

TEN

Melanie shivered. Rick put his arm around her and they nuzzled against one another. I was pleased to see that his affection for Melanie approached tenderness. But I just couldn't make my mind up about him. Melanie wanted to marry him. For her sake, I needed to make up my mind quickly. How does one get to know somebody in the course of an evening? I decided I'd better shut up and let Rick do some more talking. I refilled his wine glass.

"Your father didn't hit you, did he?" Rick asked Melanie.

"No," she said, "but that's only because my Mom stepped in and took it herself, like one of those birds who pretends to have a broken wing to lure predators away from the nest."

"A killdeer," I said.

"Unc took some heat, too," she said. "Dad beat you up a couple of times, didn't he?"

I didn't like having to admit in front of Rick that I'd gotten a pretty good thrashing from Melanie's father. I didn't want him to doubt my resolve to take care of her. But I couldn't lie.

"Didn't he ever get what was coming to him?"

"Not really," I said. "That's what makes me despair of justice in this world. We're on our own. Maybe things are better in an afterlife, but I doubt it. God's a patriarch with a long white beard and a long history of taking the man's side."

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“Yeah, I have trouble with that concept, too,” Rick admitted. “It’s a regular good ol’ boy network, isn’t it? Everyone but them is an outsider or a heathen.”

“You see yourself as an outsider?” I asked.

“Yeah, I guess I do.”

“That’s a hopeful sign,” I said. “Then why’d you give me a hard time about my pointing out the brutality involved in male dominance?”

“I just wanted to find out what you were like. I couldn’t swallow everything Melanie said about you without tasting it for myself.”

“Let’s not forget who’s on trial here,” I reminded him. Fortunately, I kept a straight face.

“Is that what this is all about?”

“What do you think?” I said, tossing it back. I’d learned something from analysis after all.

“Yeah, I suppose you’ve gotta find out if I’m right for Melanie.”

“Are you?”

The bluntness of my question surprised Rick. “Why not ask Melanie?” he sputtered.

“She’s prejudiced. I can tell she loves you.”

“And I love her,” he declared, defiantly.

“Just simmer down, Rick. I want to be sure there isn’t something like a Dorian Gray lurking beneath that handsome shell. If I find you’ve been lying to her... well, you don’t want to know what I have in store for you. I decided I had to mete out some justice to Chuck for his mistreatment of my sister and Melanie. But it didn’t come close to what he deserved and, unfortunately, I was...”

. . .Beaten to the Punch

The minister officiating at my sister's wedding reached the part of the ceremony where he asked whether anyone had reason to feel the couple should not be joined in holy matrimony. But he mumbled through the passage in such perfunctory and sing-song fashion he was like a conductor calling out subway stops. The couple wanted to climb aboard, saying, "I do! I do!" The train pulled away and Connie was married before I knew what hit her.

I didn't have any strong objections to her marrying Charles Swan for her own sake. My reasons were mostly selfish: I had no use for a brother-in-law. I was accustomed to confiding in Connie and calling her up at all hours and dropping by whenever I was in the neighborhood. I didn't want to have to temper the closeness we had shared since childhood with anything smacking of good judgment and common sense. That's not what being brother and sister was all about, at least not to me. Here was the one lasting relationship where a man and woman could be good friends on an equal footing.

Then, along came Charles Swan stirring up the waters of our comfortable little pond, turning it turbid and murky with his lawyer's sense of propriety and decorum. I could no longer drop over whenever I got the notion. He said it might look like a kinky *menage a trois* to the neighbors.

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Chuck had already displayed enough of the characteristics of the typical asshole brother-in-law to satisfy me that the only way I'd be able to continue seeing my sister was if I watched every move I made and weighed every word.

Connie doted on him. He had sufficient leverage to make her defer to him in all matters both important and inconsequential. She now shunned bright colors because Chuck found them hurtful to his eyes. He liked her hair cut short and so she had it styled according to his wishes. When he thought she was putting on a little weight, she began having only a glass of orange juice for breakfast and carrot juice for lunch.

Since Chuck didn't care for any of Connie's friends, they dropped out of her life, and eventually stopped calling. He thought her taste in books and movies too egghead and her favorite music too longhair. Connie hunched herself over to attain his level, so they would have something in common to discuss over the one solid meal she was permitted a day.

Connie and I were born only two years apart, but now it was as though a whole generation separated us. The next time I visited she put on a Sinatra record. I hardly knew who she was.

There wasn't much I could say against any of these changes because it was Connie herself, after all, who had allowed Chuck to tie the marionette strings to her joints and limbs. But I didn't have to sit through their interminable Ken and Barbie Punch and Judy shows and like it.

I wanted, however, to remain on Connie's better side. One day she would need me again. I'd be the keeper of our history and, when the revisionists fell out of favor, I would be there to reassemble the pieces of truth and help her put herself back together as the person she had once been.

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There was only one way for me to keep from disliking the superficial, twittering air-head who had taken over my sister's personality and invaded her body. I had to make the distinction between Connie and the disease consuming her, maintaining my love for the patient while passionately hating the disease. I detested even more the charlatan who had recommended the damaging cure when there was nothing the matter with her in the first place. I allowed the full measure of my intense dislike for the new Connie to transfer undiminished to my brother-in-law, who had caused her revolting transformation from a woman into a house-bound wife.

Charles Swan was not going to get away with killing my sister.

I developed such a thorough dislike of Chuck and all his manipulations that I viewed his personal slights to me as quite beside the point of my hatred of him. I laughed off his insults and parried the punches he delivered at me whenever Connie left the room. Nothing would make me abandon guardianship of the sister I loved so much, but especially not Charles Swan.

Connie tried tirelessly to make peace between Chuck and me, hoping to reconcile, I suppose, the two halves of her life fighting for one existence. I did everything Connie wanted me to do, short of liking her husband. I decided that any disagreeableness would have to come from Chuck. He did not disappoint me.

I planned to tolerate Chuck as long as Connie could. After all, I didn't have to live with him. I could put up with his put-downs and lawyerly pontifications for the duration of my short visits to their apartment. He grated sorely on my nerves, however, especially once Connie brought out the board games, thereby obviating all genuine conversation.

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My brother-in-law was always right. He insisted that Mars was the second planet from the sun and Venus the fourth. I would have liked to send him on a mission to explore the region in question so he could discover firsthand his mistake. On my next visit I brought along the encyclopedia volume treating of the solar system.

“It’s a misprint,” Chuck said. “There’s probably a lot of them in there. Mars is definitely the second planet from the sun, shithead. Any ordinary fool knows that.”

“Then you must be an extraordinary one,” I replied.

Connie quickly intervened, clearing away the board game and bringing in chips and dip and a six-pack of imported beer. I was astonished that, by her silence, she was agreeing with Chuck. I had built a telescope as a kid and we spent uncounted moonless nights watching the planets in their celestial dance around our back yard. She could not have forgotten. The universe was constrained to spin differently around their apartment than it did for the rest of the world. Connie agreed to these preposterous falsehoods merely to maintain a tenuous peace.

I could overlook this episode as merely further evidence of Chuck’s jerkhood. Other episodes were not so easy to ignore. I accompanied Connie to the dentist, where she had her wisdom teeth pulled, all four of them at once. Her cheeks and face were so swollen she looked like a hamster. The Novocaine was wearing off. Chuck did not even ask how she was feeling. He simply slumped in his chair and demanded his supper. He had worked hard and he was hungry and that was all that mattered. I kept my temper because I was convinced Connie would lose hers, but she didn’t. She acquiesced and fawned and gave in to his every wish until I lost my appetite and left early.

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In comparison to all that followed, Connie's first year with Chuck was like a long, leisurely vacation. Soon after their first anniversary, bruises appeared on Connie's face and upper arms. She tried to conceal the dark splotches with make-up and long-sleeved blouses, but it was these attempts that drew my attention to her mistreatment. The honeymoon was over. That's the end, I told myself. Connie will finally be leaving the creep.

But nothing of the sort happened. Each time Chuck abused her, Connie doubled her efforts to soothe and placate him. She convinced herself, but not me, that he would outgrow his volatile temper and make up for all his abusiveness. When he knocked her front teeth out, she told me she ended up apologizing to him for contradicting him and inciting him to wrath. I knew then she would never leave him of her own accord, till death did them part, most likely her own.

All my pleading with her fell on deaf ears. I felt like an inexperienced counselor trying to talk her out of a destructive addiction from which she still derived too much comfort and security to forsake, and stand on her own.

I decided I needed to accumulate evidence against Chuck that I could bring to the police or other authorities, hoping they'd comprehend the seriousness of my sister's situation and rescue her while she still had some teeth left.

I called several detective agencies listed in the yellow pages and chose the one offering the most detection for the least money. The evidence against Charles Swan seemed so clear and overwhelming to me that it didn't make sense to spend a lot to gather the evidence. I figured I'd save most of my money to get counseling for Connie once she was out of the bastard's reach.

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The entire transaction with the Hermalinda Detective Agency was conducted over the phone.

I sent my retainer check in the mail. I had no idea I might be making a big mistake.

Meanwhile, the evidence of Connie's mistreatment was accumulating before my very eyes.

She looked like she'd been in a car wreck and the paramedics had dropped her stretcher while loading her into the ambulance.

The detective agency cashed my checks but did not return my calls. In desperation I went over to the Hermalinda Detective Agency one day after work and demanded to see the file on Charles and Constance Swan.

"I assure you he's been working most diligently on your case," the receptionist said, smiling for punctuation. "Mr. Forepaugh usually checks in around this time to update his reports. Why don't you have a seat?"

She asked the question as though it were a riddle: "Why don't you have a seat?" I felt like saying, "Because I've been running my ass off over this stupid thing and no one tells me anything."

I waited in the dusty, cobwebby reception room, sliding out of the cheap vinyl chairs every few minutes and paging through two-year-old magazines with the second halves of the articles torn out.

Clement Forepaugh arrived about fifteen minutes later, pushing a volume of air before him into the tiny reception room. He was built like Grover Cleveland and wore a gray suit and vest. He created his own atmosphere and occupied most of the tiny room in a single step. Over one eye he wore a black patch. My doubts surfaced at once. What had I gotten into? Who would hire a one-eyed private eye?

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After introducing myself I demanded to know what evidence he had gathered against my abusive brother-in-law.

“It’s all on video,” he said. “We can watch it in my office. The notes are rather tedious,” he added.

I was sucked into the vacuum created when he left the room.

Mr. Forepaugh closed the blinds in his office, pointing to the leather wing-back chair in which he wanted me to sit. He inserted a DVD into the video player, slumped behind his huge, untidy desk, and dimmed the lights.

I held my breath. My heart raced as though I had sneaked into the Saturday horror matinee and was waiting for the ushers to find me and throw me out.

Slowly, my eyes became accustomed to the fuzzy, grainy quality of the picture. The view through Connie’s and Chuck’s apartment windows heaved slowly up and down. I suspected Mr. Forepaugh had held the camera on his generous paunch to steady it.

The lights in the apartment were dim and the focus softly blurred. I heard music in the background. At first I thought the microphone had picked it up from the stereo in their living room. But, as the music grew in volume, depth and clarity, I realized I was listening to a dubbed soundtrack Mr. Forepaugh had overlaid on the video. The picture developed shimmering star-points at the edges of every bright or reflective object in the apartment. The image slowly crystallized and Connie and Chuck came into sharp focus, just as the music reached a climax.

Pretty arty, I thought, for a one-eyed private eye.

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Without their conversation on the soundtrack, Connie and Chuck appeared to be doing a dance: first an argumentative minuet, back and forth, and around the sofa; then a tango, clutching, more sensual, more physical; then a sort of jitterbug, more violent, more heated; merging, finally, into a free-form frenzy, a brutal apache dance in which Connie was knocked to the floor and dragged by the collar of her blouse into the bedroom.

Chuck threw her onto the carefully made bed and ripped off the rest of her clothes. My sister struggled futilely, as though fighting off a swarm of bees with wildly flailing arms. Chuck unzipped his pants and pounced on top of her. The music had transformed to a deep, throbbing bolero that matched the angry pounding of blood in my ears.

The camera zoomed in on them and lingered caressingly on long shots up and down Connie's slender legs and thighs. The action lapsed into a slow-motion poem. I had to turn away. My fingernails had cut into my palms.

"Stop it!" I yelled. "Turn it off. I can't watch any more."

Forepaugh was startled. He hit the pause button and switched on the lights. Connie and Chuck were frozen in mid-stroke, the silent, open-mouthed scream carved on Connie's face as she awaited the next brutal thrust from Chuck.

"I said turn it off," I hollered. Forepaugh reached for the remote control. He had a puzzled, slightly annoyed look on his face.

"You got your second installment," I said, "and that's all you're gonna get. Now get out!"

"This is *my* office," Forepaugh replied.

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My anger had blinded me. I'd forgotten where I was and why I was there. I reached the door to the reception room and flung it open so violently it swung all the way back and crashed into the wall.

I didn't dare drive home. I would have rammed my car up the side of a street pole or rolled it down an embankment. My hands trembled so spasmodically I couldn't even separate the car key from my house keys. I realized I'd been hasty in storming out of Forepaugh's office. I should've snatched the DVD. Now I'd have to pay him the rest of the money I owed him if I wanted to get the video out of his filthy paws. But I vowed to get it, one way or another.

I left my car in the lot and started walking. My shoes slapped the concrete. I couldn't decide whether I was more furious with Forepaugh or Chuck. My brother-in-law *and* the detective had violated Connie. I could have murdered them both.

Having the impression that someone was following me, I stopped and looked around. The back of my head bristled. I realized, however, that it was merely the sensation of the blood engorging the primitive areas of my brain stem, soaking them in adrenaline and other volatile chemicals.

I half expected to see the imprints my furious stomping had left in the sidewalk, like the round-walled craters left by footsteps in the gray slush of a first snowfall. I remained alone on the street. There was only the raging beast inside of me for company, clawing at my stomach in its effort to get out.

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I tossed my clothes off along a trail that wound through my apartment to the bathroom. I stood under the shower until the water had turned lukewarm and then cold. The beast had been soothed but he had not been cast out.

My anger left me drained and my muscles ached with tension. I couldn't sleep. I sat wrapped in a towel at my desk, drawing up a list of the ways in which I might murder Charles Swan, giving each a probability of success. I gripped the pen so firmly it spurted ink across the page.

I almost wept at the thought of what my sister had endured—and was undoubtedly still enduring—at the hands of her husband. The episode filmed so artily by Mr. Forepaugh recorded events from nearly two months before. The trees outside the apartment still wore the deep green of mid-summer. How many times since that incident had Connie talked to me without so much as hinting at what had happened to her? How many times since then had I looked in her eyes and not seen her rape etched in them?

Wearily, I decided she was never going to do anything about how Chuck mistreated her. I was the only other person who knew what was happening to her and who would do anything about it. It was all up to me.

Time did not blunt my rage, but it did afford me opportunity to consider every aspect of the murder of my brother-in-law. I understood my own weakness and aversion to violence and knew I would never be able to twist the knife beneath his breastbone unless I were incensed and white-hot

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from actually witnessing one of his attacks on Connie. There was no chance of that. Charles Swan was a very politic and decorous bastard.

I thought first of hiring someone to do the job, a hit man, but I was not a very shrewd consumer. I'd likely end up with a blackmailer who intended to extort more money from me to keep quiet about the murder of my brother-in-law. I would have to hire another hit man to silence the first and a third to silence the second, and so on, forced at last to sacrifice the whole of humanity to the swirling black hole of Charles Swan's vicious soul.

I'd have to undertake his murder myself or it would never be accomplished. If I had to sacrifice myself or my freedom to the venture, it would not levy as great a price against my inner peace as continuing to witness, helplessly, the mistreatment of my sister at his hands.

Although I didn't rule out the other variety, my natural inclinations led me to consider a bloodless murder: a strangulation, a poisoning, a fatal fall over a strategically placed wrinkle in the carpet or a slippery spot on the floor near an open window. I decided to visit Connie and see whether I might not have an ally in her. I doubted it, but I also wanted to look over the apartment for anything that might assist my efforts, or provide an escape route in the event I only injured the bastard.

Connie did not expect me to visit without calling first to make sure the coast was clear. She answered the door in a long-sleeved ruffled blouse I suspected was intended to conceal her latest bruises.

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"I'm in the middle of something," she said. "Just come on out to the kitchen. I'll put on a pot of coffee."

I followed her. My heart leapt at the sight of every implement from the wooden knife-rack laid out in increasing order of size along the kitchen counter. Connie started up the grinding wheel and set the edge of a long butcher knife against the guide. Amid the pleasantly metallic grating buzz, the sparks flew. I imagined a Forepaugh film of her cutting Chuck's balls off with it. The tune in my head was the "Anvil Chorus."

"They're all so dull," Connie explained. "I'm almost done," she said. "I couldn't even cut an overripe tomato with them. Charles has a taste for Chicken Vesuvio. Would you like to stay for dinner? I'll just take another chicken out of the freezer."

"I can't," I said. "I'd only get into another argument with Chuck. Unless maybe you'd like some help."

"Help with what?" Connie asked.

"Cutting apart the chickens, uh... the chickens, I mean."

"I can handle that myself. Don't you worry about me," she said, laughing. "I'm stronger than you think. Boy, Charles is in for a big surprise," she added, testing the edge of the butcher knife with her thumb.

I couldn't be sure what she meant: a surprise at getting his favorite dish, or at something else not on the menu? I didn't want to risk revealing my intentions if murder wasn't what she was alluding to. I didn't want her to be an accessory if I could avoid her involvement.

"You're awfully quiet," she said.

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"Just thinking," I replied. "I guess I'd better be going."

"You won't change your mind?"

"No. I'll let myself out."

"Don't be such a stranger," Connie said. "Just make sure you call first, that's all. Oh, and guess who I heard from?"

I shrugged.

"Eileen. Yeah. She finally got through when Charles wasn't around to hang up on her. She says to tell you 'Hi.'"

"That's nice. I hope you two had a good long talk."

"No time," Connie said. "I had to get Charles' dinner ready. See you later, OK? Charles has to fly to Atlanta next week. Maybe we can get together."

I let myself out, sinking immediately into a depression over what a housewife Connie had become. Her vivacity had shriveled up to the size of a dried pea. She hadn't cracked a single joke or teased me about anything. She hadn't even kissed me hello or goodbye.

As I replayed our sparse conversation, a notion struck me. Why hadn't I thought to enlist my sister's friend Eileen in the cause against Chuck? I knew she hated his guts; she had told me as much at the wedding. I'm sure she knew the part Chuck played in destroying all Connie's old friendships. A likelier ally I would never find.

I looked up Eileen's phone number when I got home. I hesitated calling, though. I doubted she would believe everything I knew about how Chuck abused Connie. Eileen knew he was a jerk

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and a creep and a self-righteous, smug little bastard, but would she believe the rest of it? If only I had Forepaugh's video tape!

As desperate as I was to enlist an ally, I couldn't stomach going back to Forepaugh's office. I couldn't be altogether sure my anger wouldn't spill over onto him, and I wanted to reserve every last drop of it, undiluted and undiminished, for Charles Swan.

Time slipped away as I vacillated among the various methods for murdering my brother-in-law. My resolve ebbed and flowed as though according to an ephemeris.

At last I got up the nerve to call Eileen. I was surprised to learn that she suspected Charles was an abuser. She lamented not being able to help Connie. She couldn't get near enough to have a long conversation with her on any topic deeper than oregano and organically grown tomatoes. Eileen did, however, assert that Chuck would one day get what was coming to him. But I couldn't be sure what role she might be suggesting for herself. Would she consent to murdering him, or was she only voicing the desperate hope of those trying to maintain their belief in a just and orderly universe, a universe that did not revolve around Charles Swan?

Chuck went on his trip to Atlanta and Connie and I got together for dinner. I wanted to take her out, but she insisted on cooking for me. "I don't want to get rusty," she said.

"He'll only be gone for a week," I reminded her. "You won't forget how to make Chicken Vesuvio in a week."

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Connie seemed distracted. I wound up finishing most of her sentences for her. She flitted and fidgeted with the dinner and the place settings as though for the master himself. It made me uncomfortable.

The phone rang and Connie jumped up as though her seat had received an electric charge. She tossed her napkin beside her plate. "He should have called hours ago," she said, dashing to the phone in the kitchen. I wasn't surprised Chuck wanted to keep close tabs on her.

I stared at Connie's nervously-folded napkin, a neurotic approximation of an origami bird. It was the most creative thing I'd seen her do in months. There was a crash of glass in the kitchen, and I went to see what happened.

Connie had slumped to the floor, leaning her back against the cabinets, her knees pulled up to her chin. The shattered baking dish lay in scattered pieces. The phone dangled at the end of its twisted cord. Someone was still talking on the other end. I picked it up, bracing myself for the detested sound of Chuck's voice.

The man on the other end was a police sergeant from Atlanta. Charles Swan had been murdered in his hotel room.

I identified myself as the victim's brother-in-law.

According to the preliminary evidence, the sergeant said Chuck apparently had a girlfriend in Atlanta. From the bellhop's and maid's testimony, he frequently beat her. This time, however, the woman defended herself, picking up the magnum of champagne beside the bed and bashing his head in with it. Then she drank a little of the murder weapon. When the police arrived she drank a toast to them. The sergeant found that amusing.

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After making arrangements for the body to be flown back home, I went over to Connie, now barely sobbing, and lifted her to her feet. We sidestepped the shattered baking dish and the splatters of tomato paste and chunks of Chicken Vesuvio.

I sat her down at the dining room table and poured her a glass of brandy. I tried my best to console her, but my heart wasn't in it. I rubbed her shoulders, but she flinched. I had touched one of her fresh bruises.

She took hold of my hand and looked up at me. She smiled. "I'll be all right," she said. "But that poor woman in Atlanta. I can't help thinking of what she must have gone through. She didn't know Charles as I did."

I wasn't going to get into it with my sister. It was enough that her tormentor had been eliminated. Without his domination of her, I was confident she would return to herself, and to the rest of the world. And, there'd be one less lawyer to worry about.

I had to admit I felt cheated by not witnessing Chuck's murder, or wielding the weapon against him myself. I was concerned about the Atlanta woman, too, although I suspected she wouldn't be charged with anything more serious than manslaughter, if that.

My sister owed her life to the brave woman of Atlanta who, with a single blow, had restored a modicum of order to the universe.