

FIVE

“I think it’s really nice how you stuck up for Mom all the time,” Melanie said, sucking on her last ice cube.

“She helped me out of a few jams, too,” I said. “I’m sorry it didn’t turn out better for her.”

“Look, Unc, you did all you could. We’ve been through this a thousand times. When are you gonna stop whipping yourself?”

I shrugged. “Come on. Let’s eat.”

Melanie snatched up the empty glasses and paper napkins, beating me out to the kitchen. Like a doting lap dog, Rick jumped up and followed her. “I’ll set the table,” Melanie offered.

Rick danced after her with the silverware, heeding her instructions on its proper placement. “What a wimp!” I thought. It worried me, though not for his sake. Lacking genuine masculinity, wimps have to resort to beating their wives or starting wars to overcome their weakness.

“Rick would like another drink,” Melanie called from the dining room. “I would, too.”

“What’s wrong with his asking for it?”

Melanie burst into the kitchen. “Don’t be so hard on him, Unc,” she said, lowering her voice. “He doesn’t want to be impolite,” she whispered.

“What’s so impolite about stating your needs?” I asked, shouting. “Anyway, forget the drinks. We’ll be having wine with dinner. Is he any good with a corkscrew?”

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“I don’t know. I’ll ask.”

I set the oven a little higher and worked on finishing the salad. I pointed Rick towards the junk drawer. I had it all figured out. If he couldn’t get the bottle open, he’d score low on general around-the-house usefulness. On the other hand, if he succeeded, he’d get demerits for his facility with liquor bottles.

He got the bottle open, though fumblingly, thereby satisfying both requirements.

Melanie dished out the salad and Rick poured the wine. I pointed out to him that the tablecloth was an heirloom. The neck of the bottle chattered against the lip of each glass, but he didn’t spill any. I should’ve made his drinks stronger.

Melanie offered to say our usual grace: “Thanks. It could be a lot worse.” Then she lifted her glass to me. “And thanks to you, Unc, for raising me.”

Her toast embarrassed me. “I think we raised each other,” I said, digging into my salad.

“Do you ever stop to think how much worse it would have been for me, and for my Mom, if we hadn’t had you to rely on, Unc?”

“You’d have probably made out fine. Instead, I wonder how I’d have gotten by if your Mom and I weren’t as close as we were. Suppose we were merely acquaintances. Can people mean that much to one another’s survival? Maybe we just think so, to feel important. I wonder if we’re not just...”

. . .Fools of Fate

Connie answered the door in her big old terry cloth bathrobe. Her wet hair was piled atop her head and wrapped in a bath towel, wound around like a turban. A wisp of already dry hair fluttered behind each ear. I got the notion into my head that I wanted to finger those two fly-away wisps. I imagined they felt downy, like the soft feathers that came floating out of my winter parka. I tried to imagine what they felt like against the smooth skin of her neck. I imagined licking her neck.

“Oh, it’s you,” she said, turning on her heels and walking down the hallway to the living room. I thought about how the carpet must have tickled her feet as she turned away. I imagined licking her feet, getting her to arch her back in the torture of ticklishness. I wanted to play This Little Piggy with her toes. Her toes were cute, and I had no trouble picturing porky little faces on each of the pinkish nails.

Connie sat down on the sofa, folding her legs beside her on the cushion. She pulled the voluminous robe tighter around her knees and, undoing the turban, began drying her hair, leaning her head far forward and rubbing vigorously. There were more of those delicate wisps all across the back of her neck. My spine tingled and I shivered at the thought of her lashing my bare back with her wet, glistening hair.

“What’s up?” she asked, whipping her hair to the side and rubbing it some more.

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“I thought maybe I could interest you in going to dinner with me.”

“Is this a date?” she asked, suddenly stopping all her strenuous rubbing and flinging around of her hair.

“Uh, no,” I said. “I mean, I had to make reservations, but it’s not really a date exactly.”

“Oh no? Sure sounds like a date to me.” She resumed drying her hair. She produced a wide-toothed comb from the pocket of the bathrobe. “Look,” she said, drawing out each word like she did the strands of her long hair. “How many times do we have to go through this? Friends do spontaneous things for each other. You can’t sit down and make plans to be spontaneous.”

“Well, I just thought so we wouldn’t have to wait in line to get a table, you know?”

“It’s a date, in your mind, anyway, and I’m not going. You’re stretching this friendship to its breaking point. I told you way back in April that we couldn’t be lovers.”

“All because of some New Age mumbo-jumbo,” I remarked, wishing instantly I hadn’t said it.

“Look, friends don’t go trying to convert one another. They don’t have to believe in the same things to be comfortable.”

“I’m not trying to convert you,” I protested. “It’s just that I think you’re getting into this hocus-pocus a little deep, that’s all.”

“Oh, now it’s *hocus-pocus*. Just because it doesn’t fit your view of the world, I should give it up? Listen, maybe you should apply for the Pope’s job. I hear he’s ill again.”

I raised my hands to make a point of what I was about to say, but it struck me as a papal gesture. I couldn’t think of anything to say that wouldn’t get us deeper into an argument.

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“Look,” Connie said, softening her harsh tone. She managed a faint smile. “We have obviously known one another in a previous life. People tend to surround themselves with those they’ve known from before. I’ve been through a whole series of past life regressions with my analyst, and I’m telling you we were brother and sister in at least the last three. I’m not trying to put you off. I want us to remain friends. But anything more would just feel wrong to me—like incest or something. Can’t you just go along with that?”

“I’m trying,” I said, but it’s all I can handle just keeping track of what I’m doing in this life. I promise I’ll try harder, but it’s not easy for me. I’m in love with you, Connie.”

“I love you, too. Let’s keep it that way, OK?”

I nodded. I knew what she intended in loving me: discussing important books past midnight, playing and sipping white wine spritzers, and hugging one another. I felt like crying.

“I’m going to get dressed,” she announced. “You can help yourself to a drink if you want.”

I watched the trails of her shampoo-scented hair and the billows of her robe disappear down the hallway. I didn’t feel like having anything. I could only think about how foolish I’d sound cancelling the reservation I just made. Then she called me to come to the bedroom.

She’s had a change of heart! I stumbled over the coffee table and dashed down the hall. I pictured her lying naked on the bed, waiting for me. I would lean down to kiss her and she’d wrap her arms around my neck and topple me onto the bed.

“Could you fasten that top clasp for me?” she asked, turning her back to me and pulling her hair from her neck. She looked at me in the vanity mirror. “Be careful. Don’t catch my hair in it.”

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“You going somewhere?” I asked. I saw she was wearing the silky white blouse Chuck had got her for her birthday.

“No, not necessarily,” she said. “I just wanted to look fresh for when Charles gets home. He’s been working so hard lately. All the tough clients seem to get passed on to the junior partners.”

“Yeah, that’s rough, especially at the meager six-figure salary he gets.”

“Just cut it out. Why don’t you try being nicer to him? You’d find out he’s not such a bad guy.”

“Yeah, maybe I should, so you don’t have to defend him all the time. What’s this thing?” I asked, pointing to the pulley mounted above the bed. “Exercise equipment? Chuckie doesn’t want to get fat and flabby, huh?”

“Something like that,” Connie said, shaking her hair back into place. She stood up and switched off the lights beside the mirror. I followed her back into the living room.

“Why don’t you come down later, after you’ve had your supper? Charles and I have nothing planned for the evening. Just a friendly game of . You two could get better acquainted. Besides, Charles wants to apologize to you for throwing you out last time.”

“Yeah, sure.”

“Look. Charles is still from the old school. To him, there was only one reason a man and woman would get together. He’s learning that men and women can be just friends. I’m explaining the whole thing about platonic relationships to him.”

“Do you mind explaining it to me, too?”

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Connie laughed. “I wish he had a little of your sense of humor. He’s so serious all the time. So, see you later?”

I nodded. We hugged one another in the doorway, her soft, cool hair brushing against my cheek. I rubbed the cool silk of her blouse against her warm back. I felt as though I were on fire. Hope burns eternal, I reminded myself. And so do the fires of hell.

I went back upstairs to my apartment. After a cold shower that left me prickling but no cooler, I remembered to call the restaurant and cancel the reservation.

“There’s been a death,” I explained.

The maître d’ cooed his sympathies. I wasn’t sure why I needed to concoct an excuse in the first place, except that I didn’t want anyone thinking I’d been stood up or turned down.

I heated a dinner of odds-and-ends leftovers and fell asleep on the sofa with the TV going.

When I awoke, my dream came flooding into my mind like swirling water through a cracked dam. It was similar to other recent dreams. I was swimming through narrow, rocky passages in an underwater cave. It was a claustrophobic dream, reminding me of reruns of “Sea Hunt”: murky and confining, with only scarce minutes of air remaining.

I hoped it wasn’t too late to drop in downstairs. Even though I’d have to put up with Chuckie boy for the evening, I couldn’t pass over a chance to spend time with Connie. I put on a clean shirt and walked down to her apartment.

Connie liked to have me tell her my dreams. She’d been through so much analysis that she could interpret them without a doubt or hesitation about what they meant. She said my underwater

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dream was a memory of my going through the ordeal of squeezing down the birth canal in a salty sea of amniotic fluid.

I knocked on the door, but there was no answer. The stereo was going, playing Ravel's *Bolero* at chest-whumping volume. Maybe they didn't hear me. I knocked harder and waited.

In the recent dreams, I had been in a frantic sort of panic. I was searching for someone. Connie told me that was a memory of a womb-mate: a sibling who had preceded me into the world. Since I had neither brother nor sister, Connie said it was proof of a previous life's memories coming back to me.

I knocked again, the hallway reverberating with my pounding on the heavy door. I didn't want to tell Connie that the wavering figure I was trying to reach in my dream was my sister. I'm not even sure how I knew that, but I knew she would make a big deal about it, so I never told her.

I turned the doorknob finally; it was unlocked. I peered around the door and went in. Two wine glasses sat on the coffee table, an empty bottle beside them.

"Connie?" I called. Abruptly, an image flashed to me from my latest dream. The shimmering figure I had been pursuing down the narrow corridors of the submerged cave was Connie. I had watched her swimming gracefully on ahead, always out of reach, her arms at her side, her legs scissoring lithely up and down, her black hair flowing behind her like wave-stroked kelp. I imagined I was a fish, chasing those tender little toes into the light.

"Connie?" I called again. There was still no answer. I inched along the dim corridor. "Connie? Still up for that game of?" I nudged the door aside.

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The music, which was approaching its rhythmic climax, should have tipped me off, but it didn't. My brain felt water-logged. I should've known better.

Connie and Chuck were making love; at least that's what it first looked like. Neither of them noticed me; I froze still.

Connie was suspended in a sort of leather harness, dangling in the pulley contraption I noted earlier. She was just inches above Chuck, her legs straight and her arms outstretched, hovering like a naughty angel.

Chuck lay flat on his back, his cock standing like a monolith on a barren plain. In his right hand he held the rope attached to the pulley. With swift, jerking motions of his wrist, he minutely raised and lowered Connie above him. Up and down, up and down she went; in and out, in and out went the prick's cock in 3/4 time, with the rhythm of his wrist. Chuck moaned. The bolero ground on like a runaway engine with a bent driveshaft.

I had to laugh. The jerk was just jerking off. Connie was his handy hand replacement, that's all.

Chuck heard my laugh and turned his head sideways. I couldn't see Connie's face for all the hair dangling down in front of it.

"You bastard!" Chuck hollered. He tumbled out of bed, letting go of the rope. Connie fell flat on her face onto the mattress. Chuck's erection collapsed like a felled tree. He stood up to confront me.

"You stupid little fucker," he said. "Come here."

"Don't worry," I said. "I'm going."

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“Not before I throw you out, you dumb fuck.”

Connie followed us down the hallway, but she had reached the end of her tether. “Don’t you hurt him,” she said. I wasn’t sure which of us she was talking to. “Charles, let go of him. I invited him down. It’s my fault.”

Chuck let go of my belt, but retained his grip on my collar. He swung around to Connie. “You what? I knew there was something going on between you two. You whore,” he said, yanking back his arm and hauling off at her. He hit Connie so hard she fell against the wall and slumped to the floor. I wriggled loose.

A coiled spring of instinct released somewhere inside me. I pounced on Chuck’s bare back and brought him to the floor with a heavy, sack-of-potatoes thud. I thought I heard the cracking of ribs or floor boards. The wind was knocked out of him so forcefully he gasped for air, groaning with the painful effort of breathing. If he’d still had his hard-on, I would’ve nailed him to the floor.

I got up and, stepping over him, helped Connie to her feet. She was damp and she trembled with sobbing. Her cheekbone had already taken on the excited color of an impending bruise. I unbuckled the leather harness, my fingers tingling wherever they touched her skin. I got her robe and she quickly gathered a bundle of clothes in her arms. Connie stepped over Chuck on the way out; I stepped *on* him.

“Nobody treats my... my friend that way,” I said. I had almost said “my sister”, but caught myself in time. Connie’s mumbo-jumbo was beginning to invade my head, swirling around in my thoughts like the dark waters in a murky cave.

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Connie and I sat in my living room, drinking coffee and talking until nearly two o'clock. "I should have seen how Charles was treating me," she said, "but maybe I just didn't want to know. It's too close. My father was contemptuous of women, too. I've come to expect it."

Her ideas twanged with the brutish accents of Victorian Vienna.

We decided Connie would take the bedroom and I would sleep on the sofa. Tomorrow we would get the rest of her things from Chuck's apartment.

She hugged me before turning in, adding a modest peck on the cheek. "I have to thank you for standing by me like that," she said. "You stuck up for me like a big brother would have. You're my big brother now, the one man I can always rely on."

"Thanks," I said, returning her kiss in a brotherly way. "See you in the morning."

At last I had got Connie in my bed; too bad I wasn't there to partake in the pleasure. When the lumpy sofa finally permitted me to drift off to sleep, I returned to the underwater cave where I encountered a barracuda with our father's smirking face.