

PHANTOM TWIN

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Honorable Mention, Short Story



he neon numbers on the dashboard read eleven o'clock when I looked at the stranger feigning sleep in the seat beside me and, annoyed by the silence, honked the horn and watched my brother react.

Neal's long neck jerked around quickly and his eyes questioned mine.

"Sorry." I searched for a lie. "There was a driver crossing the yellow line."

"So this is Texas," Neal stated absentmindedly.

"Yes, it is. To me, in the car, it still feels like home. I could be anywhere but out there, Neal, out there is Texas."

"I've never been anywhere. I know I'm here but I still feel like I'm there, like I haven't left. There isn't much to it—this traveling. If you would've told me last week that today I'd be in Texas, I would've said you were crazy."

"I didn't know you last week."

"But you knew me once. You knew me back when we lived in the same place."

"Now, that was Texas."

"That was home."

"That was a womb," I corrected.

"What do you think it was like?"

"Like this. Like sitting inside a place, looking out—like knowing you're there but you're in here."

"Is that how mom felt?" Neal asked

"I don't know how she felt about anything."

"She must've loved Texas—to stay all this time."

"People stay where they're familiar, where they belong—once we left that womb, we left our home."

"And now we're back."

"In here looking out."

"And wanting to be a part of it," Neal said and then lowered his sunglasses down from the top of his head to the bridge on his nose and I couldn't tell whether or not he was crying again.

He'd cried when he'd gotten off the plane. I saw this man coming towards me like a mirror and he started to weep. I recognized him immediately, but the

shock was so great that I took a step backwards when he came forward for a hug and he saw me flinch and that hesitation made his eyes fill once more. When we got in the car, our small talk ended and his eyes were clear until he decided at last to shut them and give me the peace I thought I'd needed and the peace I didn't want once I had so I honked to end the drama.

My agent had been the one to tell me that Neal had been trying to reach me; that my brother had called—that I had a twin brother who was trying to track me down to tell me that our mother was dying. That was on Monday. I called him back on Tuesday. Today was Wednesday. Right away, I thought it was a prank but he'd been around this whole time—my mirror—and I hadn't known.

All my life, I never wanted to know my origins. The only thing I cared to know was that I was put up for adoption and unlike most, I never felt curious about my birth mother. After all, she'd given me up and I couldn't bring myself to care about her one way or another and now she was dying. I never even realized I'd had a brother; she hadn't just abandoned me—I had a partner in the betrayal. When I spoke to Neal on the phone, he'd said, "Wasn't it crazy that they separated us? I guess there wasn't much call for twins back then."

To me, it made perfect sense but I didn't want to bring him down so all I'd offered was, "Yeah. Weird."

That was basically the bulk of the conversation and we'd agreed to meet up at the airport, rent a car and do the three hour drive together. It wasn't until we met that Neal quietly told me, sideways, while lugging his duffel from the baggage claim that he had a phobia about driving. It seems he'd lost his foster parents in an auto accident when he was nineteen. Poor guy. I didn't have time to register the deception—the imposition that I was now to be chauffeur. Brotherly, I accepted because he'd lost two parents and was about to lose another but I wasn't prepared for the immediate critique on my writing that followed after Neal and I had buckled our laps into the tiny hatchback we'd been given in lieu of the Lexus my assistant had forgotten to request.

"I've read everything you've ever written without knowing that you're my brother," Neal mentioned curiously, adding, "A few days ago, I reread your short story collection and had this unsettling feeling that somehow you knew—not about me in particular but it's like you knew you were missing something—your other half."

"My other half and I divorced five years ago."

"I'm referring to your short story, 'Phantom Twin.' You remember it?"

"Vaguely. I wrote it in grad school."

"It's the one about that girl, Alice, whose mother thinks she's losing her mind because she hears her talking to herself but when she's questioned, Alice claims she was talking to her phantom twin—the shadow on her mother's ultrasound that the doctors had incorrectly assumed was her twin sister. Her mother gets out of the conversation quickly. It's very suspicious and later she's in bed

talking to the phantom twin herself. It's like they've always missed something that had never been there to begin with except in your case, I was there and you didn't know it and vice versa."

"Hmm," was all I'd said—my succinct phrase for any thought I didn't feel like sharing. I decided to change the subject by asking Neal his profession. It was intriguing that the topic hadn't been introduced—like we'd been in AA or something—strangers testing each other's boundaries without getting too specific instead of two members of the same shallow gene pool.

"I'm a photographer. I take family portraits. I like my work but it's not influential like yours."

"A photograph is a powerful thing. It can influence a person to buy their child a camera so they can keep the memories alive, it can help save a marriage, get you remembering the good times."

"True, but it's not an outlet for my thoughts like your work must be for you. Getting back to the twin story, don't you find that symbolic considering us? The longing for a sibling?"

"No, I mean, you could look at your work as a longing—taking pictures of families when you yourself were missing your real family."

"I never thought of it that way. Hmm," he said—his turn for my succinct phrase.

Shortly thereafter, I got the feeling that I'd depressed the poor soul and he confirmed it by announcing he was tired and began settling in for a fake sleep.

After the honking incident, we stopped for gas and picked up some awful service station sandwiches that tasted like lead smeared with generic mustard. I'd made an offer to treat somewhere nice but he'd just smiled meekly and said we should really head onto mother's place and I found the term unsettling.

Neal sensed my discomfort. "She'd assumed we were together. That's what they'd told her. Were you surprised that she'd gotten in touch with me?"

"Not really. Isn't that the thing to do when one's dying?"

"I suppose. I was angry though because I'd never gotten a call before then and I'd wanted one over the years. Didn't you?"

"I was content without a call."

"I needed her. I went through kind of a rebellious phase—did some bad things growing up."

"Well, don't feel bad. I got into some trouble when I was fifteen but I don't think my adoption was the root cause."

"It was around the time when I was fifteen myself. I'd been at a pool party and a kid drowned. I think he was the cousin of a classmate. I saw him go under and didn't do anything even though I'd always been a strong swimmer. I could've saved him—I was the only one who noticed but I was numb. My body stayed still."

"Jesus."

"After that, I really wanted to talk to someone. I couldn't talk to my parents. I thought Mom would somehow understand. I tried to look her up but it was no use."

We stared at the road ahead, the gravel being eaten by the car as we advanced down the road and I found myself saddened by the way it just continually disappeared behind us.

"Honestly, were you ever curious about her?"

"No, she dumped us and I don't hang around after getting dumped."

"Are you talking about your ex-wife?"

"Pam?"

"Is that her name? You've mentioned your divorce twice."

"Have I?"

"What happened?"

"She thought I was cheating on her."

"Were you?"

"No. I've never cheated in my entire life. You know, it's funny, most men want to but I never did. I flirted—we all flirt—it makes us feel alive but I never took it any farther. I was completely taken with Pam. It was just the letters. She found my letters and assumed I'd been unfaithful."

"Love letters?"

"Fan letters. I'd been corresponding with a certain fan for seven years. They were atypical—devoid of the usual fan propaganda—just friendly letters telling me what was new in their life and I wrote back."

"Did you ever meet?"

"No."

"Do you still write?"

"No. I burned them all when Pam accused me, just to show her how little the letters meant to me. She called it an act of passion—Pam was a poet. It was sexy as hell. When she shouted, I wanted her even more. Everything was an act of passion to her."

"Did they really mean little? The letters?"

"No, not really."

"So you cared about her?"

"Pam? Yeah, I loved her. Still do. I haven't had sex since without feeling like I'm cheating on her and she's even remarried."

"No, your fan. You cared about her?"

"It was a man. Yes, I mean, I cared about him and considered him a friend."

"Oh, I," Neal began to fidget.

"For God's sake, I'm heterosexual and so is he. His wife died and I was her favorite author so he wrote to me—he was just missing her and needed someone to talk to and so did I. There are certain things you can't tell the person with whom you share a bed. Pam thought there was something unnatural about it all but he was like a brother to me," I said, cursing the simplicity of the revelation and we were both humbled into silence. After awhile, I turned the spotlight back on Neal and asked if he was married.

"No but I'm engaged. Her name is Joyce Reed."

"R-E-E-D? That was Pam's maiden name."

"She's an optometrist at an office next to mine. We've been dating for two years—she's an old fashioned, small town girl from a religious family—won't move in before the wedding. You know how it is. I have a picture."

He reached into his pocket and fumbled for the photo holder in his wallet and offered it to me. "That's Joyce and that's my dog, Otto. We're getting married in July. I know she'd love to meet you. She's so much smarter than me—reads voraciously. Will you come?"

"I...yeah, I'd love to," I said and realized that I meant it and he smiled in return.

"Oh, there's our exit," Neal announced and then quietly added, "I'm nervous. I don't know what we're supposed to do when we see her."

"Smile and tell her how great we're doing, how she didn't fuck us up, how we've forgiven her and thought of her fondly on every birthday and mother's day."

"I couldn't do that."

"Neither could I."

"I'm worried about what to expect—how she'll be."

"You said it was bone cancer; it won't be good."

"Don't leave me alone in there," he whispered.

"I won't. The same goes for me. I don't handle emotion well. I expect she'll be crying."

"I think I'll probably cry. I mean, it's natural, isn't it? Don't you think? To cry?"

"I never cry. Not even when I was a baby. My parents feared I was a mute."

We turned into the long dusty driveway that Neal had read off of a blue index card and both of us exited the car quickly, not wanting to delay or spend time thinking. There was a cracked concrete sidewalk leading up to the front door and Neal followed my footsteps carefully as I knocked, afterwards startled by the sudden presence of a man coming towards us, not realizing I'd knocked on a screen door, thanks to the heavy, lazy Texan shadows seeping down from the sky onto the trees.

The man looked at us quizzically and I glanced at Neal, his silence forcing my lips to open. "I'm Luke Corday and this is Neal Givens. We're sons of Lynn Adams."

He pulled the rickety door open, mumbling a terse greeting and then cleared his throat, continuing, "I'm her brother Keith."

I extended my hand cordially and he shook it. Neal followed suit and Keith's mouth remained open and it seemed he had more to say.

"I don't know how to tell you boys this after y'all came such a ways out but Lynn died this morning around eleven a.m."

"I see."

Neal stared at me blankly, wondering if I really did see but I was as slow to process the news as he was. How had he missed her? Yes, Neal's flight was thirty minutes late but we'd made it to the car in no time. I did the math. At eleven, I'd honked the horn to wake up my brother and we'd been driving like madmen ever since.

Keith asked, "Would you like to go in and see her?"

Neal sat down at the foot of the teal carpeted staircase. He shook his head at me sadly and I understood that he'd rather go on hoping than face the truth. I told Keith that I'd go in. I said it before thinking it through and knew that although I resisted sentimentality, something about the aroma of the home—the mixture of cinnamon, vanilla and spices combined with the pungent stench of sickness and antiseptic cleaners hit me in the pit of the stomach. Keith led me over to a closed door off to the side of the kitchen and pointed.

"She's in there."

I walked inside tentatively like I was wandering in on someone taking a nap and my feet stopped involuntarily, not wanting to intrude. I stayed like that for a moment, finding it hard to leave my station at the foot of the bed, one hand resting on the wooden knob of her grand four-poster and the other clinging to the crocheted yarn of a tropical colored afghan strewn haphazardly over her feet. Finally, I pulled myself away and moved closer until I could see her face.

She looked tough, weathered and completely different from the photo on her nightstand and I studied the photograph more than her face, preferring the carefree image of her laughing in the wind, blonde hair flying, head thrown back slightly, green eyes blazing mischievously. I wondered what had been so funny and why she'd laughed—something about the way she admired the photographer made me believe she'd been in love at the time. I hoped it had worked out, that he was generous and kind and made her laugh more than he made her cry. I liked that laugh and wished I'd had the opportunity to be the one to make her head to fall backwards.

I must've been in there awhile because Keith walked in offering a cup of tea. I accepted the drink but just let it stay warm in my hands. I never liked tea much but today I didn't think I could swallow anything for fear that the tears would start and I wouldn't be able to stop but my eyes remained dry.

“Would you like the photo?”

“No, but I think my brother might. He likes photography.”

Neal and I were silent on the ride back to the airport. We booked our flights home matter-of-factly and then boarded the moving walkways as mine was scheduled to depart in fifteen minutes.

He walked with me all the way to the gate and once we'd arrived, I didn't know what to say, plunged into the sea of well-wishers and lovers around us parting with hugs, kisses, tears and laughs. Too much had been said and not enough at the same time. It was beyond awkward and foolishly, I told him it was nice meeting him but he seemed amused by the politeness of the expression and shook my hand warmly, reassuring that it had been nice for him as well.

They called my row and I said goodbye, adding that he say hi to Joyce for me, as we began slowly to walk away from each other, not quite strangers yet but the feeling was growing strong.

“Well, you'll tell her yourself in July,” he said halfheartedly.

“Yes, the wedding,” I told him in an equal tone.

We forced smiles and waved again as I left his eye line and made my way onto the plane, finding my seat without trouble. I settled in and played the entire day over in my mind, focusing on the photographs I'd seen and the ones I'd handed back to Neal: Joyce happy and playing Frisbee with Neal's dog, Lynn laughing and in love. Suddenly, I pictured Neal's face and knew for certain that I'd never see him again—it'd been brief, but I had a brother, one that I knew would no longer remain a phantom or a sibling but somewhere in between and a solitary tear slid down my cheek at the revelation.

