

ONE

My niece and her boyfriend were coming for dinner. Melanie had moved out only two months before, but the apartment had already reverted to its primitive state in which a proliferation of clothing and stray objects, no longer fitting in the closets and drawers from which they had spewed, gobbled up space voraciously. I took a week off work to get things in order. I didn't want to embarrass Melanie.

There was no disguising the real reason for Melanie's and Rick's visit: Melanie sought my approval of her boyfriend according to the time-honored ritual by which children seek the parental blessing upon an immanent union. I didn't care for the role, but, after standing *in loco parentis* for Melanie for the last twelve years, I was the only one who could properly be called upon to give her away.

I forced my weight against the entry closet door to jam in the vacuum cleaner and ironing board. I wished Melanie had simply eloped. I'd have been more at ease entertaining a *fait accompli* than a prospective nephew-in-law.

Melanie's recent letters and phone calls, regardless of what initially prompted them, got around to discussing Rick. Thereafter, Melanie remained fixated on the subject with the devotion and fervor of a door-to-door Bible-thumper. Afraid my apostasy only encouraged her proselytizing,

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I suggested I get to know Rick before converting. I'd long ago abandoned the notion another person could make you happy. I was as doubtful of Rick as I'd become of all messianic avatars.

The doorbell rang. I pulled off the old dress shirt I used as an apron and stuffed it under the sofa cushion. I swallowed a gulp of air and opened the front door.

Melanie hung her arms around my neck and kissed my cheek. I suspected she was embarrassed to kiss me on the lips in front of her boyfriend. It was already a bad sign, imputing jealous fits to Rick, who stood with his hand out like a wound-down mechanical toy.

Rick towered over Melanie. I assumed it was merely an analogy for his dominating her in every other aspect of their relationship. His handsomeness, firm handshake and wide smile all worked against him. I decided, if I couldn't dissuade Melanie, who was, after all, probably blinded by his glaring smile, that I'd work on Rick and make him hesitate to become enmeshed in a family as kooky as ours. I decided to pull out all the stops.

"God," Melanie said. "I'm so nervous. This is like the time I came to live here." She handed me her jacket, laughing skittishly. "You've kept the place in good shape. I was afraid that without me to keep after you, you'd become a sloppy bachelor again. You're looking fit, Uncle."

"Don't be fooled by appearances," I remarked. "Don't forget, everything's in..."

. . .The Eye of the Beholder

I'd always liked the story of the ugly duckling. I wanted to take my nine-year-old niece, Melanie, to the movies to see it. I figured having a kid along would make it seem like I was doing it for her.

"You must be kidding," she said. "I already know how it turns out. He turns into a swan and lives happily ever after. How about taking me to see *Mind Invaders* instead?"

"You mean the one about the virus that gets into people's brains through their ears or nasal passages and causes their heads to explode?" I asked, knowing perfectly well she knew all about it.

"Yeah, that one," she said. "Who wants to see a stupid cartoon?"

"Why not? I think it's a Disney picture. Even adults like to watch them. I remember my first Disney cartoon back when I was... well, a bit older than you are."

"Oh, come on. First of all, it's not even a Disney cartoon. It's one of those Grimm fairy tales or something. I already know what happens. I want to see something more like real life, OK? Let's just skip it then."

"No. All right, we'll go to the one you want to see. But how is an alien bug getting inside your head and blowing your brains all over the wallpaper more like real life, Melanie? Do you mind answering that one for me, huh?"

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“Think about it,” she said, grabbing her jacket and her pint-size red plastic purse. She had offered to buy the popcorn.

I got a different sort of stare taking her to the movies this time. Instead of, *My God, a grown man going to a Muppets movie*, it was, *Will you look at that. Taking a kid to see a picture like this. Where are some people’s brains?*

Well, I knew where they would be shortly.

I couldn’t watch the movie, even though I knew it was only synthetic goop and special effects. I didn’t want to be obvious about my squeamishness, so whenever the music clued me in that somebody’s cranium was about to go nova, I turned sideways, like the seat was really getting to my rear end. I watched Melanie instead. She didn’t flinch once, even when the light from the screen falling across her face turned blood-red and I knew what had happened. She asked me to please sit still, a couple of times.

As the adult, I knew I should have taken control of the situation and insisted on the Disney picture. But she’s just so much more... well, sophisticated, than I am. Melanie knows what she wants and how to go about getting it. Christ, at her age I hadn’t even been out in public for the first time yet. There was nothing better to do during the film than remember things: sort of watch my own movie.

Comparing us to our older cousins, our parents convinced themselves my sister and I were horribly ugly, disfigured at birth. They thought we were much too ugly to be seen by anyone, so they reported two miscarriages, two years apart, to the relatives. I suppose they thought it would reflect badly on them to have something murky in their genes. They never sent us to school, afraid the other

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kids would only pick on us, adding mental disfigurement to the physical burden we would already have to carry through life. They figured television could do just as good a job of preparing us for life as school could. We got to play in our yard, though, whenever the neighbors went on vacation or went away for the weekend.

Connie and I—Connie is Melanie’s mother—were watching the family festivities one Fourth of July from the basement window. The basement windows were all pretty well hidden from view by scrubby little bushes. Connie and I had put an old board from a shelf across the cement washtubs so we could see above the window-well and learn what barbecues were about.

There were some sticky, sappy knots near the middle of the board that even paint couldn’t hide. When we both stood on the board at the same time, the plank cracked in half and we fell into the washtubs. It made an awful racket.

We heard Uncle Ernie say, “What was that? Emma? Carl? Did you hear that? I think you’ve got rats down there. They’re chewing your house up.”

My sister and I knew who people were because our parents showed us their pictures in the family album. That’s how we know who said, “What was that?”

Whenever our parents had friends or family over—they never mixed the two—they talked them into doing little fix-it jobs. Uncle Phil was a carpenter, so they got him to hang pictures for them. Grandpa Linder had worked for the phone company, so they got him to put in a new front door bell when the old one shorted out. But they didn’t ever want to have to ask Uncle Ernie for a favor. They would be too ashamed. Uncle Ernie was an exterminator.

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“Sure sounded like something big to me,” he said. “Sure wasn’t no mouse, I can tell you that. I better go have a look.”

So Uncle Ernie handed his barbecue mitts and sauce-splattered apron over to our dad and started down the stairs. Mom couldn’t tell him not to, because it would look like they were trying to hide something in front of everybody.

Connie and I climbed inside an old wardrobe, but Uncle Ernie found us anyway. Exterminators have to be pretty thorough.

“Emma? Carl?” he hollered upstairs, calling our parents. “There’s two kids down here.”

“Goats?” our mother asked.

“No. Children,” Uncle Ernie said, leading us up the steps.

“Oh, *that*,” Mother remarked. “Well, no need to get upset. We were going to tell all of you, but it somehow never came up.”

“Well, whose are they anyway?” Grandma Linder asked.

“They’re ours, I guess,” Mother said.

“Natural?” Grandma asked.

“In a manner of speaking,” Father said.

“Well, whatever did you keep them hidden away for? Sakes, I’m a grandma again and didn’t even know it.”

“Can’t you tell?” Mother asked. “Can’t you see they’re not quite right? I mean, they’re so God-awful ugly.”

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“They look perfectly normal to me,” Grandma said. “I mean, they’re about as good as anyone in our family ever gets.”

“You want ’em?” Mother asked.

“Well, no, dear. Your father and me are up to our ears with taking care of the garden. We’re not as spry as we used to be, you know. You keep ’em. They’re yours. But there ain’t no need to be keeping ’em locked away like that.”

“We were afraid people would stare at them. Some people are offended by ugliness, you know,” our father said.

“Well, let ’em come out and enjoy the picnic, anyway, now that they’re here. What’s your name, little girl?”

“Connie. I’m nine years old, and I live at 540 Flaubert Lane. My phone number is. . .”

“How clever you are, Connie. Do you know who I am?”

“Yes, Grandma Linder. I saw your picture.”

Connie and Grandma Linder got to be fast friends. And my sister and I got treated to our first barbecue: burnt hot dogs, dried up hamburgers you couldn’t tell from the charcoal briquets, lots of pickle relish and German potato salad, and plenty of Neapolitan ice cream.

Connie and I got sick, and had to spend the night down in the basement anyway, over by the floor drain in case we got sick again. We missed the fireworks.

Connie died last year. She killed herself, which is why Melanie has come to live with me. Her father is a lawyer. He said he had enough problems and obligations already without taking on

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an underage brat. Melanie knows how her mother died, but never talks about it—except when something makes her think of it, like Christmas or her birthday.

My sister never quite got over the idea that she was ugly. Melanie's father always told Connie she was the most beautiful thing in his life. The trouble is, everything else he did conveyed the opposite message.

I always think of my sister Connie when I think of the ugly duckling. Not because she was ugly, but because Melanie's father's name is Charles Swan.

The movies ended, mine and Melanie's. I promised we'd go to a burger place. She likes lots of ketchup, even after a film like *Mind Invaders*. I lost my appetite 85 minutes ago.

"Do you think I'm ugly?" I asked Melanie. She finished chewing first and took a sip of soda. She always had good manners.

"No, not really," she said. "Maybe you could grow your hair a little longer. Kind of cover up your ears. Other than that, you look fine to me."

"Thanks," I told her. "Just checking."

"So, is this a celebration dinner, or what?" she asked.

"No, I haven't heard anything yet. I'll let you know as soon as I do. You can count on that. How could I become your father and not tell you, kid?"

"Just checking," she said.

I got a ream of stupid forms I had to fill out before the adoption could go through. They asked really dumb questions, like what was Melanie's profession/occupation.

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“Child,” I wrote down. That’s a full time job, questioning everything, trying everything, reveling in the wonder of it all. Somebody’s got to do it. May as well be a kid.

Then they wanted to know the name of her employer. Who hires a kid to do the wonderful things only a child is old enough to do? “God,” I wrote down. There was plenty of room for that.

Employer’s address? it wanted to know. Where else? I put down “Heaven.” But that sounded kind of smug. Fortunately, I always use a pencil when I fill out forms. I erased it and wrote in “Paradise.” Paradise can be anywhere. Heaven is always hanging over your head.

Then it asked for the employer’s phone number. I admit, that one had me stumped for a while. What is God’s phone number? Then it came to me. “Etcum Spiri 2-2-0.”

I got the form back in the mail last week, for being “improperly filled out.” I didn’t want to tell Melanie. It seems all those questions were supposed to be about me, not her. Luckily, they included a new form.

After the hamburgers, we went home and played a game of *Scrabble*. Melanie won.

She’s going to her friend’s house tomorrow, so I have to get up early to drive Melanie there.

I’m beginning to see what she meant about *Mind Invaders* being more like real life. I’ll have to tell her about that in the morning. She’s sleeping right now. It’s possible for somebody’s idea of you to get into your head and breed there, making copies of itself until there’s no more room. That’s what happened to Connie. Everybody told her, in one way or another, that she was ugly with a capital *Ugh!*

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And I got it into my head that all forms are stupid, so I filled it out like a smart-ass. I hope the court can take a little kidding. I wouldn't want Melanie to get shuffled off somewhere else. If it doesn't go through, we'll try it again. Or, maybe she could adopt me.