was askew, almost falling off the back of her

head, as she hollered bloody murder. Red-faced and furious, she gripped her father's shoulders with death-claws.

She didn't hit him. She could have hit him. If it had been Isis, she'd be pounding the crap out of him. And she didn't strain or try to twist out of his grip. Several uncles and some cousins spilled out onto the porch to watch them leave. They had that shared look on their faces, the family look. Isis never did figure out what that look meant, though she'd seen it herself back in the day.

If Amy looks up at the window, I'll go down and defend her. I'll take her with me, let her live at my house. But Amy did not look up. And she had to know that she could. When Ricky reached his vehicle he snarled some order and the side door slid open. Ricky tossed Amy inside like she was a bag of mulch. No one from the porch seemed to think anything of it. When the door slid closed again, Isis had an irrational fear that she'd never see Amy alive again.

"What a putz," said Karlis. "I don't like him." Isis stepped back from the window, her body hot and pounding. Of course Amy was in no real danger, but Isis felt as though she had witnessed a crime. She was supposed to do something, she was supposed to—

The reflection in the window glass: she and Karlis stared impotently out at the empty square of gravel where just moments before, a man in a ski jacket forced a girl in a burqa into a vehicle with dark tinted windows. The Amy part was over, and only translucent witnesses remained, both wearing the family look, one with her hand at her breast. Isis snatched her hand away. It wasn't her gesture, she didn't do that.

Laughter downstairs, and a baby squalling. More laughter, more. Which meant that none of it had happened. Karlis kissed Isis on the temple and rubbed the crevice between her shoulder blades. He said, "Maybe we go?"

They put on their coats so that their intention would not be misunderstood. When they got downstairs there was even more laughter; someone had put a pink plastic tutu around Ruthie's fat belly, and when she walked the ruffles accentuated her waddle and framed her haunches so that the dark pucker of her anus was even

more obvious and gruesome than usual. With the *Hooter's* shirt it was perfect.

Isis waved bye-bye to her mother, and no one made any fuss at all.

