

NINE

“That was cruel,” Melanie said, her last word stretched out to cover a giggle. “Did you and Mom really do that to Grandma and Grandpa?”

“Do you think I’m making up a bunch of stories?” I asked, sounding offended.

Melanie and Rick looked at one another. They seemed afraid to signal what they thought with any gesture more active than the movement of their eyes, as though, scratching their noses at an auction, they might wind up buying something. They were afraid of buying my stories.

“Everything I’ve told you is the truth. I may not have it exactly right in the picayune details, but it’s all true, even the fabrications.”

Rick laughed, quickly losing his grin when he saw his easy dismissal had piqued me.

“Ask Melanie,” I told him. “Melanie, have I portrayed anyone in a way that grates against your memory of them?”

“No.”

“Have I suggested anything they might have done that would go against the grain of their characters?”

“No, Unc.”

“Have I said anything you know to be untrue?”

“No, Unc, but...”

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“Are you worried Rick might be getting a wrong impression of our family?”

“Yeah,” she said. “Kind of. I think you’ve made them out to be a whole lot nicer than they actually are.”

Melanie and I had a good laugh. Rick, who had been following our verbal tennis match, seemed startled by the upset victory.

“Let’s play a game,” Melanie suggested. “How about *Scrabble*?”

“It figures you’d say that. You always win,” I complained. “I think you got it from your mother.”

“She never let’s me win, either,” Rick grouched.

“I’d better soak these dishes,” I said. “You go get the board set up. Put on some music, too.”

I cleared the table and set the dishes in hot, soapy water. The tomato sauce had begun to congeal like dried blood. When I went out to the living room, Melanie had the *Scrabble* board and letter racks set up on the coffee table. She and Rick sat on the floor on pillows.

I opened another bottle of Chianti and brought out fresh glasses. Melanie had lit a stick of incense and turned on a lamp. There was just enough light to make out the letters on the little wooden tiles. She’d put on one of my favorite records of Baroque harpsichord music. It was one of Connie’s favorites, too. The shadows crowded in like ghosts.

Rick bobbed and swayed to one of the livelier pieces, playing the edge of the coffee table with slightly inebriate panache. “I really like that one,” he said. “Who’s the composer?”

“Francois Couperin,” I replied. “It’s called *Les Barricades Mysterieuses*, or...”

. . .The Mysterious Walls

Although we lived less than two miles apart along a bus route, I hadn't heard from my sister all summer. She'd dissolved from the daily-traveled paths of my consciousness during that lapse, so I was expecting anyone on the other end of the phone but Connie. She didn't usually call me at work. As was her style, she didn't waste a minute getting to the point.

"Charles is going out of town for the next three or four days so I was wondering..."

"If I would come over and spend the next three or four nights with you."

"Yeah," she said.

"You could have given me a little more notice."

"I only found out myself; you know Charles. We had an argument, so I don't know if he's really got business in Atlanta and just forgot to tell me until the last minute, or whether he's got something else up his sleeve."

"More likely it's squirming around in his pants," I said.

"Stop it. When are you two ever going to get along? Do you realize what an uncomfortable position that puts me in, always playing referee to a couple of scrappy boys?"

"Hey, I'm not the one that told *him* never to set foot in the house when I was around."

"Look, let's not go into that again. Are you coming over or aren't you?"

Her voice shook. Still, I hadn't outgrown a brother's habit of taunting his sister.

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“What if I had plans?” I asked.

“You? What plans could you possibly have on a weekend?”

“I like that. What if I had a date or something?”

“That’d be great. I’d tell you to bring her along and let me meet her. Do you really have a date?”

“No.”

“Then what’s all this ‘what if’ crap? Get your butt over here.”

“When does Chuck’s flight leave?”

“Five o’clock. Don’t forget how early it gets dark this time of year.”

“I’ll be there. Just get a bottle of wine and dust off the board games. I’ll be over right after work.”

I wasn’t pleased with myself for giving in to her so readily again, but at least I’d suggested I might have something else to do than play nursemaid. I’ve been accommodating myself to her fear of being alone in the house after dark for so long that I hardly question it anymore. All these adjustments everyone else has to make to her problem seem so extravagant. It would be more frugal if she just got over her fear.

I guess I shouldn’t be so hard on Connie. It’s not as though she hasn’t tried. She’s been in therapy of one sort or another since we were in our early teens. And yet every recent scourge that’s raised welts on her psyche—her best friend’s dying in a fiery car crash last winter and Charles’ beating her up, for instance—only appear to heal. I’m no shrink, but it seems to me all her other

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problems just get swallowed up by her fear of being alone in the house after dark. Everything else goes away after a while, but that one keeps getting bigger and more outrageous.

I'm just her little brother, but only by about five minutes. We're twins. And maybe I can't help her, but I still want to protect her from whatever scares her. I can't help it. That's the other part of a brother's shtick. But every so often I get wigged out when I think of how close we are; we even finish sentences for one another. If Connie's really as nutty as she seems sometimes, can I be that far behind? —only five minutes from madness.

I was dredging up all this stuff when I should've finished up at my desk before the weekend, so I wasn't able to knock off early like I'd hoped. I had just enough time to get to my apartment and pack a change of clothes and make it to Connie's house before the sun went down.

I didn't even get my finger poised to ring the doorbell before Connie swung the door open and I nearly fell inside. Her reddened face was streaked with the half-dried trails of tears. I also noticed a couple of fresh purplish bruises on her cheekbone.

"I thought you weren't coming," she said, gulping the final deep sob of what must have been a long, hard cry. I took her in my arms and let her rest her head against my chest. She trembled.

"You know I'm coming if I said I was, silly. I'd never do that to you. Friday evening traffic's a bitch. Got that drink ready for me?"

Connie nodded, which in our positions meant she rubbed her ear against my collarbone.

"I like listening to your voice come from deep inside," she said. "I don't care about the words; I just like the sound of it."

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She went to the kitchen while I went in the bedroom to change. I couldn't stand to be in a suit and tie a minute longer than I had to. I got into a favorite pair of jeans and an old gray sweatshirt and chucked the black dress shoes for a beat-up pair of moose-hide moccasins. I felt like myself again.

I always felt like myself around Connie. What I needed was to find another woman I could hang loose around besides my sister.

Connie set two chilled glasses of Chablis on the coffee table. With her legs tucked beneath her in her favorite old chair—the one Charles kept threatening to call the Salvation Army about—she leaned forward and set up the board, picking out seven letters for each of us.

“What’s got you this time?” I asked. “I thought you’d gotten used to the new house.”

“It’s the wallpaper,” she said. “It really gives me the willies.”

“Is that the new paper Charles ordered all the way from Cambodia or some place?”

“Thailand.”

“I kind of like it,” I said, twisting my neck around to look at the other three walls, even though, on first glance, its pattern seemed unvarying and repetitive. It was very expensive rice paper. Vertical, evenly-spaced pale green stripes were superimposed upon the primary pattern of bamboo stalks. The curved stalks—sometimes clustered, sometimes standing alone—varied in height and thickness. Some leaves were seen broadside; others, as though stirred by the wind, were in profile and shadow. Nowhere could I discern any repeating of the bamboo motif. It must have been a real bitch to hang. “It’s an OK pattern. What bothers you about it?”

“Nothing, right now. It’s your turn. But just wait till after dark.”

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neighborhood. The whole house has Chuck imprinted on it. Everywhere you go, he's in the room with you. Don't *you* ever get to decide about the decor or the furniture—or anything?"

Connie shrugged, and went to the kitchen to refill our glasses. She gave up serving each glass of wine politely, as she would to company, and brought out the four-liter jug instead.

The bruise on her cheekbone kept getting in the way of our conversation. I kept focusing on it the way I do when someone has a physical defect. I can't concentrate on anything but the defect. It glares at me. I want to look away, I don't want to be rude, but I can't help staring.

"How'd you get the black-and-blue mark?" I asked. "Run into a door again?"

Connie said, simultaneously, "I ran into a door again," so that it sounded like we were echoing one another.

"I'll bet you did," I said, unwilling to mask the sarcasm. "Maybe you better go to Dr. Lenz and get your vision checked. What I want to know is why you put up with it. Or does liberation only mean chucking your bra, but not chucking Chuck?"

"Lay off, will you? Charles can be really sweet. You're just never around for those times. I'm sure he feels bad about hitting me. His emotions are very close to the surface. He loses his temper before he's had a chance to think about what he's doing. I'm sure he'll make it up to me. He always brings me a nice silky dress or something as a peace offering."

"Oh, you mean for a piece of ass? You come pretty cheap. What're you going to do with the dress, wear it over your head and peek out through a sleeve so no one sees the black-and-blue marks?"

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“Just stop it! I don’t want to hear all this again. You’ve got your mind made up about Charles and nothing’s going to change it,” she said, turning away in a pout and glowering at the wall. “Uh oh. It’s started already.”

“What has?”

“The wallpaper.”

Darkness had crept surreptitiously into the living room. The single table lamp that was lit could not dispel the murky shadows. The ethereal glow of flashing green neon from the hipster restaurant across the street washed past the security bars on the windows, creating an undulating pattern of stripes and shadows and casting it upon the wallpaper. The streetlamps and headlights from passing cars formed enlarged shadows of the house plants. The lights at the window made the serrated, lobed, and palmate patterns of the plants tangle and waver among the broad bamboo leaves imprinted on the paper. It was as though a breeze had stirred in the sultry jungle.

I had to admit it was an eerie effect. Foreground and background were continually trading places; the room seemed to expand and contract with the breathing in and out of the cool night air through the open window.

“It’s kind of soothing,” I remarked to Connie. “What are you so shook up about?”

Before she could reply, a dark, vaguely canine shape darted across the wallpaper, weaving in and out among the fronds and shadows of fronds. I turned to see whether an animal hadn’t raced past the window, but of course it hadn’t. The ledge and sill were not wide enough for a big dog. Maybe the light played all these tricks. Maybe I’d had too much wine.

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Connie stepped around the coffee table and jumped down beside me on the sofa. She forcefully took my hand in both of hers, squeezing hard enough to make me wince.

“He’s coming! He’s coming!” she shrieked, bouncing up and down on the cushion. “That’s his dog. He’s coming now.”

“Who’s coming?”

“Daddy is. That’s his dog Sam. Don’t you remember anything? Daddy’s carrying his suitcase, too.”

She grabbed me around the waist and buried her face in the crook of my neck and shoulder, blubbing. She looked up at the wall and then nestled against me again.

The shadowed figure of a stout man in profile appeared from behind a cluster of bamboo stalks. A large rectangular shape hovered at his knee, obscuring the rest of his legs. He set the object down and stepped forward.

“Don’t let him take me,” Connie whimpered.

“Daddy’s dead,” I assured her. “Besides, why would he be here?”

“He always comes when Charles is away. He comes to make sure I’m being a good girl. He comes to watch out for me.”

“I’m here now,” I said.

“But you don’t hit me. How can I be a good girl if you don’t hit me?”

Connie pulled away from me vehemently, jerking my arm at the shoulder. She disappeared into the wallpaper. I stood facing the wall, looking down at my right arm, which was missing below

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the elbow. My hand and forearm had gone into the wall, following whatever had dragged Connie inside it.

I felt Connie's strong tugging, even though she was only a shadow on the wall. She overcame my dumbfounded resistance and pulled me inside. Struggling free of the shadowed figure, we shrank to the ground and crept along on our hands and knees. We'd got away.

"What does he carry a suitcase for?" I asked.

"Not so loud," Connie admonished. "He comes from the after-life, I guess. Or maybe it's just from somewhere in my memory. He carries his traveling things in it. Now keep quiet."

I noticed first the change in atmosphere. It was tropically humid and it became an effort of will to breathe. The sounds were also different. The lulling swish of the traffic sweeping past the window could not be heard inside the wallpaper; only the occasional high-pitched wail of a police or ambulance siren penetrated the thick rice paper. It was a world with its own sounds: the most horrible keening and sobbing and moaning, punctuated by the too-solid walloping of fists against tender flesh.

I realized at once what was happening. The wallpaper—everything in the house—were witnesses to all the events that had taken place. Each episode permeated the paper like the strong odor of fish and onions. A residue remained. I was hearing the beatings Connie got from Chuck. These were events strong enough to penetrate the walls. But I could not explain the screams of children I heard in the distance, off in the encroaching, leafy background.

"This way," Connie said, dragging me by the hand. We crouched behind a silhouetted cluster of tall ferns and watched noiselessly as the shadows gathered.

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“What’re you doing down there?” our father asked. “You’ve got to come out and face the music, Connie.”

As we stood up, I could see we weren’t as tall as we had been. We had become children. In my child’s eye I recalled the similar leafy pattern of the wallpaper we’d had in the living room at home. The shadow figure came out of the silhouettes of foliage and loomed above us. The anger stood out on his flesh in the pattern of blood-colored veins. We had never seen anything else printed upon our father’s features, no tenderness, no humor. His anger was the only emotion strong enough to penetrate the wallpaper of his skin and register on his face.

Our father took hold of Connie’s upper arm and dragged her roughly from behind the ferns. “What’s this? What’d you bring *him* along for? No matter, I’ve got something in here for him too.”

Stooping over his suitcase, he undid the latches with two sharp, flapping clicks. I remembered he used to keep the locked suitcase out in the garage. Inside was an array of things. Topmost was his wide black leather belt and a short piece of radiator hose.

“No,” I said. “No more.” I pulled Connie away and we ran off into the dense cover of jungle growth.

“We’ll never get away from him,” my sister panted. “He was a colonel in Vietnam for three years, when we were babies. He’s used to the jungle. He’ll find us in here anyway and it’ll only be worse for running away.”

“We have to try,” I said.

We ran until I thought my burning lungs would burst. We stumbled over the tendrils and thick tangle of roots. I fell once and smashed my forehead into the base of a moss-encrusted tree.

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I didn't pass out, but my legs were getting wobbly. We heard a noise behind us and crouched down, thankful for the opportunity to rest.

Things were too indistinct to be real. I realized we weren't inside the wallpaper. Our twins' closeness had let me enter Connie's state of mind. Her bruises had not come from ghosts in the wallpaper. The shadowy figures could not touch her. But the memories they stirred up still had power to harm her. I lay down beside her and covered her with my child's body. The dry, papery leaves rustled. I felt Connie shudder.

Chuck crept up from behind. He was dressed in muddy, sweaty fatigues and carried a rifle unstrapped from his shoulder. He was one of the many grunts in our father's platoon. I recognized a few of them: Connie's former boyfriends, Uncle Ernie, and the ghost of Grandpa Linder in his doughboy's outfit that smelled like the attic trunk it was stored in. They thrust their bayonets into the clusters of low foliage. Connie squeezed my hand each time one of them passed, but she refrained from letting out so much as a whimper. They withdrew without ever finding us, though the tip of Chuck's probing bayonet once came within inches of Connie's ear.

We got up and moved on. I could not be certain we weren't going around in circles. Alike as my sister and I were, I was in unfamiliar territory.

The mossy ground became soggy, but the atmosphere grew lighter. In the center of a small clearing in the jungle allowing light through the defoliated trees above, we saw Connie's living room furniture. We made a mad, heedless dash for it.

We passed through the membrane of memory with a great, papery tearing sound, tumbling into her living room. Connie landed softly on the sofa, but I had stumbled to the floor, hitting my

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head on a corner of the coffee table. We again wore the adult bodies we had lately been presenting to the world.

I would have thought the entire episode a result of the knock to my head—maybe I had simply passed out after one glass of wine too many—except that our shoes were muddy and the wallpaper was torn where we had burst through. The shreds hung in leaf-shaped tatters. I wondered whether I hadn't entered her madness as well. But Connie wasn't the one who was crazy.

We immediately got to our feet and tore frantically at the bamboo wallpaper. I jumped atop an end table and ripped at the corners of the long strips. Connie tore outward from the center of the hole we had made. The bare plaster beneath remained untouched except for the scrapes and gouges of our fingernails.

One by one the shadowed figures approached the boundary of the wallpaper. We rushed to where each tormentor appeared and ripped him from the wall. Connie mopped her forehead.

There appeared to be no end of them. As Chuck's lumbering shadow came into view, she grabbed two tattered edges of the rice paper and slashed him in half, from his forehead to his crotch, in one long, rending, dry, papery rip.

In an hour we had defoliated the entire living room. We shoved the sofa across the muddy carpet to the fireplace. Sobered by our recent exertions, we brought over the coffee table as well, and Connie put on a pot of coffee. She bandaged my forehead, making the wound look worse than it was with several layers of gauze and a half-mile of tape.

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As she filled our cups, I started the fire with one of Chuck's girlie magazines from the pile beneath the coffee table. I hoped he wouldn't miss it, but realized it didn't matter. Connie had already decided she wouldn't be staying with him. She understood who he really was.

We gathered the shreds of wallpaper into rustling balls that resembled tumbleweeds. I fed them one by one into the fire.

We watched them burst into flame. The large scraps of ash floated in the heated air of the hearth, hovering like the last leaves of a dry autumn, before they were sucked into the updraft and swept up the flue, disappearing at last from our lives, if not our memories.

Connie raised her cup. "To the future," she toasted.

We clinked our cups together. Smiling, I proposed my own toast. "To Thailand," I said. "They've toppled their dictators, too."