

## Protection

My sister had her hair in short, tight pigtailed that started up behind her ears. On her it looked original and chic, making her look ten (if not thirty) years younger than she was. And *why* am I going on about her hair? Because this was someone who, the day before, had had a complete nervous breakdown while on the road from my place in New Mexico to Oklahoma and had wailed at me from the bedside phone in a roadside motel somewhere in northeast Texas for about four hours.

I had just got home from having resumed my schedule at work. There, I'd sat at my desk, hands tucked under my skirt, rocking back and forth most of the day. Rescue Remedy and a neighbor's Baggie of expired Valium only went so far, I was still only one step away from my routine reaction to my sister: on the surface, I got angry with her, but under the surface I fell into the rabbit hole with her so she wouldn't be alone. Not that she ever noticed.

When I could get a word in edgewise, during her tearful monologue from the motel, I'd told her to turn around and come back.

She'd suddenly stopped crying then and asked, "It took you this long to come up with that option? Don't you love me at all?"

That she'd had the where-with-all to braid her hair so stylishly this morning seemed incongruous. Also incongruous were her tight jeans and tiny pullover, and expertly light application of make-up that would've seemed insouciantly *au naturel* back east where she lived, but out west, so few of us wore make-up at all that it was a noticeable surprise given her denim and braids.

She'd refused, understandably, to meet me at my office. It would've caused a good-natured ruckus that neither one of us was in any mood for; the bane of identical twins, especially when nobody knew you had one. We'd suffered this together since childhood and it may have been one of the few things we still had in common.

So now she was waiting for me in the parking lot behind the plaza. Not, as I feared, crouched deep in her car, it would've been too hot for that anyway. She was leaning up against it like James Dean. She had an open look on her face, but her jaw was stiff with the effort, like she was posing although no one else was in the parking lot.

In my relief at not having company anymore I'd planned to eat a grilled cheese sandwich every night for a week and not think about menus. Suzy didn't eat cheese.

"Well," I greeted her, "do you want to come with me to the grocery store, or do you want to eat out?"

"Let's eat at Eladio's." She pointed across to the café's back door. "You can go shopping after work tomorrow," she added, organizationally.

So we walked over to Eladio's and chose the orange room over the blue or pink one and did enjoy our dinner. It was a casual place with Day of the Dead folk art all over. We didn't mention the issue at hand.

Suzy's visit with me had lasted almost a week before she drove off for Oklahoma, which it seemed, based on how much time she spent talking about it, was the real reason she was in the southwest to begin with. She spent the first evening and entire next day talking non-stop about her Comanche friends. Talking and talking, about people I didn't even know, me expected to remember names, dates, places, one sentence running into the next. I'd hardly been able to cook or use the bathroom without causing a fight for having interrupted her in order to leave the room. Not knowing what else to do, I'd eventually touched her arm the first night and asked, "Do you want a margarita to go with your posole stew?"

"Just never mind," she said, regarding, I presumed, what she'd been telling me about.

"Go on, just tell me what you want to drink."

But she'd said, "I can tell you're not interested." Then she wouldn't speak to me all through the welcome-to-New Mexico dinner I'd made in her honor.

I wasn't disinterested in what she was up to. I wished she would tell me what she was up to, versus explaining the detailed religious rituals of people I'd never met. It never failed to amaze me that we couldn't manage a simple how ya doin', the kids are fine, the corn is high, conversation. Ever. I'd still been naively hopeful the next morning, even if I had spent the night on my own sofa after her insisting that my bed was large enough for both of us and my trying to sleep with her and her reeking of patchouli.

She then spent four hours over breakfast responding to my dislike for sweet hippie perfume from health-food stores that also sold stick-on bindi spots. This somehow implied in me a disrespect for Buddhism and Native American philosophy to boot. Despite the fact that I lived, by choice, in the middle of nineteen historic Native pueblos and one quarter mile from a stupa trailing prayer flags like a maypole.

She illuminated me that I was in fact “polarizing” on her interests due to having been overly identified with her by everyone always, everywhere.

I’d decided a field trip was in order. While she talked about the trailer of a friend in Tahlequah that had been upended in a tornado but in which her friend still resided, I corralled her into the car and drove us to the Sand Dunes. Very unfortunately this was twice as far as I’d thought it was. She spent the entire drive north explaining to me all the additional things wrong with me and, more importantly, how I could improve myself. I suppose I didn’t take it in the spirit in which she’d intended because, after a giggle (by her) climb up the pink waves of sand in a ripping wind so that the entire surface we stood on was in constant sizzling motion, she didn’t speak to me for the whole ride home.

I was so frustrated that it was all I could do not to run off the road, crunch through the sage and fly over some arroyos just to get real. I wanted to grab her and wobble her head back and forth until I punched through the wall she’d put around herself. Why the criticism? I wasn’t a bad person. I thought I was a fun and interesting person.

I had no idea if her judgmental streak was reserved just for me or not, though really I couldn’t imagine her being anything but exceedingly polite, happy and friendly to everyone else. What the hell did other sisters do when they got together after a three-year absence across a thousand-mile distance?

The next day this private bonding came to an end when we drove south to pick up a friend of hers who happened to be in Santa Fe and brought her back to my house (!). This was a girl who Suzy had described, in detail, as being her soul mate, so I was quite alarmed to find that she was entirely pink. She was dressed in pink shorts and a matching pink sleeveless top (who wears such sets past kindergarten?), was pale-haired, plump and sunburned more pink. She had an accent like a New York crime boss. God, could my sister become attached to anyone more unlike herself? I served them white wine and potato chips under my portal. Suzy, suddenly the hostess, told her pink friend all the trials and tribulations of my “frontier” life, getting half of it wrong, since I never really got the opportunity to explain any of it.

They left together. Suzy was to drop off her pink friend at the airport in Albuquerque, where she herself would be turning in her rental car and flying out after her round-trip week in Oklahoma with her Indian friends, though I would not see her again. Or, that had been her well laid-out plan.

We drove home from dinner at Eladio’s through one of those incredible sheets of golden light that lay over the mesa in early evenings. The tops of the grasses were shining and swaying beside the highway. Something inside my sister had fizzled. I was still, however, as wary as a kicked dog.

I watched her walk across the dirt driveway from the car to my house with her whole left side lit up golden orange. I made the sudden, odd observation that she walked like her body was in a narrow cylinder. Her arms hung tight at her sides. I couldn’t say when this had started. Her hand rotating at the bottom of a slender arm, with her fingers

splayed out stiffly meant “hurry up, c’mon!” and was as exuberant as she got. She did this now, and I hurried to follow her.

She didn’t argue when I put the sleeping bag on the sofa for her to use. I’d already washed the sheets she’d slept in and only had the one set.

This time I’d covered my ass and rented a pile of videos during my lunch break. Suzy tolerated me making a game of saying she couldn’t watch one until she helped me install my new faucet.

I’d had the damn faucet since before her arrival the first time and had not had a chance to put it in. Every time she’d used the water, she’d made fun of my having the cold water turned off under the sink. It was no use explaining that since my on-demand hot water heater did not trip on unless the faucet was turned on full blast, if you wanted cold water you could just turn the hot water faucet on lightly and you’d have cold water. For someone who kept saying she wanted to move out West and raise horses, she was quite the princess when it came to plumbing.

In her new docility, she followed me into the bathroom. Suzy stood looking over my shoulder at the two of us in the medicine-cabinet mirror while I stared down at the old faucet and wondered where to start. I unhappily realized that it was her complete lack of moral support that had led to my procrastination with the sink the previous week. I’d built my whole goddamned house for cryin’ out loud, I should be able to install a faucet without needing an audience cheering me on. Though I, oddly, didn’t remember having ever installed one.

When I was in the throes of house building I’d had any number of not even very well known guy friends competing over who was gonna help me the most. It was

flattering. I just struggled to steer their effusiveness in a useful direction, though, really, with all their manly advice-giving and pissing matches, this only rarely succeeded, and usually ended in their doing something I was completely capable of doing myself while the thirty twenty-foot long beams stayed in a too-heavy pile. There were many, many more days of crying, sweating, muscle-tearing solitude that like a mother raising an automobile off her child, I'd raised myself a house. What was that all about?

"We both have the same crease between our eyebrows. Look," Suzy ordered me. I looked up, though I didn't like this tradition she had of lining us up side by side every time we got together.

"Straighten your collar," she scolded.

"I'm working for cryin' out loud," I told her.

"Just straighten it," she insisted. I did, and tried not to look at how her shoulders sloped down so severely. Did she think she had to hold up the whole world? I couldn't even make my shoulders do that. I'd tried, the night after she'd left previously, standing right here in front of the mirror, annoyed again at my still-dysfunctional sink.

"Find me the directions," I asked her, "I need to get a screwdriver."

I plopped the small, alarmingly-heavy box with the new faucet into her hands. I'd held off buying a new one as long as I could because the damn thing cost over a hundred dollars. I'd been pulling the old faucet apart and changing the gaskets every two years, having to figure it out all over again each time, until I was sick of it. It would save me now from seeming malfunctioning and needy upon the rare moments of being observed. This brought to mind my new motivation; that my boyfriend was due to return to town any day now and there was no way in hell I could entertain the two of them at once.

I'd already put Niall off the previous week and I'd tried to put him off for another week, knowing my usual shell-shocked recovery rate, but he hadn't been able to re-arrange his schedule that much and it was now or never. Well, not never, but was gonna be a fuck-up at any rate.

My sister had an unerring nose for when I'd rather be with the man in my life. This unexpected trait had reared its head the minute I'd moved out of the apartment we shared in Manhattan and in with my then boyfriend soon-to-be-ex-husband. The more I complained to her that it bothered him for me to stay on the phone with her when he wanted to go to bed, the more she scheduled her breakdowns for 10pm.

Her few-and-far-between visits to New Mexico had by now coincided with the very week Todd had planned to move in, with the week prior to Rudy splitting for good, and now; intruded on the rather tenuous move toward closeness with a potential #3. Potential? Christ, how insecure was I? Niall and I were one hundred percent dumbstruck, lust-ridden, and infatuated with each other. In this really vast landscape, that we had come upon each other at all was a miracle. I could already imagine us ten years from now. Twenty. I could imagine still getting that little lurch in my heart when I saw his truck bumping up my driveway. I could imagine his very un-cool grin that he couldn't wipe off his face while he walked over to me being the same grin, if maybe briefer, thirty years from now.

Niall headed up a dig near Zuñi land down near Gallup, but since some crucial archeological analysis had been required beyond their capabilities, they'd adjourned for three months. At the moment he was picking up work charting midden mounds for the



highway department. This was often easy commuting distance to my place, though not at the moment.

Suzy never did somehow visit during my extended private times when the company would've been, if not exactly welcome, at least more convenient.

When I returned with the screwdriver, she was perched on the closed toilet lid holding the instructions purposely upside down. After refusing to let me take the time to do this the previous week, she suddenly thought home-repair was quite the lark.

"Is that the only screwdriver you have?" she asked me. I was using a little yellow one and it was slipping out of the grooves with every turn.

"Rudy took off with my bigger ones when he moved out. He was always scolding me that I used them for chisels, which I did, but only after he lost all my chisels."

"You're going to stab yourself if you keep doing that. Find something else to use."

"I'm not going to stab myself."

"Be careful!"

The phone rang the minute I got the two water lines turned off and the old faucet lifted out. "You don't have to answer it," my sister said. I knew it was Niall and laid the dripping, old faucet on the throw rug and went down the hall. I carried the phone into the kitchen.

"I don't know how long she's going to be here. Until her flight next week I suppose, she doesn't have time anymore to head out to Oklahoma again and drive back again and locate anybody while she's out there now."

"I could still come, she can't be that bad." He laughed, missing several points.

I lowered my voice. “She’s having a rough time.”

“She had all last week to have a rough time.”

“Last week was her full-time sister-improvement project,” I practically whispered.

“And I thought you were perfect.”

“I am,” I told him. We were both quiet for a minute. What a sweetheart. I didn’t want to see him now. Or, rather, I didn’t want him to see me now because I judged myself pathetic for having a sister who would insult me in front of him and ask didn’t I have a sense of humor if I called her on it. My throat closed up just thinking about previous times I’d been mortified at her disloyalty.

God, how I wanted the relief of sitting under my portal under the big quiet moon with a beautiful man who just wanted to roll all over me until daybreak.

“What are you up to?” I managed to ask Niall.

“Saw a good movie last night in a falling down old theatre in this real small town. It was a sort of documentary about Shakespeare’s Richard III. Ya know; ‘Now is the winter of our discontent, etc., etc.’”

“I thought that was A Tale of Two Cities.”

“No, that was ‘It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.’”

That made me laugh, thinking of Dickens writing Richard III.

“I bet you’re just alike,” Niall murmured.

Goddamn. Et tú Bruté?

“Where did you put her, in the bed with you?” I could hear a lascivious smile in his voice that was, and wasn’t, altogether, a joke.

“You always have to have a man around, don’t you?” Suzie asked me. I didn’t say anything. “Is he coming?”

“He’s gonna call again tomorrow and see what we’re up to.” As if thirty-plus years of Suzy’s unrelenting response to eighteen years of shit I, myself, had walked away from was going to alter by then. I bent and reached under the sink to push the old drain ring up and out with its little lever that never had connected properly. My sink was a pretty Mexican tile one, wider than most of these inserts were designed for. The up and down mechanism under the old faucet wouldn’t reach properly to the center lever under the drain. I held the new one up to the old one. It was no bigger. Perhaps they sold extensions. Why hadn’t I thought of that before?

“Can’t Niall do the plumbing?”

“He’s an archeologist,” I said.

“And you’re a gallery manager.”

“But he’s got a degree and a good paycheck and can hire a plumber if he needed one.” I opened the medicine cabinet for a hair clip. “The sink is in backwards,” I commented, looking down at it and pulling my hair off my hot neck.

“How can you tell?” Suzy asked.

“The overflow holes are supposed to be in the front, where you’re not staring at them all the time.”

“And you’re just now realizing this?” She laughed cruelly.

“No,” I said. “Todd put the sink in.” I had, somewhere along the line, remembered this.

“So why’d he put it in backwards?”

“Because I said to put it in the other way, he didn’t like being told what to do, and it was his jig-saw we were using.” I wedged my fingers under the edges and since nothing was holding it in any longer, hauled the sink up into the air to look at the shape of the hole. It was quite a custom cut.

“You’re going to throw your back out! You shouldn’t be doing this by yourself.” The sink really wasn’t that heavy. I stepped off the throw rug and told her to pull it into the hallway so I could set the sink out of the way and go get a saw. The sink being Mexican and irregular, I’d have to redo the jigsawed edge, but at least then the drain plug might fit right; the true back being less sloped and fitting closer to the faucet.

I thought about calling my butch neighbor, knowing she’d have a jig-saw, or three, though it would no doubt take her hours to put her hands on one in her Marx Brothers’ stateroom of a tool shed. Unfortunately my only saw that seemed to be hanging around anymore was a battered needle-nose saw covered in pine sap that I used to cut boughs with for Christmas.

I walked back into the house from my shed with this and Suzy met me saying, “last autumn, and I haven’t heard from her since,” and looked at me sternly. It took me a second to realize this must have been the end of the sentence she was saying when I’d told her I needed to go to the shed for the saw. My veins filled with a liquid fear. I took a stab and asked, “Where do you think she is?”

“Don’t condescend to me.”

Christ. I really couldn't remember when this had started; these unending sentences. On the plus side, she followed me back to the bathroom without quite getting angry.

When we were little we used to plot what two contrasting locales we would call our own so we could visit or trade or split our time and have the best of both worlds. I had followed through on my half of the plan. What was mine now was hers, of course. Why would it not be? But when I'd told her to come with me last week while I walked out and watered my far-flung trees she'd stopped her inevitable story, irritably, and stood under the portal for fifteen minutes watching me off through the sagebrush. It was an idyllic thing to do, in the cool of the early evening, with the orange, low sunlight and all, and I'd wanted to share. When I walked back, she'd said, "You have your own private little life here, don't you?"

I stepped into the bathtub to open the window, but Suzy would have none of it.

"Anyone could see in!"

"There's no one out there for two miles!"

"C'mon, close it. I'll fan you." She laughed and pulled my washcloth off the rack and waved it at me like I was a mosquito.

I closed the window, pulled the shade, and stepped back out of the bathtub. I lifted the sink up off the throw rug and set it in the hole again, but right way round. It stuck up four or five inches. I reached up with one hand, took an eyeliner out of the medicine cabinet and marked the bulges I'd need to saw off, then I returned the sink to the hallway. It was only one or two inches of wood in two different places that needed to

be cut off but the wood was  $\frac{3}{4}$  inch thick, which sounds like nothing until you start sawing with a pine-sap covered needle-nosed saw.

I tried setting an easy pace but the saw bound up so I pressed it in hard and just went for it. Two minutes was about all I could handle. I had only a quarter inch cut when I stopped, exhausted. I peeled my work shirt off.

“When you finish here,” Suzy said, “we can start that garden wall you’ve been bellyaching about. There’s a full-moon’s worth of light.”

I sawed some more then wiped at the loose hairs falling in my face. God, I was tired of all this. I wanted a daddy. I wanted a big brother. Not that I hadn’t moved two thousand miles away from both of those things. I tied my drooping hair up again. I would’ve wet a cloth for my neck if I didn’t have the water turned off. I should’ve opened the window again. “Here, you take a turn.”

Suzy took the saw, holding it like a dinner knife. She turned her hand this way and that in a giggling show of incompetence until I took it back from her.

I sawed hard for a few more minutes then stopped, overcome with heat. Christ, this was hard. I rested a minute then gave another rush of a go at it. Then did that ten more times. My arms were starting to shake. I pulled my tank-top off and glanced in the mirror at the heat rash all over my breasts, then gave another run at fast sawing.

“Topless plumbing, this is a new one,” Suzy commented.

I thought, but did not say anything about, shoveling snow in the living room before I’d got all the way done with the ceiling and roof, or catching my sleeve on fire while belly-down in a five foot deep hundred-foot-long trench sweating copper pipe with an acetylene torch. Which after a full month of work to re-fill the trench, I’d sat back on

my heels, in a sheet of orange evening light, my shovel clanking off the side of my head and landing beside me when my hand, unbeknownst to me, had let go of it, and instead of some huge achievement to admire; I simply no longer had a hundred-foot-long trench in my yard.

So, why exactly did I need a man? Because a false sense of security was better than no sense of security, I supposed.

Why didn't I wait and ask Niall to cut the new hole for the sink? Because when I'd asked Rudy if he would give me a ride home after my car's radiator cracked, he'd called me a selfish cunt and driven over my foot.

After an hour I had the hole cut and the sink fitted right way around.

"Are we done here?"

"I can't get it tight." I was laying under the sink, facing up, like a (topless) sitcom plumber.

"How'd you get it untight?"

I didn't know how I'd got it untightened except that my hands had not been numb and shaking when I'd started. "Go out to the shed and get me the handful of wrenches," I said from under the sink. I figured it would complicate matters if I also asked for her to return the throw rug so I could stuff it under my back.

"Wenches?"

"Wrenches. They're on the shelf just to the left when you go in the door."

She liked her joke. "You keep wenches in your shed on a shelf?"

"C'mon."

"It's dark out."

“Well, mind you don’t surprise a coyote. The key’s on the hook by the door.”

“I don’t know what a wrench is,” she said.

“It’s a long silver stick with the letter ‘C’ on one end and a little ‘O’ on the other.”

“Really?”

“For cryin’ out loud, my back is getting a permanent dent in it!”

“Okay, okay.” She turned around, mumbling audibly, “the letter ‘D’ and a little ‘U’.

Suzy demanded absolute quiet when she watched a video. I didn’t exactly yell at the screen myself, but didn’t think an occasional “I’ll bet he’s the killer” was inappropriate. After several bossy “shhh’s” my mind wandered.

It was okay; *I* was under control. I valued beauty. I had beauty. I had freedom, and shelter. I had golden light, and Niall’s golden arms, strong under his rolled-back sleeves. His blue eyes always a surprise. The surprise of ever having those moments of bonding with someone else in this big, wild world, whether they’d lasted in the past or not, those moments proved something. I wasn’t sure what, but I valued them, I congratulated myself for having the courage to walk through the world finding them.

The phone rang, later than anyone should have been calling.

“I’m coming. I want to see you.” His pause was full of male hunger. It was an elemental sound, like rain or drums, but it did not have to assume its place at the head of the line, not all the time.

Fuck. I didn’t think that meanly, only realistically. Not that this had ever been proven, to my knowledge, that male hunger could come second.



“It’s been so crazy here, I need some of your calm,” he said. My calm? My calm!?

I pulled the phone further down the hallway away from the television. “I can’t. Can you please believe me?” I heard him take a deep breath. I had the brief thought that I should be scared because he was going to get mad.

I headed him off. “I want to see you, too. I know it might be another month now.” God, this little visit of Suzy’s was becoming costly. I just wanted my quiet evening to eat grilled cheese, and recover. I wanted my big sky, and sunlight like a presence that kept one company, and I wanted Niall.

“Thanks for throwing me a bone. Don’t you love me at all?” Niall asked.

“I love you,” I said quietly and realized, while falling out of love, that we’d never actually admitted those words before.

I sank onto the sofa and curled my legs up. Suzy had paused the video. She looked over with a grin on her face that I thought was inappropriate, considering. “There, there, when we finish the video we can go run the water again, the hot *and* the cold, it’ll be fun, you’ll see!”

END

