

FOUR

“I don’t remember being able to fly,” Melanie announced, giggling and gurgling.

“Of course not,” I said. “You’re an educated woman. That’s one of the first things they drum out of you: all your natural abilities.”

Melanie giggled again. Her tittering refuted my story and she saw that I was getting annoyed with her. We had not lost our ability to talk with our eyes.

As though to make up for her slights, she asked Rick if he had been able to fly as a boy, putting the conversation back on track and involving her boyfriend.

“Not exactly,” he said. “I used to be able to fly in my dreams sometimes, but I haven’t had a flying dream in a long time.”

“Dreams are vestiges of memory,” I told him. “How could you dream about something you’ve never seen done or been able to do yourself?”

“I don’t know,” he replied, shrugging. “I’d have to think about that.”

“Sure,” I said. “That’s what our schooling has taught us to do: deny our intuitions, bind and gag them with logical arguments. You’ve swallowed it whole. It’s time you questioned things, Rick.”

Melanie was growing uncomfortable with the direction of our conversation. I knew I was grilling Rick, but if I didn’t put him on the hot seat, how would we know what dark residues coated

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his insides? If I couldn't get them to bubble up, Melanie would have to discover them the hard way. Rick wasn't cooperating; he remained in control.

She steered the conversation away from a confrontation and asked, "I didn't know you and Mom knew my Dad already in grade school. It's almost spooky."

"Why? Is it so strange that we were all children once?"

"No, but it's weird how you all seemed to be who you are way back then. And was that the same Carlos who was your and Mom's friend?"

"Yeah, it is. You've met him, Melanie. Don't you remember?"

"Sure, only I wasn't sure it was the same Carlos, that's all. It's so weird how everything seems fixed right from the beginning, like people don't change."

"They don't," I said. "At least not any I've met. You are who you were. Nothing changes. It just goes on with new actors playing the old roles." I asked Rick what he thought, offering him the last crackers on the tray.

"I like to think people *can* change."

"I used to believe that, too. But experience disabused me of the notion. At one time I still hoped I might meet the woman of my dreams and we'd be able to fly off and find paradise. Don't laugh. I was serious about it. And I thought everyone deserved to be happy. I was a regular matchmaker. People used to call me..."

. . .Dr. Love

According to our mother, all the misery and hardship in the world was a direct consequence of men trying to make the world a better place. Like the patriarchal Creator of tradition, men could not enjoy their day of rest until they had remade creation in their own image. As a result, she said, there was not a problem in existence which a man did not bring into being.

Our mother launched into these excoriating displays while flattening dough, flaying chickens, or scraping the scales from milky-eyed fish. The rhetoric imparted a manly strength to her kitchen butchery. The silvery scales flew in all directions like sparks from a grinding wheel. They stuck to her sweaty arms and forehead and dotted the kitchen window like evaporated raindrops.

When her fury abated, I peered over the edge of the table and asked meekly if she was mad at me too. She wiped her slimy hands on her stained apron and bent low to look me in the eye. “I suppose not,” she said. “You can’t help it you were born a boy. But boys turn into men, at least some of them do. So watch out. You don’t want to turn out like your father, do you?”

I shook my head. My mother smiled and handed me a fishy-smelling cookie. “Go find your sister. Supper’ll be ready soon.”

I found my twin under the basement stairs, mediating a noisy, brutal argument among her battered, tattered dolls. I remembered thinking it odd how even the dolls and toys in our house were unhappy. Connie’s dolls could play any roles she chose for them upon the boundless stage of her

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imagination. But they wound up acting just like the people we knew: none of them were happy unless everyone was miserable.

Grandpa Linder, our mother's father, sat at the head of the table, our father to his right and Uncle Ernie, Mom's brother, to his left. Mother referred to them as the Cursed Trinity. Connie and I called them the Three Stooges. They were always quarreling and smashing things and hitting people, but they never seemed to get hurt themselves.

The three men turned their noses into the draft wafting through the doorway as Mom carried in the platter of fried fish. Uncle Ernie threw his wadded-up napkin onto his empty plate.

"You know he doesn't like fish," our Dad said. "When are you going to get that through your thick skull? And what about Grandpa's ulcer? Those fish are fried, aren't they? What are you trying to do, kill us all? I'll bet you're just waiting for us to choke to death on those little fish bones. Get right back in there and make us a proper supper."

"This is what I made, and that's what you'll eat, or else you can go hungry. Anyway, they say you shouldn't eat so much meat. It's not good for you."

"Who are *they*?" our father asked. "And what do you know about what's good for us? But I'll tell you one thing: if you know what's good for *you*, you'll get in there and make us some pork chops or something with meat on the bones."

"No," our mother said.

Father stood up and leaned across the table to where mother sat. He flung his arm behind him, winding up for the pitch.

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“Don’t you lay a hand on my sister,” Uncle Ernie interrupted. “At least not without my permission.”

“You’re a fool,” Dad told him. “I’m doing this for you. Fine. You want to eat fish? Go ahead. Swallow bones until your wind pipe’s plugged with them. See if I care.”

“She’s my daughter,” Grandpa said, “and if anyone’s going to discipline her, it should be me. You two stay out of this. As long as there’s a breath of life in me...”

“Sit down, you old fart. I’m her husband. I’ve got first rights now.”

“Not with my sister, you don’t,” Uncle Ernie said, putting his arm across our father’s chest and pushing him back in his chair.

“Don’t you forget whose house this is,” Father said.

“And it was my house before that,” Grandpa added, slamming his fist on the table, rattling the glasses and silverware.

Connie and I sat watching the shouting and shoving match as though following a game of table tennis in which the centerpiece of dusty plastic flowers and wax fruit served as the net. Mother deflected most of the punches aimed at her, but Grandpa was not so fortunate. He caught someone’s elbow in his jaw during the tangle and tussle, knocking out his dentures. They broke in half.

Most of the food ended up on the dining room walls. The splatters of grease blended right in with the residue and stains of previous arguments. The fish-shaped spatters became camouflaged among the large flowers and long, tapered leaves of the wallpaper. The greasy imprints looked like spots where the leaves had come unglued and fluttered to the floor, leaving behind their foliate shapes of yellowish-brown paste. The wallpaper was witness to all that happened in our family.

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My sister and I left the adults to their struggle for dominance and fended for ourselves. We opened a can of ravioli, spreading the sauce and lining up the pasty little pouches on narrow slices of Melba toast. We were so hungry it tasted good, even cold. We hadn't much choice. Those were among the few items we could reach in the cabinets. On other nights we made tuna and pickle sandwiches.

Mother was fond of tossing bits of advice into every argument, like pepper into the stew. "Well, that's what they say." I think she knew how much it aggravated Father. "Who the hell are *they*?" he'd ask, infuriated that anyone would second-guess him. Mother never revealed who *they* were. Perhaps she didn't know.

I formed an early opinion of who *they* were. Of course *They* were men, experts in all matters. I never learned their names, but I discovered what *they* looked like. Uncle Ernie would send me to the corner drugstore whenever he ran out of cigars. The boxes of cigars, their lids propped open, filled the display case beneath the cash register. *They* were on one of the lids, the Dutch Masters: an august gathering of wise old patriarchs consulting with one another and dispensing judgment with unwavering firmness. *They* stared right at me, stroking their faultless beards, trying to determine whether I would one day join their venerable conclave.

It was *they*, I decided, who were responsible for all the misery in the world. *They* were tyrants and hypocrites, and arrogant fatheads all. In that same revelatory moment as I stood before the cigar counter, among the hand-wrapped symbols of the male gender, I determined I would be the one to right the wrongs *they* had committed. I would be especially devoted to amending the harm

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done to the women of the world, who suffered uncountable humiliations at their hands. I would thereby lessen the disgrace my own sex had brought upon all of us. No longer would I need to feel shame for the accident of birth that made me male.

I would become a Doctor of Love, taking to my tender heart all the lonely and abused women of the world, making up to them whatever they had suffered at the hands of my ignorant compatriots. It was a tall order, I realized. My abilities to compensate womankind were unproven, but my determination was unbounded. I had no firm plan in mind, but I knew exactly how *not* to treat women, for I had the examples of my father and grandfather and uncle always before me, burned into my retinas like the sharp afterimages of reckless lightning bolts.

By the age of fourteen I had begun to exude compassion and sensitivity from every pore not already clogged with testosterone. I was a great hit with all my female classmates; hardly a one had not befriended me by our senior year. But none were interested in me as a lover. I graduated a virgin.

In college I had a bit more success in my role as Dr. Love, but in no way was it proportional to my efforts on behalf of the women damaged by love. I hadn't a clue what I was doing wrong until my sister took me aside after one particularly disastrous date and shared her observations with me.

"You're *too* sensitive, *too* sympathetic," Connie said. "You can overdo a good thing, you know. Too much tenderness and compassion makes you come across as a wimp—or a queer. Most of the women I know would question the masculinity of any man who was too nice to them."

"That's horrible," I replied. "It's the very thing I'm working so hard against."

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“Maybe you better temper it a little bit,” she suggested. “Be a bit more aggressive and inconsiderate; more aloof, more inflexible. I’m sorry, but that’s how it is. Men have been so callous and unsympathetic to women for so long that if a man doesn’t display those qualities prominently, women figure he can’t be a real man. He’s too good to be true, know what I mean?”

“Yeah, I’m afraid I do. Thanks, Connie. So how’s your love life these days?”

“Don’t ask. I could stand to run into a man with just a few of your qualities. Where the hell are they?”

“Probably going out with women who don’t equate gentleness with weakness.”

“No doubt,” Connie said. “So where does that leave the rest of us?”

I shrugged, recognizing for the first time the tremendous weight I had shouldered. I felt as though I would be crushed beneath it.

I discovered, after taking most of Connie’s advice to heart, that there was no single formula, no precise mixture of caring and callousness, which proved effective with every lonely, frightened woman I encountered. It was all hit-or-miss, tedious trial-and-error. I was fumbling around in the dark in a manner not unlike my first attempts at making love with the lights out. For every woman I rescued at the precipice of despair there were a dozen more who plunged over the edge, often with my unwitting assistance. I certainly didn’t push them; instead they sort of stumbled over me, falling headlong into the abyss, never to be heard from again.

Dr. Love, my ass, I chided myself. You’re a quack, an impostor, a charlatan. I was turning into my father after all, only worse, for I didn’t have his obdurate convictions about a man’s place

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in the world. I stood at the helm of a sinking ship in uncharted waters. Dr. Love, my ass. I was more like nefarious Capt. Wreck, leading my battered passengers onto the shoals, foundering in the shark-infested waters of the Sea of Love and tossing them overboard to the predators.

I came very close to despairing of my mission. Clearly I needed help. I couldn't accomplish it all on my own. I needed a few allies. And, I was going to start closer to home. How could I be confident in my abilities to cure the lovelorn when my own sister, my twin, remained a virtual invalid from the malady? The last guy she went out with left her not only with a broken engagement; he also made off with most of her savings, through countless "small loans, just until payday," leaving her practically destitute as well as forsaken. I had to help Connie first if I was going to be at all convincing, to myself as well as to the lonely women of the world, as Dr. Love.

The first problem I encountered in this new scheme was who to enlist as allies in this struggle to rescue women from callous mistreatment while the rest of mankind was busy perpetrating it. I felt at times like a carpenter replacing rotted beams in a neglected house who barely managed to stay one step ahead of the industrious termites who were devouring it at the other end. I was so tired.

But I could at least rescue my sister.

I had been so busy working my way into the confidences and bedrooms of the hapless women I met that I all but ignored my male friends, and hadn't cultivated a single new friendship since my first year of college, more than a decade ago.

I'd known Carlos since grade school. I considered him a kindred spirit who shared my distaste for the meanness and violence men employed against the fair sex, as well as their own. His

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father had been as ill-tempered as mine, and also took it as his divine right to inflict punishment on the daughters of Eve for their weakness. I thought Carlos would be an ideal counterpart to my sister. He was as thoughtful, sensitive, and artistic as she, and yet he hadn't relinquished his smoldering Latin masculinity in favor of these more tender virtues. Carlos did not, however, seem at all eager to go out with Connie. Every careful arrangement I made to bring them together met with some unexpected event that caused either Carlos or Connie to cancel at the last minute. I was beginning to think he was going out of his way to avoid Connie.

"You're right, my friend. I can't lie to you, man," Carlos said. "I'm sure your sister is a very nice lady, so I don't want to disappoint her. I'm not interested in women, man, at least not sexually."

"You're full of it, Carlos. What're you trying to tell me?"

"That I'm as queer as a three-headed rooster."

"Get off it, Carlos. OK, so you don't want to meet Connie. Then just say so. Don't go into some screwball act to get out of it. Level with me and cut the bullshit, OK?"

"I *am* leveling with you, man. I can't make it any plainer, except you're too stupid to believe it. I like men, OK? I guess I always did. Now get off my case with your sister and let's talk about something else."

"Fine," I said, convincing no one. I felt terrible. I had been so caught up in my own plans that I didn't even know what my best friend was about. We'd known each other since first grade, but he had to come right out and tell me he was gay because I was too wrapped up in myself to see it.

"I'm a lousy friend," I said.

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“Don’t put yourself down, man. I could see you weren’t interested in me the same way I was in you, so I didn’t push it. No big deal, OK?”

“I’m sorry, Carlos. I let you down.”

“Forget it, man. We’re still friends, right?”

“Yeah, sure,” I said.

Carlos smiled. “Then d’you mind if I give you some friendly advice?”

“Go ahead, shoot.”

“You gotta stop killing yourself with this bringing love to all the wounded people in the world.”

“I realize that now,” I said.

“Yeah, it’s such a screwed up mess God himself couldn’t fix it with another flood. We’d be down to two people on a boat and they’d still be fighting. It’s power, man. Everybody wants to be boss. You can’t change it.”

“Maybe not, but it doesn’t have to be that way. I at least have to make it right for my sister. She deserves a good man. That’s why I thought of you.”

“OK, that’s good. Every brother wants to see his sister treated right. I worry about my own sister. But that’s where you gotta draw the line. You can’t fix the whole fucking world.”

“OK, Carlos. Thanks for the advice.”

“Anytime,” he said. “And let me know how it turns out with your sister. I still remember her like she was in the fourth grade: no front teeth and this big shiner from walking into a door or something. Hah! I bet she’s sure changed, huh?”

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“Not much, actually.”

Carlos laughed. He thought I was pulling his leg. I let it go at that. It was late and I didn't have the time or inclination to disillusion him. Connie's last lover, the one who, piecemeal, made off with her bank account, also knocked out her front teeth and gave her a black eye.

“Take care, man,” Carlos said.

“Yeah, good night,” I said, rather absently. My mind was already racing to the next order of business.

Carlos had no sooner left my apartment than I was calling up a co-worker, Chuck Swan, whom I'd only just got to know. It had come to that. Dr. Love had been reduced to the role of a matchmaker. I was like a surgeon no longer sure of his skills who hangs up his instruments and instead writes a lot of prescriptions, and makes a lot of referrals to those he regards as more competent. Yeah, it had come to that. Dr. Love, my ass.

Chuck Swan hadn't been at the office very long. We'd only begun speaking to one another during the last couple of weeks. We weren't friends. There was none of the closeness that comes from growing up together, as Carlos and I had, though even that didn't guarantee you knew everything about a person. As far as I could tell, Chuck seemed a decent enough guy.

After Connie's black eye and bruises had cleared up and her orthodontist had fitted her with a new appliance, I arranged for her and Chuck to meet one another and get acquainted. Carlos was having a showing of his bloody and dismembered life-sized fiberglass Ken and Barbie sculptures

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at a local shopping mall gallery. It was not the best venue for his style of work, perhaps, but Carlos was desperate. So was I. So was Connie. I wasn't sure about Chuck.

Connie and Chuck seemed smitten with one another from the outset. I felt I could relax a little. The rest was up to nature; the best I could do was let it run its inexorable course. I met a young woman there myself: Charlene, one of Carlos' fellow artists. She carried her bohemian affectations a bit too far for my tastes, but I was in no position to be picky. It was a successful evening on several counts. Carlos even managed to sell one of his works—to a retired couple from Indianapolis.

As the summer wore on I saw less and less of Connie. She had moved into Chuck's apartment and they spent a considerable sum on expensive oriental wallpapers and artwork. It was a loft sort of apartment and had plenty of room for Connie's accumulation of mismatched furniture.

I became a little concerned by the reappearance of dark bruises on Connie's face and upper arms. I thought her excuse of continually running into doors was getting pretty lame.

"But it's true," she said. "I know it sounds trite, but that's what happens. I've been doing aerobics and, once I get going, I forget how close I'm getting to things."

"Well, at least shut the damn doors," I admonished her.

"Yeah, OK, I will."

I knew she wasn't telling me something. Their apartment was huge. You could do military maneuvers in there without running into anything. The only doors in the place were for the bathroom and the bedroom. I knew she was being reticent, but I couldn't force it out of her. I wondered whether she wasn't having her fainting spells again. The alternative explanation—that Chuck was beating her—I didn't want to consider.

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It became apparent, however, that Chuck was mistreating her. One of the reddened marks on her arm had the imprint of fingers. I had to confront her about it. Dr. Love had made the match and Dr. Love would have to find the remedy for it.

“Yeah, his temper gets away from him sometimes,” Connie admitted.

“Fine. So some people have short fuses. And I know about all the silly crap that can lead to arguments. Just look at Mom and Dad. But why doesn’t he take it out on the walls or something?”

“We just redecorated. Anyway, he’s getting better,” she said.

“What? You mean his aim is improving?”

“I don’t know what you’ve got against Charles, but it’s really none of your business. He’s a wonderful person in other respects, and when he loses control he feels worse than I do. He makes it up to me, bringing me little gifts when he travels.”

“Like what? A first-aid kit?”

“Get off my case, OK? Maybe you’d better go. Charles doesn’t like it when there’s another man in the apartment and he’s not home.”

“I’m your brother for Christ’s sake.”

“It’s all the same to Charles. Please. We’ll talk later. I want to find out how you’re getting on with Charmaine.”

“Charlene,” I corrected, but found myself talking to the door.

That was the final disgrace. I couldn’t even save my own sister. I had increasingly narrowed my scope, but I proved inept and incompetent on every level. Dr. Love was an abysmal failure.

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Physician heal thyself!

I consoled myself in Charlene's arms. Maybe that was all I'd be able to accomplish of my grandiose plan. Maybe, if I was really lucky, I would at least find love for myself.

I made love to Charlene until I thought I'd have a heart attack. Charlene never smoked except during the more sedate interludes in our lovemaking. She'd already gone through half a pack.

"You seem awfully quiet tonight," I told her.

"Just thinking," she said, taking another long, slow drag on her cigarette. I thought she'd seen too many bad French films.

"I want to fill you with my love," I said, twirling the wisp of hair lying against her neck. "But it seems there's something I'm not doing."

"You're too hard on yourself," she said.

"I'd rather be hard with you," I joked.

Charlene smiled, and propped herself up on one elbow on the thick down pillow. Her collarbone stuck out and I wanted to lick it. "Well, maybe there is a little something you could do to make it more exciting for me," she said. "We all have our little fantasies, you know? I just didn't want to put you off or anything."

"Nothing human is alien to me. I always wanted to use that line. You're not an extraterrestrial, are you?"

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“No,” Charlene laughed, “nothing like that.” She sat up and rolled over across my stomach. Her breasts made a sucking noise against my skin. She opened a drawer beneath the bed. I turned my head to have a look.

The drawer was filled with all sorts of leather and wooden devices: whips and paddles and rubber clubs and a horrible looking cat-o’-nine-tails with knots in the woven leather lashes.

“No, not that,” I shouted, squirming out from under her. I rolled off the edge of the bed and scraped my butt on the sharp edge of the drawer. “Anything but that!”

“We could start out with just a spanking,” she said, “before we work ourselves up to bigger things. Just once. For me,” she pleaded.

I was scrambling to gather my clothes from the floor. Charlene came after me with the nine-tailed whip. I thought she was going to strike me as I bent over, but I saw that she had the handle end pointed towards me.

“Oh puhlease,” she cooed. “Do it for me. You asked if there was anything you could do to make it better for me.”

“Not that,” I said. “I can’t.”

I slipped and fell while trying to get my pants on. She continued her approach, holding out the handle of the whip to me. She pleaded with her eyes as much as with her voice. She looked like a little girl begging for candy.

“Beat me, Daddy. Oh, puhlease, Daddy. Beat me.”

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I ran down the hallway still clutching my shirt and jacket. I finished dressing in the elevator. A much older woman in a fur cape stood at the back of the elevator watching me. She picked up her fur-ball Pekingese and began stroking him. I got so nervous I buttoned my shirt up wrong.

“You must work out in a gym,” she said. “Why haven’t I seen you in the building before?”

“I don’t live here,” I said, punching the elevator buttons again.

“I have plenty of room in my apartment,” she said.

“Forget it, lady. I’m on my way to join a monastery.”

“What a shame,” she replied. “Such a waste.”

I flew out of the lobby so fast the revolving door probably spun for a week. Of course, I wasn’t serious about joining a monastery. With my luck, they’d be an order of flagellants.