

**EIGHT**

Rick laughed. I supposed it was the punch line of my story he found so amusing, but I felt he was laughing at the whole story, at my entire life.

“I’m glad you find it so humorous,” I said. “But, then, your kind always does.”

“What kind is that?” Rick challenged.

“White Anglo males, *Belacani*,” I said. “You think the world is your plaything, that misery exists solely to provide you entertainment. If you’re a little humbler, you might think the suffering of others is put there as a lesson to you: don’t abdicate your responsibility or you may wind up an unfortunate yourself. Don’t forget, God left you in charge when he stepped out to lunch. You keep reminding the rest of us about the burden of your responsibility. You’re so self-absorbed you don’t even...”

“Can I say something?” Rick interrupted. “Maybe you better check your mirror. You look like a white male to me.”

“It’s a disguise,” I said. “Camouflage. It lets me travel among the powerful elite and see what they’re up to. Inside, I’m a little African goatherd who just found her last kid at the bottom of the wadi, the vultures picking out its eyes.”

“That’s really touching, but I think you put on an act to gain sympathy,” Rick said, swirling his wine glass. “We’ve all suffered,” he announced.

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“And what great misery have you borne? Daddy wouldn’t let you have the red Porsche until you maintained a C grade average?”

“Rick’s suffered, too, Unc,” Melanie said.

“Then let him tell me about it. Just sit down, Melanie. I’ll clear the table. Maybe this blond Neanderthal here expects a woman to wait on him hand and foot, but I don’t.”

“I don’t either,” Rick said. “But what can I say or do that’ll change your mind anyway? You don’t think I’m good enough for Melanie.”

“That’s probably true, but I don’t know that yet. Unlike you, I like to defer my judgment until all the evidence is in. So what did you suffer, Rick? You can tell me.”

Rick resumed playing with his napkin, folding it up tighter than an origami alligator.

“My dad yelled at me a lot. And my mom was drunk most of the time, so she never knew what was going on. Dad knocked her around. I’d find her out cold, and she’d tell me she’d fallen down the stairs. I sort of liked school, but I couldn’t make friends. We were always getting kicked out of the apartment; all the noise and hollering. My dad locked me out a lot, too, sometimes for a week.”

“Did you ever think of getting back at them?”

“What?” Rick asked.

“You heard me. Did you ever want to pay them back for all the damage they did to you?”

“No. I guess I probably deserved most of it.”

“Ah, spoken like a true victim. Then let me tell you about getting even, about plotting...”

**. . .The Revenge of the Innocents**

In our third decade, when it became painfully obvious our lives were not turning out as we had planned, my sister and I held a late-night marathon playing *Scrabble* and drinking red, white, and Chablis wine while we fixed the blame on the obvious culprits responsible for our directionless lives: our parents.

“Yeah, who else but them?” Connie said, flinging down a fistful of unused *Xs* and *Ws* and *Qs* without *Us*. “No doubt about it. They fucked us up real good. If a man treats me decent—not up on a pedestal, just decent, like I was a real person—then I can’t figure him out, or what he’s after. And you! Jeeze, I don’t mean to laugh, but you’re so shy around women you’re like the crust on a delicate soufflé: a little vibration and you collapse into this doughy, half-baked mess. Really. It’s painful to watch you around women.”

I couldn’t hide my displeasure at the accuracy of her observation. I knew she hadn’t said it to get back at me for pithy remarks I’d made about the curse of her own life: men who gave her black eyes and bruised cheekbones, but it hurt all the same.

Connie and I were close enough to one another to see what was wrong in the other’s life, but too close to our own similar problems to do other than stay awake until two in the morning complaining and getting drunk on wine that comes in four-liter bottles.

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“We’ve got to get even with them,” Connie said, finally. “We’re not going to feel better about ourselves and get on with our lives until we have our revenge on Mom and Dad: until we put them out of our misery.”

I stared blankly at Connie. She was right of course, but I was astounded that she had put into words what I rarely allowed myself to even think. We each had libraries full of self-help books we were continually loaning one another, all of them reaching the same useless conclusion that we were really OK after all. We were not OK. My sister and I traded analysts and therapists and groups like kids trading baseball cards, so taken up with collecting and trading that the bubblegum got to be beside the point. I decided she was right. The time had come to do something a step beyond the endlessly redundant and recursive introspection that had tangled our lives in hopeless knots.

“Murder?” I asked. The mixing of different kinds of wines had formed clots in my loopy thinking. I couldn’t be sure I wasn’t serious about the suggestion.

“No, not murder,” Connie said, compulsively sorting the wooden tiles alphabetically before dumping them all in the dilapidated *Scrabble* box. “Murder would put them out of *their* misery, not ours. No, we have to get back at them, and we wasted so much time already. Statistically, we’ve got about fifty to sixty years of misery left to us. The most we can inflict on them is ten to fifteen, if we’re lucky. We’re going to have to cram a lot of pain into so short a span to even come close to repaying them. We better get started right away.”

“You know, you’re right, Connie. You’re absolutely right,” I said, tapping down the taped-up lid of the game with the precise, affirmative gesture of Oliver Hardy.

Connie scratched the crown of her head. “Any ideas?”

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“Well, it’s got to involve internal bleeding,” I said. “Slow, silent, and unseen until it’s too late. They still hope we’ll turn out OK. It’s got to involve their hope. We’ve got to smash it.”

“...and stomp on it...”

“...and break up the pieces...”

“...and scatter the dust,” Connie added with finality.

We began a primeval, heavy-footed dance around the coffee table, like natives beseeching the flat, arid sky for rain. It was our rain dance. No, it was our Pain Dance, to appease and placate our inner tormentors. We picked up the pace of our frenzied dance until the empty glasses tottered on the edge of the table. She and I raced in circles like caged beasts chasing our own tails, prancing and stomping until our limbs felt too heavy to move, as though restrained by the weight of shackles.

Connie and I collapsed on opposite love-seats like the final two scrambling participants in a game of musical chairs. We sipped the rest of the Chablis to make it last and began our scheming. We schemed until dawn, when I covered Connie with one of Grandma’s crooked afghans and crawled off to bed to continue scheming in my dreams. It was such a sweet sleep, the best I’d enjoyed in years.

Connie and I met again after work on Monday to begin implementing our plan. The amber and russet leaves spiralled around us as we sat on the park bench. Neither of us had succumbed to our usual autumn melancholy, brought on by watching yet another year spinning down the drain. We were elated. It felt like springtime.

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“It’s funny none of our therapists suggested getting even with those who fucked us up,” Connie said. “It’s so basic. I feel a hundred percent better already. How about you?”

I nodded, though a plague of rodent-like doubts had begun gnawing at my internal woodwork. I hoped it had been decorated with lead-based paint, for I knew doubt and hesitation would wear down my resolve. I had begun to believe that, plot and scheme as we liked, our parents would be impervious to pain.

Connie and I arrived at our parents’ house for the long Thanksgiving weekend, finding such a setting ominously ironic. Our mother, desperate for grandchildren, had encouraged us to bring along the “significant other” in each of our lives. My sister and I saw this as the opportunity we had been waiting for. That detestable phrase would have provoked us to go out on a limb even if we hadn’t had a score to settle.

I arrived first with Connie’s and my mutual friend, Carlos. He had been coached and knew what to expect. My mother’s expression was priceless. Her lower jaw hung open, unable to assist her in shaping even the rudiments of speech. Her bright red lips formed a perfect O filled with shocked silence.

Carlos, usually thought to be straight by those who didn’t know him better, had jumped at the chance to play to others’ expectations as a blatant and unmistakable queer, especially since it coincided with the progeny-crushing impression I wanted to leave with my parents. He wore several earrings in each lobe, thoroughly garbling any message such adornment might have conveyed. He

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was dressed in a tattered, oversized cable-knit sweater; his long hair was tied back with a beaded Indian headband. His faded jeans were so tight they were nearly subcutaneous.

My mother stood in the doorway like a piece of furniture abandoned for the moment until help could be enlisted to move it where it belonged. Carlos was effusive, kissing my mother warmly and greeting her with his carefully rehearsed lisp and whiny twang. I don't know how I kept from laughing.

When the cool air finally roused my mother to take cognizance of the still open front door, she led Carlos and me to the kitchen. My father sat at the table, hunched over his newspaper. He didn't look at me longer than a moment. His eyes darted immediately to Carlos, taking in every aspect of his clothes and every nuance of his exaggerated mannerisms. He became aware that he had been staring in the same fish-eyed, fish-mouthed manner as my mother and quickly dropped his gaze. He shifted in his seat. The old wooden chair creaked with his discomfort.

My mother put on a pot of coffee and buttered some English muffins. Everything she touched made a clattering or clanging noise, knocking into whatever else was close at hand. My father cleared his throat so often without ever managing to say anything that I gave up on preparing myself for any pronouncement.

My parents spread marmalade on their muffins in abject silence; even Carlos' silly chattering and insincere compliments on everything from the cream for the coffee to the kitchen curtains could not penetrate it. When the doorbell rang, my mother and father nearly ran one another down in their hurry to answer it. It was Connie, their last hope.

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She arrived with her friend, Charles Swan, whom I knew only very slightly. He seemed sullen, giving the impression that this was the last place on the planet he ever hoped to visit. That was, of course, how Connie and I had rehearsed it, but I wondered whether Charles might merely be making use of a natural taciturnity in perfecting his role.

I thought Connie's make-up was a bit overdone, though. She had applied her bluish eye-shadow to her lower eyelid and cheekbone with edges too clearly defined to be altogether convincing, to me anyway, as a black-eye and a bruise. The wounds should have appeared as the smudges of abuse, but instead looked like something confined within the borders of a paint-by-number outline, utterly lacking in subtlety. But subtlety had never been one of our parents' strong suits, and I was counting on their being fooled by the garish caricatures Connie and I had brought home with us.

Charles quickly made himself comfortable in the living room, in Dad's very own chair. He turned on one of the many football games at a deafening volume and bellowed to Connie to hurry up and bring him his six-pack from their car. Connie dashed out without her coat and fetched the beer, setting it before him on the coffee table. Charles took a sip and then held the can up, rotating it slowly as he read the label. Connie took a step back and asked, "Is it all right? Is it the kind you like? I keep forgetting," as she wrung and kneaded her hands. I thought that was a nice touch.

"Yeah, it's fine," Charles said. "Now get out of the way and shut up."

The rest of our stilted conversation had to compete for air-time with the blaring TV set. It was perfect. Dad couldn't even watch his game in peace. He kept getting distracted each time Carlos and I set down the bowl of popcorn and held each other's hands.

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Mom was so flustered she ruined nearly every item and trapping of our traditional Thanksgiving fare. The turkey was thoroughly tasteless and as dry as a week-old biscuit, while the stuffing was soggy. The glazing on the yams had burned to an unappetizing black crust. Dad couldn't even deliver his customary Thanksgiving prayer without stumbling over every other word. The sentiment seemed to get caught in his throat, like a splinter of bone from the desiccated fowl, as though being thankful in the presence of this family was a lie even he couldn't quite pull off.

Connie and I were ecstatic. Everything was just too perfect.

During the long evening after Thanksgiving supper, Charles passed out in the easy chair, but not before delivering a blow to the side of Connie's head for bending down and kissing him right in the middle of a touchdown pass.

Carlos and I raided the liquor cabinet, filled mostly with sherry and brandy, and imbibed to the point of getting the giggles, timing our outbursts to coincide with important plays in the game. Carlos kept remarking on the quarterback's ass and I promptly feigned jealousy. We kissed and made up, causing Dad to miss the outcome of the play.

Connie sat in one of the overstuffed armchairs away in a corner, huddled into herself and sobbing softly. She seemed to sink ever deeper into the cushion.

Mom worked beneath the light of the bridge lamp on one of her many uncompleted afghans. She must have been in a trance because she kept crocheting a single row. The crooked, diamond-shaped afghan acquired a long tail. It looked like she was knitting a kite.

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Charles was left to growl and snuffle in his stuporous sleep on the sofa. Mom brought out two of her half-afghans and covered him. Connie crawled upstairs to her old room. Dad sat mesmerized by the flickering light of the TV.

“I’ll go up and get one of the extra rooms ready for your *friend*,” Mom said, laying aside her crocheted kite.

“Nah, that’s OK, Mom,” I told her. “We sleep together.”

Mom shushed me so Dad wouldn’t overhear. Not having the extra room to prepare, she had nothing to occupy her hands. She kept knitting her fingers together and twisting them apart. “Well, good-night, then,” she said, leaning forward to kiss me. “I’ll be sitting up with your father for a while yet.” She kissed Carlos’ stubbly cheek and made a great effort to smile, but her insincerity twisted it into a grimace.

Carlos and I stumbled up the stairs to my old room. The single bed had been replaced some time ago with a queen-size mattress and frame for the times I would visit with my new bride. I could now check off another dashed hope on my parents’ long list.

With our audience out of earshot, we could now revert to our normal roles. The gaming had gone fine up to that point, but now I faced having to actually sleep with Carlos. I should have accepted some of the extra blankets my mother offered. I could have cocooned myself in them and slept on the floor.

Carlos was undressed and beneath the covers before I even sat down on the edge of the bed. I got entangled in my sweater for a while, and I didn’t know how to get my shoes off. Every time

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I bent forward to untie them my alcohol-saturated blood squirted into the top of my head and the room spun around. I finally just kicked them off and peeled my pants and socks off inside out.

I lay back and tried to steady the spinning bed. My hand grabbed Carlos' thigh. "Sorry," I said. I began slipping and spiraling ever downward into a dark thought I didn't want to consider. I wondered whether I hadn't planned this elaborately orchestrated weekend with the subconscious goal of winding up exactly where I was: in bed with Carlos. Maybe my difficulty with women meant I really had no use for them: that I much preferred the company of men.

Accustomed to the flash of insight that all my therapists regarded as the rearing of truth's ugly head, I accepted the unpleasant conclusion that I was homosexual, and worse off than Carlos because I had chosen to ignore my natural inclinations. I shook Carlos and told him of this revelation into the true nature of my sexuality.

Carlos rolled on his side and propped himself up on one elbow. "You know what, man?" he said. "You're drunk. Now get to sleep so I can sleep."

"No, Carlos, listen. I want you. I'm in love with you," I confessed, resting my hand on his shoulder. My hand tingled and I took that as further evidence.

Carlos laughed. "You don't know what you're talking about, man. You think I don't see what's going on here? Your family's got you feeling so worthless and lonely you'd cozy up to a stinking billygoat right now, just so you wouldn't have to sleep alone. Besides that, you're drunk. Get to sleep and we'll see how queer you are in the morning," he said, removing my hand from his shoulder.

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I grabbed him around the waist and he shoved me away. I entwined my legs around him; he jabbed me in the ribs.

We wrestled, Carlos trying to regain his half of the bed while I tried to occupy that same half with him. He found my ticklish spot just below the ribs and weakened me with laughter. We rolled around and jostled until I thought the bed would collapse. Twice I knocked him out of bed.

At last I conceded the match to him. My head was in no condition to suffer further buffeting. I lay back on my side of the bed, panting.

“Shsh, do you hear that?” Carlos asked.

I listened carefully, in between the pulses of low throbbing in my head. I heard the indistinct murmuring of my parents’ voices wafting up through the heat register. Their room was directly below mine.

“Do you know what that’s gonna sound like to them, man, all this bouncing around in the bed?”

“How many guesses do I get?” I asked.

“Man, I’m not gonna be able to look at them in the morning. They’re gonna kill me with those icy stares of theirs. Shit.”

“Relax, Carlos. It’s not like they weren’t expecting something like this. Let’s get some sleep now, OK?”

“That was my idea all along. This is like the longest weekend of my life. I thought *my* folks were hard to take.”

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Carlos flopped back onto his pillow, letting out a long, slow sigh. I smiled until my face hurt, lulling myself to sleep with the thought of the racket and rumbling that must have cascaded down into my parents' bedroom. I wondered if they'd ever be able to get to sleep.

We all spent the Friday after Thanksgiving in much the same way except that now we had leftovers at every meal. Mom seemed a little less cheerful and Dad didn't hitch even two words together. Charles got an earlier start on his drinking and Carlos swished and wiggled a little less, probably figuring no one would notice his diminished efforts now that his identity was fixed.

Connie went out to get more beer for Charles. I decided to go with her, leaving Mom and Dad to entertain our significant others. It was a cruel trick to play on our friends, but Connie and I needed to work out a few details for the next evening's performance.

We wandered around the supermarket as though trying to recall what had brought us there, hoping the sight of the object would jog our memory.

"Charles really hates beer, you know," Connie said. "Think Mom and Dad will notice if I bring him near-beer?"

"They might," I said. "You're the one who's always fetching his beer from the kitchen, right? Why not just pour most of it out?"

"Good idea. How are things going with you and Carlos?"

"What do you mean by that?" I asked.

"What should I mean? A gay and a straight sharing the same bed has got to be a little uncomfortable for somebody."

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“We’re doing just fine. Sorry, I didn’t mean to get so defensive. It’s just that I made a pass at Carlos last night.”

Connie laughed aloud, turning heads up and down the aisle. “You were pretty blitzed last night. God, I’m beginning to wonder if this is worth it. Wait. Over here. I’ve got to pick up more eye-shadow.”

“You wonder if what’s worth it?” I asked.

“Oh, just if getting back at Mom and Dad is worth losing our friends. We’re expecting a lot from Charles and Carlos. Maybe we better cut it a day short and have the big blow-out tonight.”

“Yeah, I think you’re right. Come on, we better not leave them with Mom and Dad too long. We don’t want our friends as screwed up as we are.”

Connie purposely brought back the wrong brand of beer for Charles. That was two strikes against her right there, one to each side of the head. As she wept and Charles bellowed, I ran to Connie’s defense, knocking Charles out cold on the kitchen floor just as Mom was trying to re-heat leftovers for lunch. I ministered to Connie’s wounds with a washcloth caked with eye-shadow. My soothing and petting of my dear sister became indecent and highly eroticized, causing Carlos to spin into a rage of whimpering jealousy. Amid all the crying and hollering, Mom dropped her favorite casserole dish, and Dad was obliged to look up from his paper and take notice of the commotion swirling around him and rattling the coffee cups.

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Charles was sent packing the minute he came to and Carlos left in a huff, during which he accused me of being a closet heterosexual.

Connie and I decided to pull out all the stops at supper. Mom became overconfident, thinking that her family had settled into its normal routine, and Dad had reclaimed his patriarchal chair at the head of the table. It was perfect. They left themselves wide open for the assault to follow.

My sister and I began stroking and caressing and feeding one another like newlyweds oblivious to the world around them. We kissed between each mouthful. I fondled her pert little breasts and she massaged my crotch. We soon wound up on the floor.

“For Christ’s sake, cut it out,” Dad hollered. “She’s your sister.”

We brushed one another off and returned to our chairs. Connie soon jumped into my lap and we began our routine all over again.

“Maybe you two better go up to your rooms,” Dad said. Mom hadn’t uttered a sound since our first outburst of passion; she continued to stir her empty coffee cup.

“My room’s so drafty,” Connie said. “Mind if I sleep with you?” she asked me, coyly fluttering her eyelids.

“I was hoping you’d say that. Oh, Connie,” I sighed, “you’re the only woman I’d ever be able to make love to. I guess I’ve always known that.”

“And you’re the only man I’ve ever known who treats me like I’m not just a piece of meat. We’re made for each other.”

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Arm in arm, Connie and I started out of the kitchen. When we reached the doorway we wheeled around and I said to Mom and Dad, “You two might be getting your wish for grandchildren after all. We’d be embracing *real* family values. You couldn’t get any closer as a family than that.”

When we reached my room, we wasted no time in pouncing on the bed. We bounced up and down as we had when we were kids, only this time we did it simultaneously and more slowly, in order to suggest a certain rhythm. We laughed and giggled and moaned with the ache in our sides.

I told Connie of a new insight I was getting: that maybe we had really engineered all this just for the chance to crawl into bed with one another.

“Don’t be ridiculous. You think too much, you know that? You swallowed all that psychological gobbledygook and now it’s coming up on you. I think our shrinks should be the next ones we get even with. Christ, we can’t make a move without suspecting that everything serves some other purpose.”

“Maybe you’re right,” I said. “Got any ideas?”

“We’ll think of something. How about a game of *Scrabble*?”

Connie returned with the battered box she had packed in her luggage. We set the board up in the center of the mattress and sat cross-legged at the head and foot, scheming to the detriment of our therapists. Connie got extra points and won the first game by adding “t-h-e” to the beginning of “rapist,” already on the board, to form “therapist.” We enjoyed another round of side-aching laughter.

At dawn, Connie went off to her own room. I fell asleep easily and deeply.

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We discovered at breakfast that Mom and Dad had never stirred from their places at the dining room table. They stared straight ahead, neither blinking nor flinching as we pretended to throw things at them. We had breakfast out in the dining room, amusing ourselves by hurling horrible insults at the wooden blocks who were our parents. As I cleared away the dishes, Connie went scouting around for one of her old psychology texts.

“What are you going to look up?” I asked.

“Catatonia.”

Before we left, we asked a neighbor to look in on Mom and Dad later, explaining that something hadn't agreed with them and voicing our concern. We drove home in the jolliest of moods. Connie and I realized we had lost our innocence as victims, but considered it a small sacrifice to a greater good.