

This cloven heart

The first time Brendan had sex with his wife's twin sister was at a wedding. Suzy left early on that occasion. Tamsin, her younger sibling by just six minutes, stayed behind. It was Suzy and Tamsin's cousin who was getting married. A quiet guy in his early twenties, training to be a surveyor or something dull like that. Summer was here and everyone spilled outdoors into the grounds of the stately home hotel hired for the occasion. Excellent catering, a live band and the sun shone and shone. 'How come the weather wasn't like this for our wedding?' Suzy complained, fanning herself with a laminated wine list. That was three years back now.

Tamsin was unaccompanied, being single at that time, and so she hung out with Brendan and her 'big sister' for most of the day. They were identical twins, sharing the exact same DNA, and so the two girls were indistinguishable from each other if you didn't know them well. It was their speech, their mannerisms, and most of all their laughter that served to differentiate. A much-repeated family anecdote was that their mother used to tie a ribbon in Tamsin's hair so she could tell them apart at a glance. But Suzy and Tamsin would swap the ribbon back and forth so they could giggle at the confusion that resulted. The giggling always gave them away.

As with many identical twins, their preternatural similarity attracted a lot of attention. Guests gawped and nudged one another throughout the wedding ceremony. The truth though, was that they were as different in personality as they were alike in form. They had almost nothing in common.

Suzy called a cab early evening because she had to be up for a work trip to Germany the following morning. Brendan decided he would take one of the paid-for rooms at the hotel so he could avail himself of the free bar.

'Don't overdo it. Drink plenty of water.' She kissed him and got in her taxi.

Really, Tamsin was the only other person at the wedding he knew well, so they sat and drank and joked together at one of the tables in the garden. As always, he was amused by the novelty of spending time with a woman that was, to all appearances, his wife, but with a rebooted personality. Not better, not worse, just different. It struck him: this *was* Suzy. But Suzy in an alternate reality, another dimension. His wife in a parallel universe.

Tamsin was great company. She had always been party-girl numero uno; always among the last to leave any gathering; her weekends invariably fuelled with cocktails, marijuana and cocaine. Even as they tried for the baby that would not come, Suzy would be rapt listening to her sister talk about her exploits: the clubs, the drugs, the men. Brendan asked Suzy why she didn't just go out partying with her sister once in a while. He was more than happy to have a night in watching sports on his own. And he trusted her, naturally. But Suzy, ever the sensible one, said she preferred merely to hear about the highlights, indulging vicariously.

'I don't want the hangovers, the come downs and horny creeps trying to hit on me *and* my sister at the same time.' She said. 'Like we're gonna furnish them with some kind of internet-porn fantasy threesome.'

She needed to be fresh for her publishing job too. She had been promoted at the company in the past year and took her responsibilities seriously.

'Besides,' she added 'we're trying for a baby, right? Gotta stay clean. God knows we're finding it hard enough to conceive as it is.'

Tamsin's case made an interesting counterpoint to her high-achieving sister. She worked on and off in fashion and in contrast to Suzy's cool, even rationality, she was an unashamed lover of all things New Age. Always with the dream catchers, incense sticks, meditation retreats and African drumming workshops. Brendan viewed Tamsin's attraction to leftfield 'spirituality' as a strange bedfellow to her self-destructive hedonism. She'd had some proper trouble with drugs over the years and a few very dodgy boyfriends. Every once in a while she would come around in the midst of a personal crisis, freaking out and making unconvincing threats of suicide. Sometimes she'd lost it and trashed her *own* flat - an expensive catharsis. There would be tearful late-night chats with Suzy. Tamsin was lucky, Suzy was a good listener and a patient counsellor. For all their incongruity they were close.

Brendan had to admit he'd always been more than a little intrigued by his sister-in-law on a more physical level too. I mean, she looked exactly like the woman he proposed to - how could he *not* be attracted to her? And then those little differences. Her slightly more feline comportment. Her tumbling, bawdy laughter. That distinctive perfume: patchouli or ylang ylang or something. One of those hippy smells.

Around nine in the evening the heat of the day dissipated and Brendan saw the goosebumps arrive with the evening chill on Tamsin's freckled shoulders. They went inside to the hotel bar where it was warm and they spread themselves across a couple of sofas for a while with a large brandy apiece. It was already apparent

something might happen. The jokes became increasing provocative and their behaviour decidedly flirtatious.

Tamsin found one of the few remaining bottles of champagne that had not been uncorked on her way back from a visit to the bathroom.

'Hey, wanna take this upstairs and we can talk some more?' A glint of mischief in those familiar blue-grey eyes.

He agreed readily, and felt a dangerous surge of excitement.

They fell through the door of her room and pretty much straight away started some clumsy kissing, both laughing at the silliness of it. This wasn't serious. It was a drunken joke. No harm. They fell onto the bed. Rolling around, giggling like stupid kids. Then she fumbled for his fly. He pulled down her dress, exposing the little black bra. She reached around a deftly unhitched the clasp. The bra loosened and one pert little orb escaped and revealed itself. He watched the nut-brown nipple transform from velvet-softness to beguiling tumescence in the cool of the room, the areola wrinkling as the teat swelled. More of those delightful goosebumps swept across her skin, making it tighten. A dissonance - he knew every part of this body though it was a landscape he had never explored. The same terrain, but here, now, somehow more luxuriant, somehow more sensual. He took her exposed nipple in his mouth. The strange smell of her making his drunken brain reel. She returned her attention to his fly. He was already erect and she tugged him free. Pulling away from his embrace she stooped and greedily sucked on him.

A half hour later and all the mirth had evaporated along with the lust. There was the uncomfortable, post-sex awkwardness so familiar to strangers on one-night stands. Both of them fought it but it was made potent by the unspoken knowledge of the crime they were complicit in. Each hunted around on the floor for discarded items of clothing, getting in each others' way. Sorrys and excuse-mes and could-you-just-pass-mes.

Having gathered up his stuff, Brendan said goodnight and they kissed cheeks courteously. Like in-laws once more. No longer lovers. He crept back to his room, feeling fugitive.

When he got there he got straight in the shower. As he towel dried himself, he spotted a text message on his phone from hours ago. It was from Suzy.

'Just to let u know - home safe. Have a gud time x x'

At breakfast the next morning he and Tamsin managed to resume their easy affability. Woo! Crazy night. Blame it on the booze. It was a silliness they could forget. Never speak of. It would definitely not be happening again.

But it did happen again.

This time they weren't drunk. He went around to Tamsin's flat some weeks after the wedding to pick up some jumble for a car boot sale Suzy was planning. Predictably, Tamsin did not have the stuff ready as planned and so Brendan had to help her pack up. She was neither tidy nor organised and it took longer than expected to get all her clutter together and into boxes. Nothing was signalled as they worked, but her proximity, slightly closer than was appropriate, was a muted invitation. They were pulling some junk off the top of the bedroom wardrobe when the inevitable occurred.

Suddenly they were in each other's arms and kissing hungrily. Rapid, sweaty and breathless sex followed on the adjacent bed. Both were aware he had to be getting back home to avoid raising suspicions and so no sooner had he ejaculated than they were throwing their clothes on and turning their attention back to their domestic endeavours. They conspicuously didn't mention what had happened, instead discussing how they might best fit all the stuff in his car. Then, when he was about to leave, she said 'Do you want to do this again?'

His brain screamed No! No! No! But he heard his voice, as if off in the distance somewhere.

'Yes.'

Following this second indiscretion, they swapped lots of texts and emails. Brendan was abundantly titillated by the novelty of their illicit communications, but even as he typed 'Thinking about your body' and she replied 'I want you inside me' he fretted that these sentiments were being recorded in recoverable email and text message trails. He also became terribly furtive, which he found utterly contemptible. He activated the password security on his mobile phone for the first time ever, in case Suzy happened to scroll through his messages. Not that this would happen - she was completely trusting. This made him feel even more shameful, but he couldn't fight the pathetic compulsion to pursue this carnal adventure. He knew Tamsin was volatile. Indeed this was probably one of the things that made her so exciting. She was unpredictable. She was dangerous. This was a quickstep with the devil herself. During one of his frequent bouts of guilt, he texted her: 'Hey T, maybe we shud cool it for a bit?'

Pointedly, he got no response. Was she angry, he wondered? Was she going to flip out? Or had he just blown a good thing? He was getting cake and eating it, dammit!

About a week later, Suzy mentioned Tamsin had a 'new man' and was bringing him to dinner. Brendan masked the sting with affected indifference.

He was having a pee when they arrived. The sound of the doorbell and the unmistakably assertive, treble tones of Tamsin. Like Suzy after two espressos. He shook off and found himself in front of the mirror smoothing his hair and checking his teeth for bits. He felt a conflict of emotion. Excitement that he would see her. Guilt that the deceit he was perpetrating continued. Despondency because Tamsin had a new man and didn't want him any more. Anxiety that she might blurt something out, either accidentally or on purpose. He hoped she wouldn't get too drunk.

Brendan needn't have worried because, remarkably, Tamsin was not drinking.

Another surprise: her new man was not a romantic entanglement at all but some sort of Buddhist guru.

'Ian's a spiritual teacher, and he's helping me work through some karmic issues.'

'You're not *together*?' Asked Suzy.

Ian smiled. 'We believe the most edifying relationships are those between souls.'

Physical love is a poor imitation.'

'Oh.' Said Suzy.

Ian had a little pair of round, thick-lensed spectacles perched on his nose. The lenses made his eyes look like a couple of undercooked poached eggs. His fine, fair

hair was vacating his scalp fast. A thin, supercilious smile was deposited immovably upon his lips. This guy was not one of Tamsin's usual crowd, thought Brendan.

'Wine?' Brendan offered. 'Or there's beer?'

'I'm not using alcohol any more.' Said Tamsin. 'The Buddha teaches that alcohol weighs a life down.' She looked to Ian and they gazed at each other with nauseating, self-satisfied smiles. Brendan tried hard not to roll his eyes. It wasn't easy. He shot Suzy the briefest of looks.

At the end of the evening he and Suzy saw them to the door. 'Lovely to meet you, Ian.' 'Must do this again some time.' The usual.

Suzy closed the door, turned around, leant against it and with a wry smile said 'Well.'

'What in God's name has happened to your sister?' He demanded.

'I don't think I've *ever* seen Tam refuse a drink.'

'The power of the Buddha is indeed strong. And that guy... creepy. He didn't even compliment your vegetable lasagne. Which he ate two huge portions of!'

'Oh, he's alright.'

'He's screwing her.'

'You heard them. It's about *souls*.'

'I've seen blokes like that before. They become yoga teachers or bloody spirit guides just so they can pull the wool on a bunch of milfs and get their end away. It's all an act.'

'So cynical, Bren. Not everyone in life is a shit.'

'Trust me. I know how the male brain works.'

'That's called judging others by your own standards. Not all men do their thinking with their dick.' She grabbed his crotch and gave it a playful squeeze.

'Ah, god bless you' he chided. 'You sweet, innocent, deluded child'. His joke was almost *too* emphatic. He reigned himself in.

She laughed, oblivious. 'Well, it's her business. If it's another fad she will tire of it soon enough. Let's enjoy the peace while we can.' She took his wrist and dragged him towards the stairs. 'Now about that dick. We got a baby to make, mister.'

Lying in bed afterwards, Brendan reflected on the situation. All evening Tamsin acted as though nothing had ever gone on between them. There were no knowing glances. No loaded comments. Nothing. She had clearly moved on. Brendan had become just another one of her many, many flings. He felt relief and disappointment in equal measure. But this new state of affairs was for the best though - of that he was certain. He kissed Suzy on the head as she slept in the crook of his arm. The sex had been better than usual. That was because he'd pretended it was Tamsin underneath him while he dutifully deposited his seed. Not good. He needed to move on too, and yet he had to admit to himself, he was jealous. Tamsin's vivacious presence, like some exotic animal. Her sexual appetite and ingenuity. He felt a twinge in the base of his penis. Suzy was half right. Not everyone in life is a shit. Just all the men.

The third time Brendan met Tamsin for sex wasn't spontaneous, it was a meticulously contrived rendezvous.

After the dinner with Ian, communications between the pair remained suspended. Brendan was glad, he told himself. Glad it was all over and could be consigned to

the past. He settled back into life's routine and thought of Tamsin rarely. She hadn't visited the house for some time now and this helped.

Then one day a text arrived:

'Meet me. Fuck me.'

He immediately replied: 'When?'

They made an arrangement to hook up in a hotel on the other side of town one rainy Wednesday afternoon. He took a half-day off work specifically for this. They met in the hotel bar and, after some awkward chat and a tumbler full of courage, they eagerly made their way up to the room. Clothes fell away as soon as they got through the door and they ravished each other with compulsive urgency. This time they didn't disperse after the first climax, like they had before, like murderers fleeing the scene of their crime. Instead they rested naked on the bed and Tamsin pulled out a joint, which they smoked together. It had been a long time since Brendan smoked cannabis and it made him woozy and a little nauseous.

As they lay there, Brendan couldn't help but ask. 'What happened to Ian then?'

'Who?' she said and took a drag on the joint.

He looked at her incredulous.

'Oh, Ian. Right.' She laughed. 'He was just some weirdo I met. I wanted to make you jealous.'

He couldn't help feeling flattered, but somewhere in his mind a tiny alarm bell went off. A vague thought about somebody contriving such a thing; about using a stranger in such a way. He let the thought drift away.

'Did you fuck him?'

She smiled, amused. She had succeeded. 'Of course I did.'

They resumed their copulations; their licking and sucking. The drug cast Brendan into a fug of languid, euphoric detachment. She was crouched before him and he was taking her from behind. He glanced down at her perfectly round buttocks and the warm, alluring rift between them. He stroked his hands across her lean back. Undulations of muscle and bone. The shape of the shoulders, so familiar, the way the slender waist bloomed into the hips.

She mewled with pleasure, mumbling some words he couldn't make out.

'Uh...?' He groaned.

She said the words again a little louder. It sounded like... Surely he misheard her.

'Wha...?'

This time she barked it out. 'Call me Suzy! Pretend I'm Suzy!'

This appalled him and at the same time he was perturbed to find it tremendously arousing. The orgasm jolted through him with feverish intensity, making him grimace with its force. She gasped as she felt him tense, semen boiling out of him, overwhelming him, as if earthing a fearsome current from his core. It shot through his body and into Tamsin's in hot, electric jets.

That wasn't the end of their games. They took full advantage of the room and the many unaccountable hours. They used his wife's name over and over and the thrill of perverse transgression multiplied. A delicious, unforgivable sin. More than just betrayal now. This was blasphemy. Sacrilege.

With rain pattering against the window and the muted hum of the traffic in the street below, they spent the afternoon exhausting the possibilities of conjoining two bodies. The Kama Sutra was no more prodigious.

It was after six before they were showered and dressed and ready to leave. The last of the rush hour could be heard clogging the high street outside. People hurrying home to families. Dinners. TV shows.

A gnawing anxiety made him ask.

Her reply, tinged with impatience 'I'm on the pill.'

He assumed this would be the case, from her recklessness on previous occasions (or should that be her lack of concern about *his* recklessness).

'Sorry' he said. 'I thought I should check.'

She applied a little lipstick at the dressing table, a subtle shade, and then put on her coat. 'Well, I'm off. It might be a good idea if you hung around for ten minutes or so, to be on the safe side. You never know, hey?'

'Sure. Right. Of course.' He said.

They shared a final kiss before she went. For his part, this was pure contrivance now. He wasn't feeling any affection. Nor any desire - that had been spent. And as before, once the swell of desire waned, his guilt surfaced like a jagged reef emerging in the wake of a receding tide. More than ever before, he felt a profound self loathing and a new leaden horror at the fresh depths they had plumbed. Surely she was feeling the same thing? The earlier pleasures, a fading memory. The present mood, stilted. Practical. Businesslike.

'Text me.' She said as she walked out of the door.

'I will.' He said, forcing a smile.

Then she was gone. Relief. He ran himself a glass of water and sat on the bed. What was he doing? Sitting in a hotel room alone hoping to slink from the scene without running into anyone who knew him? He should be leaving his office now, maybe grabbing a tea from a concession at the station and a free copy of The Standard for the train journey home. How did he end up fucking his wife's sister? His beautiful wife who was good and kind and funny and so smart. It was all so irredeemably seedy. He knew at that point it would have to end and he wouldn't be meeting Tamsin again like this. But even this pledge to end his infidelity made him feel shitty. Wasn't it like the worst kind of man to use a woman's body in every way possible, such as he had done in the past few hours, and then withdraw? All the novelty now gone. The conquest secured! Was that what was happening here? And how would Tamsin react if he put a halt to this madness? He couldn't predict how she would take it.

That said, before she left she had seemed as subdued as he. She felt bad as well, he guessed. How could she not? Like him, she would know things had gone too far. Such reckless damage. Maybe now they had hit bottom together they could quietly and mutually agree to call this sordid business a day. Bury it. No one need ever know. No one need get hurt.

Another thought comforted him a little. Tamsin was known for her fickleness. This brief affair would certainly have only ever been a distraction. Yes, he thought, and I am no great catch. I'm a rotten, little shit. For all her own sins, how could Tamsin see him any other way? He was not worth cleaving your family apart for.

The thought of the low opinion Tamsin must hold of him made him reflect on his feelings towards her. Despite her effervescent beauty, her marvellous physicality, her breathtaking dexterity and generosity in bed, he couldn't help but feel a wave of disgust towards her. How could she do this to her devoted sister? Did she really hate Suzy so much? What a pair of wretches, he and she.

Brendan glanced at his watch, got up, took a last disdainful look around the room, and left.

He got home around seven-fifteen, briefcase in hand - an imposter. A 'Hi babe', improbably upbeat, as he came through the door. Too much. He'd better tone it down. But his wife was busy upstairs.

'Can you make dinner, love.' she called. 'I'll be down in a minute. I have some good news.'

'Sure. No problem.' he said. He dropped his coat and briefcase and washed his hands in the kitchen sink. Pontius fucking Pilot, he thought. He pulled some salad ingredients from the fridge and started chopping cucumbers and peppers. Broke some eggs and whisked them for an omelette.

These domestic activities soothed his nerves. This afternoon's episode was behind him. What was the past but an unprovable rumour? They had (to be uncouth) gotten away with it. No one saw them. He resolved again that it was over and he was sure Tamsin would agree this was the only recourse for the good of all involved. In some ways this treacherous experiment had been a good thing. It made him realise how

much he valued his marriage with Suzy. Never again. She was the only one. He turned on the radio and half-sang along with Kenny Rogers to The Gambler.

His phone vibrated in his trouser pocket. Instantly he was on edge. Few people sent him text messages and he hoped this wasn't from who he hoped it wasn't from. It was too soon. He dried his hands on the tea towel and pulled out the device. The name on the screen: Tam. His body stiffened. He opened the message. One line. 'Gr8 time 2day. Guess wot? I think I LUV U! x x x'

END.