

When I grow tired, I ask my brother to be kind and to tell me bedtime stories as our mother used to do, though his tales were always as likely to keep me awake as to lull me to sleep.

I do not know if I should chance my dreams tonight. Unsure, I continue to beg him: just one more before bed.

My brother says, "Lo. Unto the world was given a man and unto the man was given the world and all things were his, excepting his only son. For although the Maker of the world had given all the things He'd made to the man, He loved the son that the man himself had made, and He claimed the son as His own. And the man howled and he raged into the void, he cast his own hair and teeth into the void, but the void was his own, and returned to him his teeth and hair politely, and his son was gone from him.

"And the earth fell into the sun twelve times more before the man had a daughter. He made her of his sweat and of bread that he had chewed and of sawdust and fishing line, and if he did not love her, at least he had made her and kept her, for his Maker saw her and raised His brows and softly laughed. And He pitied the man and thought no more of his daughter. Until the man's daughter loved the Maker and she walked on her knees to Him, pressing her brow to the earth, and said, Lord, and she was with Him. And the man cursed and rent his garments and smeared himself with filth and he spit into the void but the void was his own and returned to him his spit, it slapped back against his face, and he was wroth.

"And the moon collided with the earth twelve times more before the man had twins. And they were as like each other as two eyes: one green, one blue, and their vision the same. And in the sight of the man and his Maker they were perfect, and the two of them loved the twins. The Maker said, come unto Me, and the man said, abide, and the twins said, go ye unto the void, and wrestle for us. So the man and his Maker did, and the void swallowed them. And the world and all things in it were the twins'; it was a garden; a brother swallowed the lock, and his brother the key."

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## Four Stories

Andrew R. Touhy

### HOW MUCH WE LOOK ALIKE

BROTHER AND SISTER, he said. Uncanny. To which we both smiled politely, and nodded, looking at each other. You looked nothing like me to me. I don't imagine I looked anything like you to you. You and your brother look similar but not much alike. You and your brother look more unlike than alike, in fact. Neither of your parents have blond hair and blue eyes. Your brother and I could never be mistaken for one another. Your brother and I could never be mistaken for brothers, either. My brothers and I look alike. We each look more than a little like each other. My younger brother looks very similar to me. We look like brothers. He looks so much like me that sometimes our older brother looks unrelated. Your brother still looks like your brother, even if he doesn't look like you. My older brother often looks like someone else's brother. In that regard, I guess, one could say he looks like your brother, one could say I look like your brother, one could say you look like my sister, one could say we look a lot like family. Or a lot like a family. In fact we are family now. Even though your brother has no brothers and my brothers and I have no sister. Our mom always wanted a daughter. Sometimes she asked whether or not we wanted a sister. To which I said yes. I don't know what my brothers said but I remember saying yes and trying to imagine, though I never quite could, what exactly a sister of ours might look like.

### BROTHER FROM SAN FRANCISCO

He's vegetarian now but eats fish, but not just any fish. First he must know where the fish comes from, then he must know whether it was farmed or wild caught, and then of course he must like the fish, the particular type of fish, that is, as food, which often depends on its freshness and preparation. We'd planned blackened dolphin on the

grill. Not dolphin the mammal, of course, but dolphinfish, a blunt-headed iridescent game fish—mahimahi, they call it out west—that lights up neon blue and green when hooked. It's a local specialty here and our favorite, sizzling in butter in an iron skillet. We laid it on a bed of sweet corn succotash, sour-cream black beans on the side, and he said it was good. He said he liked it but asked if we had any bread and cheese.

We ask: What do you want to do today? He answers: Whatever you normally do. We ask: But is there anything you'd like to do? His answer: He'd like to do whatever it is we usually do.

Really?

Really.

We don't believe that. Because we don't necessarily want to do what we have to do today and we are us. We'd like him to want to do something else, so that we have a reason not to do what we have to do today. We can't bring ourselves to believe him because while we know him to be a good-natured, easygoing person, we understand that he's from San Francisco also. He wouldn't live in San Francisco if he wanted to do what we do here.

Our brother wears a wetsuit and rubber skullcap swimming.

Today, we need to cut, trim, edge, and then water the lawn before the broiling sun climbs too high. He lives in an apartment on a hill blurred by fog. We have three hampers full of dirty clothes, including pee-damp sheets. He keeps a small caged bird as a pet, trained to poop on command. Our minivan needs to be washed, the inside, seats and floorboards, vacuumed of crumbs, scrubbed of spills, but first we should organize the garage. He rides a bike to work and even on dates. Saturday night is bath night. Last weekend he attended an international film festival. The pool needs chlorine, tablets; we should pick up a new beach raft too. His housemate is from Portland. Our two children squeal from their rooms—one painted Sailor's Sea (blue), one painted Tricycle Taupe (pink)—our cat hides in the box spring of our bed, our horsey yellow Lab eats a toy a day, from the piles in nearly every corner of the living room. On his home bar—an antique tea cart—at least one bottle of fifteen-year rye.

He says: They're not much for conversation, are they?

Then he says: But of course they're only, what, two and three?

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He likes to read. Sometimes when he's saying something we have to realize that he's quoting from a book. Or it sounds as though he's quoting something from a book. Sometimes even his jokes are made out of something he read in a book. He's writing his own book too, of poetry. He writes poems and sometimes reads them out loud, to a live audience, at a bar or café, or in the back of used bookstores. Quoting people he likes to read, or just quoting quotes he likes, he has said:

Marriage—nothing against yours—marriage is a great institution, but who wants to live in an institution? (Groucho Marx.)

A lawn is nature under totalitarian rule. (Michael Pollan.)

Love: A temporary insanity curable by marriage. (Ambrose Bierce.)

When a greedy seagull clipped our son on the forehead: When it comes to children, let the air comb them. (Julio Cortázar.) And later, kneeling beside our son: Perhaps I heard a bird singing and felt for him a small, birdlike affection. (Jorge Luis Borges.)

Vodka is the blank canvas upon which many a colorless cocktail is painted. (Himself, we think.)

We fall asleep on the couch, watching a slow, long, confusing movie with subtitles. We wake even more confused, to what looks like the exact scene we were watching when we dozed off. Then he falls asleep, watching a movie we've all seen before but edited and censored for television.

He is difficult to read.

He brings his own coffee from San Francisco. This time, he brought his own grinder.

While we were at Mass he went to the Whole Foods and now the countertops are faintly stained with cilantro, the cutting boards and kitchen floor littered with diced onion and sticky garlic scrap and chili stems, which snap like dead lizard tails underfoot. He's made his salsa again. The bowl of green is spicy, bowl of red mild. He also made

quesadillas. We've been invited to a belated Cinco de Mayo fiesta, hosted by friends whose little boy, Xavier, attends the same preschool as our son. But we weren't asked to bring anything. In fact we've been told not to bring a thing, other than ourselves and our brother from San Francisco. But our brother insists. The gesture at least, he argues, will be appreciated. Besides, they've never had his salsa.

His salsa is too hot to eat. Often it's too hot to smell. All we can breathe is heat. A smoky bubble ripe with heat.

We put our noses over the bowl and cough, eyes stinging almost immediately with tears.

That's not the mild one, he says, try a chip. We believe him. Our lips burn. No, first our tongues burn. The whole tongue: top and tip, the sides all around. Then the roofs of our mouths, the insides of our cheeks, our throats, our stomachs. How does it taste? Our noses start running. We reach for water, although he says use a piece of bread, or tortilla, to wipe the capsicum oils away. We drink two glasses of milk each.

His quesadillas are strange, small and hard, filled with a crumbling white kind of salty cheese that doesn't melt.

The babysitter! Our first. The girl next door. She's thirteen. Is thirteen dollars enough? We can't believe we're so nervous.

He looks bored. At the far end of the patio table with our friends and neighbors, who all have children at the preschool, our brother sits cross-legged, hardly speaking. He looks down, either at his lap or the beer in his hands, he stares off across the yard, at the fence decorated with strings of tiny Mexican flags. He fingers the beard hairs under his chin while gazing up at the rustling palm trees, so tall, straight, and dark against the round dusk sky. We catch his eye. He raises his sweaty brow, nods, and smiles without parting his lips, then winks. We ask if he's having a good time and he says he's having fun. Our favorite friends, a couple our age with a boy and girl also, ask if he's always like this. What? Distracted. Aloof. Isn't he having any fun? No, he's doing fine, we say, he's just settling in. When the hosts ask how he's doing, we say he's having a good time, we say he said he's having fun.

Our brother is a listener, a thinker. It's not that he doesn't have plenty to say, it just seems that he prefers to listen and think it to himself. Our brother is an observer, a participant-observer, but mostly an observer first, and then, after a while, or after the fact, a participant.

He once compared family to a still life. Clichéd in subject matter,

in form, but timely nonetheless. Family is a convention, he's said, and he's OK with that. Life itself is timeworn. He's happy to take his place on the table. As knife or bread, pitcher or bowl. As fruit. Even as a fly on the fruit.

A fly?

Or bee.

But when someone asks about his time in Mexico he comes alive.

He tells a story of drinking tequila with tequila barons in Tequila, the town. Many of these men were blond, blue eyed, dressed as cowboys. They bought and paid for round after round, served by a man they called The Priest, in an upscale cantina named The Chapel. Two mariachi bands hired for the night serenaded them out to the dusty, cobbled streets. He tells of eating *menudo*, the hangover stew made with cow stomach. He talks of overnight turkey buses through cold mountain villages and military checkpoints and teeming outdoor markets with bizarre fruits and regional dishes with long, unpronounceable names, some in a language other than Spanish. He ate grasshoppers with mezcal. He ran a small café for a while and roasted coffee beans trucked straight in from the nearby plantation mill. He visited ruins that were once the center of an empire.

On the coast, where the lone eyesore is a palm-frond-thatched hut that serves ice-cold bottled beer, and the ocean does all the work of the day, he slept in a hammock for two dollars a night. After the mosquitoes got him, he rented a cedar-and-cinder-block bungalow, with window screens and a ceiling fan, for just three dollars more.

We all take turns hugging the hosts good night, and promise to make next year's party. Our brother says he'll fly in again. He says he'd love to help out again: He makes mean tofu *enchiladas verdes*, not to mention killer *chiles rellenos* that aren't heavy sponges of oil. He is drunk. We are all drunk but he sounds drunk. He sets his beer bottle on the serving table and it falls off. We are relieved that he doesn't notice and stoop to retrieve it from the grass, strewn with tortilla chips even the dogs refuse to eat.

Enjoy the salsa! he says.

Question: Seeing anyone special? Any serious romance brewing?

Answer: Regard the society of women as a necessary unpleasantness of social life, and avoid it as much as possible. (Count Leo Tolstoy.)

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We all fall asleep on the couch.

He is difficult to read. Or rather, it is difficult to read how he is reading us.

Truth be told, how can we know much about him? Even a long weekend, once or twice a year, isn't much time to spend with someone if you want to get to know them, if you want to really get to know them again. Of course we try to get to know him again each visit, which is no easy process with our brother, especially now that he's from San Francisco. Inevitably the first days are spent remembering who he was last time he came. While the next days are spent learning and accepting how he's changed since, or learning and accepting how we'd misunderstood him before. Things get trickier when we factor in memories of our brother's prior visits, not to mention our memory of him from childhood.

There aren't any days left after that.

He is gone again, he is out of sight although not entirely out of mind. But to a great degree—whether we like it or not, we can't help it—we soon forget who he is now. We wouldn't make the effort if he weren't family. Honestly, we love him but wouldn't work this hard if he weren't related to us.

Even if he stayed for weeks, a month, a whole summer or winter, if he lived here for the year, or moved back, finally, who's to say the distance—the inevitable distance grown between us as brothers and family and changed people in the world in general—would shrink or dissolve? Proximity doesn't guarantee closeness.

By the same token, what can he know about us? The fact is, nobody knows anyone that well. It's a metaphysical, or phenomenological, issue, as our brother would say. People—family perhaps more so—are a mystery, which does make sense, since everything begins in mystery. A lifetime is too short a time to get to know much about yourself, really. That we are who we are, or who we think we are, is equally mysterious, when you give the notion some thought. What was it our brother once said? Every man possesses three characters: that which he exhibits, that which he really has, and that which he believes he has. (Jean-Baptiste Alphonse Karr.)

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We still don't own a coffeemaker because we still don't drink coffee.

He is difficult to read. Or rather, it's difficult to read how he is reading us. Or rather, it's difficult to read how he is reading us read him.

He did like our dolphin. So much so, in fact, he finished the leftovers, cold, before heading to the airport. He hadn't noticed, he said, just how tasty the meat was. As dense as chicken but moister and more richly flavored. It paired really well with the sweet corn and black beans, now that the overall ingredients had had time to meld. Was there a touch of mango in the sauce? Bonus, he said, dolphin itself is a remarkable species of fish. He'd looked it up and found that in general they have a quicksilver metabolism, reach maturity in a year, and spawn year-round. Their lean flesh isn't prone to bioaccumulation, meaning of almost any fish in the ocean, dolphin is less likely to have dangerous concentrations of mercury. Even their scales will soften and glow again when returned to the water.

We watched him: standing before the refrigerator, elbow propped on the open door, bags beside his crossed feet, eating bite after bite, straight from the Tupperware container. How we had hoped he would like our dolphin. How we had enjoyed planning and preparing it in anticipation of his visit. Certainly we're happy to know that worldwide stocks are both healthy and well managed, but what makes us most happy is knowing our brother enjoyed our dolphin. Blame us for such an unreasonable thought—we try not to think it. Or we try to keep from admitting that we do think it. But we wish that each of his visits was like this moment: bite by bite, us certain of his pleasure.

## FATHERS AND SONS

Never, not even when I was the sole masculine power structure in your life, did you have the urge to kill me?

Clarify, please, your use of the word "urge."

I understand it, and use it here, to mean desire, want, a strong inclination toward murdering me for irrational reasons. You could, quite knowingly, harbor considerable resentment for any number of

parental missteps or misdeeds I, quite unknowingly, committed as "father." For example, the day I took away your scuba knife. Or you may—here I draw on the classic psychological metaphor for describing our psychosexual competition—out of an inborn fear of castration joined by any lingering subconscious hunger to replace the breast as love object with your mother, my wife, still wish me dead.

Let me make sure I understand you completely. You took my scuba knife?

You were threatening the neighbor's boy. You were threatening several neighborhood boys, in fact. And their pets.

Tell me, upon hearing of my death by shark attack in coastal waters, how would you have felt?

Remember, you never actually *went* scuba diving. We bought you the one knife, and a pair of flippers, which you wore in the pool.

By emphasizing "went," do I detect that you believe I'm a failure?

You detect my personal investment in you as a success, to the extent that it validates my worth as parent.

So I'm to feel better knowing that what I detect is your disappointment in yourself because I'm a disappointment?

Yes. And you're to feel like not killing me.

For the record, I have no—nor have I ever had—interest in killing you.

Clarify, please, your use of the word "interest."

By "interest," I mean I am not—nor ever have been—suitably aroused to act on the above-mentioned oedipal impulses nor any conscious, premeditated plot to avenge my childhood self . . . of which I was robbed . . . insofar as neither will resolve the bewilderment, anger, and anxiety we all experience as a result of being thrown together with a particular set of parents by the accident, and I suppose miracle, of birth. I am, after much work of an inmost nature, my own charge. And while gaining this degree of self-awareness, or self-actualization, for lack of a better term, nearly always involves some rebellion and conflict with those in power, I can safely say now you have nothing to fear from me.

So I'm to understand, and believe, that under all possible circumstances you would absolutely not kill me?

Would not.

Not by accident?

No.

Not in self-defense? Say, if I forced the issue?

No.

Not if I asked?

Not even then.

Well. I'm disappointed. Relieved but truly disappointed. I thought you had it in you. I wasn't tiptoeing around in fear, mind you, but I've been careful, all of these years, and, I admit, strangely hopeful. You certainly are a disappointment. You certainly have proved to be your mother's son.

I am.

Is that your old scuba knife?

## MISTAKERS

Only in the shower, my body lathered with soap, did I realize I'd mistaken your toothbrush for mine. We have known each other eleven years and a month. We will have lived together eight years, come June. We have been married now close to two years, give or take a handful of weeks. Our toothbrushes are identical. White with blue-and-white bristles. Two more shades of blue mark the spines. To prevent any confusion, you wound the handle of yours with an elastic hair tie, which is black. I could brush my teeth with your toothbrush. I would take appropriate pains to keep this fact from you also. I would brush faster than usual, I imagine. By that I mean brush the teeth faster, each tooth, I suppose, receiving fewer and quicker brushes, and brush the set of teeth as a whole, the uppers and lowers together, in less time than is recommended by dentists. I would try to keep my gums and tongue, the roof of my mouth, even my lips, from touching the bristles of your brush. And I would go as far as to dry the bristles with a towel, or use my thumb or palm of my hand—like my brothers and I used to as kids—and of course then return your toothbrush to its right place. Our toothbrush holder has three perfectly round small holes, arranged exactly like those on the face of a bowling ball. You keep your toothbrush, I think, in the top right hole, where a left-handed bowler such as I would put his index finger, were he bowling with our toothbrush holder. Or I could rush dripping wet from the shower to fetch and dress my toothbrush, hurrying back as if moving fast alone could prevent the interruption, or erase it from existence, or at least help me fool myself into thinking I'd invented it. It was cold, morning. Bathrooms are cold in general most mornings, all by themselves, before the first person showers.

I hadn't been under the water a minute but it was hot and wouldn't I drip with each step everywhere? A pattern of drops and damp footprints across the rectangular bath mat, around the round red bath rug beneath it, onto the linoleum tiles beyond. And into your makeup kit, which you set on the sink at night before bed, and I set on the floor beside the sink each morning before shaving. You wouldn't be happy with both makeup and makeup kit soaked with shower rather than shaving water, or so I reasoned, as your toothbrush entered my mouth, seemingly of its own accord. Here is where you step into the story, the shower, quite naturally, quite literally. Which means you pulled back the curtain on me midthought, amid my thoughts, only to climb in and stand beneath the water, half asleep still, but already brushing.

## The Dwindling

Diane Greco Josefowicz

*Early stages in a Dwindling's rehabilitation are the most difficult because there is inevitably so little with which to work.*

*—The Book of Querque: A Compendium of Advice for Pedagogues*

"WATCH THAT STEP," Dr. Querque warns me as he shoulders open the door that fronts his Home for Dwindling Boys and Girls. In the foyer, a trio of woodwork angels clasp psalters to their chests as they raise their bulging eyes to heaven. Their mouths are burnished Os.

"The threshold," he informs me, his words falling like other, lesser angels from the dark height of his mouth, "is not what it used to be."

I follow, mindful of my fingers, which are grimed with the train's soot and beneath that, like a memory, dust from my mother's pencil sharpener. Emptying it was the last task she set me, keeping her expectations low, so I might easily exceed them and not burden her with a need for correction. Unlike my mother, Querque seems unfazed by what I require in this department. Of my belongings, I was allowed only my drafting compass, which Querque confiscated after he caught me using it to jimmy our compartment's lock. "Thus does the personality gain in structure, brick by brick," he said, straightening the lapels of his jacket, which gave off an odor of gingersnaps, though there were no such wonders on him. (While he dozed, I checked.) This too was a lesson: Beware the senses, which bamboozle. An empty stomach, however, is incontestable. My last meal was yesterday.

I shrug myself from my coat, which Querque takes from me with no sign of the displeasure I am expecting, since I have been for some minutes dripping on his parquet. I shuck my good shoes, and my toes emerge, ten quivering shrimps, through holes that I swear to heaven weren't there before. Against the world's disorder, which eddies about me like a patch of bad water, all I can do is repeat my mother's advice: Stand straight, smile bright. *And hold.* Sensing my beaming has a bit of the beam about it (as my mother would say), I force my