

SIX

“Did you ever want to fuck my Mom?” Melanie asked.

“Sure,” I said. “Our childhood wasn’t that abnormal.”

“Do you think Mom ever wanted to fuck you?”

“Yeah, at least she said she’d like to.”

“So, did you?”

“Uh... hold on a minute, Melanie. I think your boyfriend’s choking. He looks kind of purplish.”

“My God! Rick!” Melanie screamed. She tipped over her chair running to him.

Rick clutched his throat. Melanie tried to pull him up out of his chair, holding him beneath his arms, but she couldn’t lift him.

“Unc, do something!”

I pushed Melanie out of the way and hauled Rick out of his chair, holding him around the waist. I clamped both my fists over his abdomen and pulled him roughly against me, forcing my fists deep into his stomach. Nothing happened. I was having trouble holding him up. I again thrust my fists into his abdomen, harder.

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With a popping noise like a wine bottle being uncorked, a little cherry tomato shot out of Rick's mouth and bounced across the heirloom tablecloth. He coughed like a consumptive who smokes Camels. Melanie took his other arm and we set him down in his chair.

"Water," he gasped.

Melanie filled his goblet. I cautioned her to remove the ice cubes. "We've had enough theatrics for one evening," I said.

Melanie shot me a reproving look and fished the ice cubes out with her fingers. Rick swallowed noisily. His color was returning.

"How about a little brandy?" I asked him.

Rick nodded. I filled a small snifter and set the bottle in front of him.

"So, to answer your question, Melanie..."

"Are you OK, Rick?"

"Yeah, fine. Really."

"Maybe candor at a family dinner upsets him," I suggested. "Maybe we should discuss the weather. Politics? Gay marriage? There are all sorts of irrelevant things to discuss."

"Talk about whatever you want," Rick said.

"OK," I replied. I turned to face Melanie. "No, your mother and I never screwed one another."

I saw Melanie glance quickly at Rick, probably to make sure he didn't have something in his mouth, before asking her next question. "Why not? I mean, if it was something you both wanted?"

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“We wanted something deeper. We needed intimacy; we needed to get inside of and around one another more than a few measly inches. We each lacked something the other had. Maybe it’s a peculiarity of twins of the opposite sex. We wanted to be whole. We were sick of feeling like half-persons in search of our other halves, ruined in love because of...”

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. . .An Accident of Birth

Connie and I sat in the airport lounge watching the colorful swirl of people and fabrics all around us. Having time to kill at a busy terminal makes you feel like you're from another age or another planet. Everyone else seems so stern-browed in their determination, hauling baggage and pushing carts. It is easy to make fun of them.

"Do you remember the games we used to play as kids, going on summer vacation?" she asked.

"Of course I do," I replied, taking a sip of my martini and carefully setting the glass back on its paper napkin. "How about *Counting Crows*?" I asked. "Or *Adding License Plate Numbers*? Or *Objects of the Alphabet*?"

Connie smiled, but it was an abstract smile, faraway. I knew what she was thinking: that it would be kind of silly for two adults to be playing those games now, even as a means to assuage their nervousness about flying. She had moved up to games of a more philosophic bent, like *Why Am I Sad?*

"I know," she said. "Let's play *Why Am I Sad?* All right?"

"Fine. You first." I took another sip of my astringent martini. "The fifth white male with a knapsack," I suggested.

We counted.

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The young man strode past with an awkward gait: all motion with no grace of movement. He looked as though he would trip over his lower lip.

“He just had an argument with his rock band and he was outnumbered. They gave him the boot, and now he’s going to visit an old chum in hopes of starting up a new band.”

“Oh, come on,” Connie chided, wagging her head. “You’re so outmoded, you’re lucky it’s not painful. You’d be screaming in agony. Long hair and tattered jeans don’t make anyone a rock musician. Do you recall how lumbering his walk was? There’s not a musical bone in his body. Try again.”

“You’re right,” I admitted. “OK. His girlfriend, or boyfriend for all I know, has broken up with him. He’s going back home to lick his wounds and start over.”

“Better,” Connie said. “But he’s much too self-absorbed to have a lover who could disappoint him. You’re right about his going home, though. Mom and Dad want to see how he’s making out at the university before they fork over any more dough. This is an inspection visit, and that’s why he looks so glum. He wants to rebel, but he also knows you don’t bite the hand that’s feeding you unless you’re prepared to work your way through college at minimum wage. He’ll accede, of course, and be miserable for the rest of his life. If he’s lucky, the plane will crash.”

“You’re right,” I said, conceding the first round to her. We had never had a single argument over *Why Am I Sad?* We knew instantly which of us was right. I just didn’t like keeping score, having to admit Connie was right more often than I. Connie knew about my tender male ego and never kept the tally too strictly.

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“All right,” she said. “Round two: the fourth unaccompanied female with a flower on her person or somewhere in evidence among her things.”

“I’d like to order another drink first,” I said. “Are you having anything?”

“No, and I wish you’d refrain from having any more alcohol. We’re going to be twelve hours out of synch as it is. Do you really want to be even more disoriented? Didn’t you read any of the articles on jet-lag I clipped for you? Alcohol is the first taboo.”

“But you know how nervous flying makes me. Would you prefer me pliant or wound up in knots?”

“Pliant and sober,” she insisted. “Besides, the weather report said it would be over ninety degrees with high humidity in Bangkok. You’re begging to get sick, if you ask me.”

“Are you pulling rank on me, Sis?” I asked.

“If I have to, yes. And don’t call me that if you expect me to be in an agreeable humor during this trip. There she went, number four.”

“No fair. I didn’t know we’d started. How about a beer?”

“You may have one beer.”

I motioned the cocktail waitress with the swaying hips and long, slender legs over to our table. I ordered my beer. Connie asked for another glass of ice water. I watched the tied bow of the waitress’ lacy apron bounce from side to side as she returned to the bar.

“Forget it,” Connie said. “I know what you’re thinking. Don’t even bother getting her phone number. We won’t have the slightest interest in her upon our return from Thailand.”

“How do we know we won’t?” I asked.

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Connie smiled. It was not her vague, reminiscent smile, but rather the sly, omniscient variety, which she used sparingly to great effect. I feared she would be right.

I sipped my beer slowly, to make it last. We found our fourth woman; she had a bunch of roses sticking out of a brown paper shopping bag. We agreed she'd bought the flowers at a curbside concession to adorn her efficiency apartment as a reward for getting through the dental hygienists' convention without allowing herself to be seduced by a man with an imperfect smile.

Connie won this round, too.

We continued to play our game during the first hours of the long flight, but with lapsing interest. We started a game of *Who's That Cloud?* recognizing Sir John Gielgud and our old high school principal, Mrs. Doody, before heading into the sunrise and beyond, back into darkness. In the desperation of boredom, I eventually fell asleep over southern Africa.

My sister had learned enough short Thai phrases to impress our cabbie and our porter at the hotel. The Thai were a naturally polite people and did not have to be shamed into civility, but Connie hoped to bridge their aloof wariness of strangers. She succeeded with them to a small degree, thereby increasing my feeling of uselessness. I was excess baggage.

Connie insisted we stay awake until local bedtime. She dragged me to an open-air market, even though I did not feel well. The air was oppressive. Within minutes I was soaked in perspiration down to my socks. The aroma of rich, seldom-encountered spices hung on the motionless air. I had begun to feel queasy. Somewhere in that jumble of cabbages and iPhones and black-market

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cigarettes, my dear sister found the familiar cobalt blue bottle. The Bromo-Seltzer settled my mind as well as my stomach, though I fretted the tiny bottle in my sweaty hands until the label wore off.

I was in a nasty disposition by the time we returned to our hotel room. I found the air conditioning not cold enough, the bath towels too small for Western bodies, and room service to be excruciatingly slow. All that waiting for a lukewarm bottle of Coke and a soggy fish sandwich.

“Must you complain constantly?” Connie remarked.

“I’m not complaining. But we wouldn’t have to be going through all this if our own government weren’t so backward about these things,” I said. “We could have been in our own beds instead of traveling halfway around the world. But that’s the good old U. S. of A. for you. We’re at the forefront of everything that doesn’t matter, a bunch of decadent Puritans running everything else.”

“Oh, cut it out, will you,” Connie said. “I didn’t come halfway around the planet to listen to your bitching.”

I slumped into the low-backed chair. Nothing was comfortable in this miserable little country. I watched Connie take out her full-color travel brochures again, playing with them like a deck of cards in solitaire, laying them out on the bedspread.

“You know,” she said, “according to the map, I don’t think Angkor Wat could be more than about two-hundred-and-fifty miles from here. It’s just over the border.”

“I doubt we’ll have time. Anyway, you can go if you want, but I’m staying put,” I said, sinking deeper into the chair.

“You’re forgetting, dear brother, that after the operation, we’ll be doing everything together.”

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“You’re right. I keep forgetting. But maybe we won’t want to go traipsing off. There’re plenty of local sites, the royal temple and all. What’s it called again?”

“Wat Phra Keo, the Temple of the Emerald Buddha. But I still want to see Angkor Wat and I’m going to do my best to keep that part of me.”

“We’ll see,” I said. “We’ll just have to wait and see.”

At last it was bedtime. We chatted with the lights out, just as we had as children. Connie fell asleep with the brochures still scattered across her bed. As I dozed off, I heard them fall softly to the floor, one by one. It had the sound of memories being discarded.

During the next two days, Connie got us out and around. I had to admit it was better than moping in the hotel room and entertaining second thoughts about the operation. We spent an entire afternoon at the Wat Arun, a modest temple in the city of Bangkok itself. We traveled there by way of the canals. It was definitely not Venice. The grass-thatched houses were all built up on stilts, like dainty women lifting their skirts to negotiate the muddy puddles of the Chao Phraya River.

I remarked to Connie that, for a country so enlightened about matters of sex, its architecture was predominantly phallic.

“Don’t you ever get tired of seeing penises everywhere?” she asked.

“Actually, yes,” I said. “But it’s not my idea. It’s Freud’s.”

“Freud is dead,” she said, and turned to chat with the boatman, a perpetually smiling gondolier in a conical straw hat, baggy pants held up with a length of rope, and rubber sandals.

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Connie and I checked into the Radha-Krishna Clinic on Thursday. I still found it curious that a Buddhist country would name its most famous clinic after Hindu deities. The name struck me as odd and anomalous, like calling a kindergarten *The King Herod Day Care Center*. Connie told me I was just fishing for excuses to get cold feet. She was probably right.

We were pestered for the next three days by doctors and technicians who subjected us to every test and analysis imaginable. In our spare moments, which were not many, we were invited to meet with three other patients who had undergone the sex-merge operation. All three were northern Europeans. Their English wasn't bad. A fourth patient joined us later, an American who had as yet to undergo his operation. He introduced himself as Charles Swan, from Terre Haute, Indiana. Since he had no female companion, I asked him what he was in for.

"*Diphallia terata*," he said, leaning back in his chair at the round table at which we had gathered. "PD...penile duplication. I have two penises," he explained.

"That's a problem?" I asked, looking around to the others to see if the joke had been understood. Connie kicked me under the table.

"Yes, it is," Charles Swan said solemnly. "I'm here to have one of them removed. The trouble is, I can't decide which one."

The others around the table nodded or wagged their heads sadly. What a terrible dilemma. I didn't have the slightest sympathy for him.

"Why don't you just play *Eenie Meenie Minie Moe*?" Connie suggested. I was ready to kick her. The Europeans simply looked baffled. I expected them to ask for an explanation. Charles Swan slapped his forehead and grinned stupidly.

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“Why didn’t *I* think of that?” he exclaimed. “It’s so simple, really. That’s probably why it didn’t occur to me. Thanks, Connie. God, what a relief! I’ve been going nuts over this dilemma. What a great idea!”

Connie blushed at the effusive compliments to her cleverness. Charles Swan flapped up out of his chair and scudded across the room, announcing to the attendants that he needed to see a doctor immediately.

After our fellow American’s great, honking outburst, it was difficult to resume our more demure conversation with the androgynous Europeans. Connie’s and my questions returned repeatedly, under one guise or another, to what it felt like to be a hermaphrodite, not in a physical sense, which we could pretty well imagine, but in the psychic sense: how one’s outlook would be altered by being able to see the entire spectrum. Did you still feel like yourself?

“Yes and no,” was the general response. The Europeans took us to the edge of the horizon, but what lay in the valley beyond was obscured in the fog of a language inadequate to the task of describing anything whole.

The doctors reached their decision regarding Connie and me over the weekend. They normally retained most of the male frame in such pairings because of its slightly greater strength and sturdiness, appending the female features: the breasts and vagina, uterus and ovaries. But the doctors did not care for the condition of my heart, and they took a positive dislike to the state of my liver. It was decided to employ Connie’s body as the basis of our union, rather than causing further stress and chancing greater risk in transplanting her heart and liver into my body.

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The thought of my penis leaving me, even if only for a brief time, caused me some distress, but the doctors assured me it was the right choice. I had to assume they knew what they were doing. We had the example of the three healthy, happy Europeans.

Oddly, the microscopic slicing and sandwiching of our brains, forming one brain out of the two, troubled me less. But I had gotten used to the idea that the penis and the vagina were the organs that defined gender. That couldn't have been further from the truth. The researchers at the Radha-Krishna Institute had concluded that it was all in the mind. Their brain-layering technique was the centerpiece of the sex-merge operation. Their expertise in this field, banned even as research in North America, was the sole reason we had traveled to Thailand.

The night before our scheduled operation, Connie and I sat in our little room playing poker, reassuring one another by enumerating our reasons for going through with it. We were trying to exorcize our doubts. After all, each of our best friends had told us we were completely nuts. It was hard to convince ourselves they could all be wrong.

"You just have to keep reminding yourself of what the alternative is," Connie said, sounding very sure of herself. I supposed that was on account of her having won the last three hands.

"I'd have thought you'd be fed up with all these dead-end relationships by now," she went on. "Face it, you don't really understand women any better than I understand men. Yet we get along perfectly with one another."

"Being twins helps," I said. "I mean, we don't even have to wonder most of the time what the other is thinking."

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“So, don’t you think it’d be nice to get along that way with everybody? *I* sure do.”

“Yeah, I guess so. No more ‘gaping gender chasm filled with misunderstandings.’ Who said that anyway?”

“I did, little brother, remember? You had just split up with Charlene.”

“Don’t remind me. I hope that’s one of the slices of my brain they leave out.”

“Well, it’ll all be over with after tomorrow. Now get some sleep. We want to be fresh in the morning, don’t we?”

I turned out the light. Connie was already snoring. I fell asleep holding on to my penis, cradling it as tenderly as I once did my scruffy Teddy bear. Connie never could figure out why I’d hung on to Brownie as long as I did, until he had practically fallen apart from love.

The last thing I recalled before the anesthesiologist descended on us with the clear face masks and corrugated hoses was that I was lying on one of the side-by-side stainless steel operating tables and Connie was on the other, hyperventilating almost hysterically, gulping in the sleep-inducing gas. We were holding hands, my right and her left; I gave her hand a squeeze to reassure her, and that was the last thing I remembered of the monstrous deformity of being exiles in separate minds and bodies.

This is now the last week of my recovery. The psychologists have been testing my memory. Everything seems fine to me. If a certain memory was sliced out during the operation, it’s just not there, and it does not trouble me. Nor do I puzzle any longer over why I was once called a “fraternal

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twin”. Why not “sororal twins”? After all, my Connie half was born first. But it does not matter. I am one.

I have decided to travel to Angkor Wat next week. The young boatman who took me around Bangkok has agreed to be my tour guide. His wife is a nurse at the Clinic and would be coming along to look after me, though the doctors do not expect any late-developing complications. The boatman and his wife, Khuang and Doi Pia, are looking forward to the trip as a vacation.

I have no plans after that. I have no desire to return to America, the land of my exile, and live among the decadent Puritans. I shall stay here, for Siam is my ancient homeland, the place of my birth.

I shall place my hands on the profusely ornamented phallic spires of the temple of Angkor Wat and explore the cool, dark recesses of the inner chambers. We shall smile to myself, for I, too, am of singular architecture and unity of design. Like the half male, half female representation of Shiva guarding one of the portals, I am an emblem of the indissoluble unity of the creative force.

I will braid one of the jungle vines encrusting the ancient temple in my hair and dance Shiva’s dance to the end of the world, the world that has brought all separateness into being. It will be a new game to play: *Who Are We?*