

# Sympathy

by Daniel D'Arezzo

I was a love child, conceived on my parents' honeymoon and born nine months later. I was born in Women's Hospital, in Bolton Hill, and about a year later my parents bought a house outside the city, in a part of Baltimore County called Overlea—a house next to the house owned by my mother's parents. In that house I grew up, and my younger brother came along a couple of years later and grew up there as well, although I would have preferred he hadn't.

I was fortunate in having my grandparents next door, because my grandfather, at least, was sane. As for my father, perhaps the location of the house was not so fortunate, because he did not get along with his mother-in-law, who had been against the marriage. When my mother was discouraged about my father, as she frequently was, she had a ready ear into which she could pour her troubles, and she did.

My mother, poor woman, was surrounded by males. She professed to like men, but I don't know if I believed her. I'm like my mother and I don't know if I like men. Now, if most men were like my grandfather, Vernon Miles, I'm sure I would like them, but very few are. One day I was doing something—I don't recall what it was—some little-boy thing, like staring off into the distance when she was talking to me, which annoyed my mother, who promptly screamed at me, and Pop called her down: “Doris, leave the boy alone.” It was as if the sky had opened up and a voice had thundered from above. She was dumbfounded long enough to stop molesting me. My state of mind at the time was a mixture of awe, gratitude and evil delight at my mother's chagrin. It made a powerful impression on me, because it confirmed for me that I had done nothing wrong. Later I understood that my mother resented my existence, because my birth had trapped her in a marriage she had instantly regretted. I understood but I couldn't forgive. She was over 30 when I was born. Shouldn't she have known better?

When I was pretty much grown up, my grandfather died. He had mowed the lawn and said he wasn't feeling well and went to lie down, and when Mom-mom checked on him, he was gone, and so was the foundation of my childhood. When I finished college, I left Baltimore and returned only sporadically and always with dread, because after Pop died, there was nothing and no one to put a lid on the constant bickering. Whenever I arrived home, everyone wanted to hear my news; this state of anxious anticipation lasted approximately 30 seconds. I had clearly not developed the art of holding an audience spellbound and was, rather, the captive audience, my parents the performers in a bizarre theater of cruelty.

It is a fact of life that returning to the ancestral abode automatically infantilizes just about anyone. A responsible adult in your own life, you are forever a child in your parents' eyes. You are their child, but you are no longer cute and adored, if ever you were; you are merely a case of failed expectations. You are insufficiently loving, attentive, intelligent, talented, successful and grateful. Maybe that's not true if you're Bill Gates, but how many of us are? And even Bill Gates—was he sufficiently grateful to his mom? Is anyone?

In their performances, my parents competed for my attention, approval and agreement. I was supposed to take one side against the other. She nagged, he farted. It was that petty. I really could never understand or stand it. When Darwin published *The Descent of Man*, many people mistakenly thought he was telling us we were descended from monkeys and, consequently, were deeply offended. They did not stop to consider the monkeys' feelings. In my case, I was directly descended from people whose ape-like characteristics were all too apparent. I had to recuse myself or become a human sacrifice.

Something remarkable happened after Mom-mom died. Maybe it was the heightened appreciation of their own mortality, or maybe merely the fact that they were thrown upon their own resources and my mother no longer had the willing ear next door, but they started to get along. They turned 80, and that is a threshold over which very

few skip lightly. They were getting old. They weakened. There were things they had done that they could no longer do. Their friends were growing older too, and falling by the wayside. Their world shrank to just themselves and a few others. They had always been religious, but now they went to mass together nearly every day and took comfort from the church, its early-morning stillness and somber liturgy. My father particularly enjoyed funerals and was regular in attendance, even if the deceased had been a complete stranger.

My parents lived in the same two-story house in which I had grown up and they climbed the stairs every night to sleep in the same double bed. By habit they each slept on the same side of the bed they always had, my mother on the left, near the door, and my father on the right, near the window. A curious series of events took place in this late stage of their marriage, which I learned about from my brother, who continued most of his life to live in Baltimore, although he had almost as little to do with my parents as I did. But he occasionally had lunch with Dad, and after a few beers, our father poured out his tale. I wasn't there, of course, so these are not Dad's exact words, and they aren't even Randy's exact words but my own words—my attempt to make sense of one of the strangest stories I ever heard.

It began when Dad woke up one night around two in the morning, as he often did, and got out of bed to pee. But that night, he found himself on the wrong side (that is, the left side) of the bed. He stood up and saw that he was near the door instead of the window. He was disoriented, to say the least, but he was careful not to wake up Mom, who was snoring more loudly than usual. He went to the bathroom where, years ago, Mom had installed a toilet that had a seat that would not stay up. It was an anti-male toilet that would not cooperate with a man or boy who wanted to pee standing up, so my father had got in the habit of sitting down when he peed at night, which was just as well because once he had fainted while peeing upright because his blood had pooled while he was sleeping and couldn't get up to his brain. He normally slept in his boxer shorts and T-shirt and he prepared to lower his shorts but found that his T-

shirt had grown down to his knees. When he yanked it up, he discovered that he was wearing briefs and not boxers. He was tired and bewildered, but he just yanked down his briefs and sat and peed, flushed the toilet, yanked up his briefs and went back to bed. He lay there for a while, on the wrong side of the bed, and stared at the ceiling, but he could not figure out what had happened and finally, exhausted with thinking, he fell asleep.

In the morning, he woke up on his customary side of the bed in his T-shirt and boxer shorts, and the events of the night seemed only a bizarre dream. He wondered if it were possible that he and Mom had had sex and that, afterwards, he had rolled over on to her side of the bed. He did not remember having sex either the night before or for a very long time prior, but the idea of having sex had entered his mind and began to fester. He recalled how he used to try to make himself agreeable to his wife and how occasionally she succumbed to his boyish charm. It had not been too difficult, just a night out, dinner and dancing, a couple of glasses of wine, cornball joking combined with sexual innuendo—naughty, naughty—oh, it did the trick. He thought he was still up to it, and so he said to Doris that morning, “We haven't been to Manero's in a long time.”

“What the heck are you thinking?” she said.

“Huh?” he said, thinking *Am I that transparent? Does she see right through me?*

“Don't you remember that Manero's closed last year?” she said.

“I don't believe I ever knew that. Closed up, did they?” Sad, another funeral of sorts, and he had missed it. “Come to think of it, maybe I did know.” *It isn't good to seem like a complete booby, must maintain one's dignity or it's the booby hatch for you, buddy.* “But that's neither here nor there. I was merely proposing that we dine out tonight.”

“What's the matter?” Mom said. “My cookin' ain't good enough for ya?”

Oh ho, playing hard to get. “Heck no, Doris. You're a great cook, the greatest. Why else do you think I've gotten so fat?”

She looked at him disdainfully and said, "Not from my cookin'. From your eatin'."

"But that's neither here nor there," Billy continued, unperturbed. "I was proposing a change of venue and . . . and a respite, for you, from your labors."

"Okay," Mom said. "How about the Egyptian pizza parlor?"

Pizza did not sound at all promising. Italian, yes; romantic, no. Beer and soda, not wine. Dancing, never.

"I was thinking of a little music. . . ."

"I'm not gettin' *dressed up*!" Mom said.

He smiled. He couldn't help it. He actually liked the bratty Doris, liked it when she got her back up and stamped her little foot. "Okay, forget it," he said. He would wait and she would change. "Sorry I brought it up." He sat at the breakfast table sipping his tea knowing that his passivity was gnawing at her.

Finally, ten minutes later, she said, "There's Petty Louie's."

"What's that?" he said.

"It's French," she said. "On Roland Avenue."

They went to Petit Louis and ordered a half bottle of wine, which Doris drank. She had driven over and Billy drove back; it hardly took anything to get her tipsy. He helped her up the stairs. "*Voulez-vous coucher avec moi?*" he asked while she sat on the edge of the bed taking off her heels.

She smacked him lightly on the cheek and said, "What are you talking about, you old goat?" He was home free.

She had married a boy, not a man, and he was still a boy. She smiled, lying there in bed with her husband snoring lightly beside her. He had been a disappointment as a husband and father and remained a constant irritation, but she couldn't help being amused sometimes by his bone-headed sense of humor. The wine had awakened her. She was still a little drunk and needed to get up and pee. When she stood up and found herself beside the window, it was a little disorienting, but then she remembered that they had made

love, and it sometimes happened that they switched sides of the bed afterwards. She pulled back the curtain and glanced at the quiet street: only the yellow light of the streetlamps lit the slumbering cars parked along the curb. Yawning, she stumbled toward the bathroom and flicked on the switch. It startled her to catch a glimpse of her husband in the mirror.

"Billy!" she whispered. "What are you doing here?" Hadn't she just left him in bed sound asleep? Or had he snuck in while she was looking at the street? But when she looked around the bathroom, he wasn't there. She pulled back the shower curtain, half expecting him to jump out with a war whoop, the idjit. The bathtub was empty. She pulled down her panties, which seemed to have lengthened, and sat on the toilet and peed and thought about it. *I must be dreaming*, she thought. She pulled off a length of toilet paper and wadded it up to wipe herself, then looked down at her crotch and saw Billy. That junk down there was Billy, not her. She wiped it with the wad of toilet paper and felt it move around. *Weird*. She pulled up the panties, which she now saw were white boxer shorts, and looked in the mirror. There was Billy. "You're drunk as a skunk, Doris," he said to her. She startled to giggle and giggled all the way to bed and promptly fell asleep. In the morning, she found herself on her usual side of the bed wearing her own underwear.

"I had the weirdest dream last night," she told her husband over breakfast.

"I don't want to hear it," he said. "I got my own weird dreams and I don't tell them to anybody."

"You were in it," she said, ignoring his protest. "Except you were me, or I was you. I didn't realize it at first. I got up to pee and when I got to the bathroom and looked in the mirror, I saw you. It was the funniest thing. It was weird but it was also"—here she started laughing—"I can't help it, but the look on your face of pure astonishment was so funny that we both started laughing, and you said, 'You're drunk as a skunk, Doris. Go to bed!' So I went to bed. That's all I remember."

Doris looked at her husband, who stared at her in astonishment, and she started to laugh. "You're doing it again!" she said. *What a goofball he is, such a comedian.* She thought he would break up and start laughing, too, as he usually did, but he kept it up and kept it up until she stopped laughing and said, "Okay, enough is enough. It's not funny."

"I know," he rasped, his throat and mouth gone dry. "I had the same dream myself two nights ago."

Now it was Doris's turn to look astonished. "You did?" she said.

"Only it wasn't a dream," he told her. "I woke up on your side of the bed and was wearing your nightgown, only I didn't know it. I got up to pee and I knew something was wrong and I wouldn't look and wouldn't touch myself. I just went back to bed and said a prayer, and in the morning it was all right and we were sleeping on our own sides of the bed in our own bodies."

"But, Billy," she said, "it had to be a dream. Those things don't happen."

"I say it happened!" he said sharply. "It happened to both of us."

Doris shrank in her chair. *Two nights ago, he said. And that morning I woke up wet down there. He didn't wipe up, the idjit. I could have got an infection. Mother of God, what is going on?* She crossed herself, and Billy mirrored her action. They sat there in stunned silence when they should have been walking out the door and driving to their parish church, which was just down the hill within easy walking distance except that getting back up the hill was hard on them. They would miss mass that morning and then for several mornings in a row while they pondered what to do.

Billy broke the silence with a long, noisy fart. He did not seem perturbed; he did not shamefacedly apologize. Doris opened the door to the side yard and turned on the fan. When she returned to the table, he said, "It's God's will."

"What is?" Doris asked. If his farts were God's will, she would not humbly submit. She was more inclined to believe they were the devil's invention because they smelled like hell.

"He wants us to be one," Billy said.

She thought about this. "But we aren't one," she said. "We're each other."

"That's what it means to be one," he said.

"Oh," she said and thought about it some more. She was inclined to believe that anything Billy said was wrong. *How did he know it was God's will? What would Father Okema say? If it was God's will, oughtn't they to ask the Church?* She wasn't ready to do that, however, because she didn't want to be a laughingstock. *They'll think we're crazy. Are we?* She wasn't sure.

"Maybe it won't happen again," she said.

"And if it does?" he said.

"I don't know," she said.

"Listen," he said. "If it happens again to you, wake me up. And if it happens to me, I'll wake you up. Then we'll know it's not a dream. We'll have proof."

"What proof?" she asked.

"We'll take a picture," he said.

"A picture?" she said. "A picture of us in each other's body? Won't that just be a picture of us?"

"You're right," he said. "We'll make a video."

"What will that prove? We make a video of you saying you're me and me saying I'm you. People will think we're just crazy."

"The proof is for us!" he said. "We don't show it to anyone. It's proof we aren't dreaming, that's all."

"If we wake each other up, we don't need a video. We'll know. If you like, I'll write a note and you'll write a note. I'll write, 'I'm Doris,' and the note will be in your handwriting. And you'll write, 'I'm Billy,' and the note will be in my handwriting. And then we can burn the notes. Okay?"

He nodded. He couldn't tell Randy what they had done the rest of that day; he said he was just keyed up waiting for the night to come. He remembered that he and Doris got in the car and drove, but he didn't know where. They drove all over. He thought they had driven to the shore and back but he wasn't sure. He wasn't sure what they



ate or whether they ate. But by the time night came they were both exhausted and fell into a deep sleep.

He was awakened roughly. "Get up," he heard himself say. "Get up, it's happening again."

He opened his eyes and squinted. The lamp was on, and it took him awhile to adjust to the light. But he unmistakably saw himself looking intently at himself, the same blue eyes he had always seen in the mirror now searching him with a laser-like gaze. He felt himself returning that gaze, looking into his own eyes to discover what intelligence lay behind them. *If I am me, that is not me. Who is it? And who am I?* He reached out to touch this apparition and at the same time felt a hand on his face. *She is touching me, touching herself. She is thinking the same things I am thinking.* He felt giddy, and he saw his eyes light up and the queerest smile take shape in them, and he felt his own face, the face he was wearing, fall into a quizzical expression, a questioning expression, and the question it asked was "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

She nodded. His head nodded, but it was she, and she said in his voice, "If you are me, who am I?"

He grasped that big hand in his small one and squeezed it. She squeezed back.

"What happens now?" she asked.

"Are you afraid?" he asked.

"No," she said. "I'm thrilled."

"Thrilled?"

"Yes, I'm thrilled that something is happening to me. It's been such a long time since anything has happened. I was getting really bored, but this is great."

"Great? Why is it great?"

"I always wanted to be a man."

"What? You never told me that."

"Wasn't it obvious? Why did I join the Navy in World War Two? Why did I re-up during the Korean War? I wanted the freedom of a man, the power of a man. I wanted to make my own way in the world. And now I'm inside this big handsome man's body"—he was momentarily flattered and then flattened as she went on to say—"which you constantly abuse and never took advantage of. Damn it for being such an old man's body, but I'm taking advantage of it every way I can."

"Hold it!" he said. "Hold it right there! That is my body and you have to give it back to me."

"We don't know that," she said. "We don't know why this is happening or how it's happening. We don't know how long it will last. We don't know nothin'."

"What am I supposed to do with your body?"

"Don't you like it?"

"Of course, dear. I always liked your body."

"Now you get to find out what it's like to be me—sort of. We get to find out how the other feels. Isn't that what you were saying about being one? Maybe that's what God wants, if this really is His will." Doris was not actually interested in God's will, just her own. "I think it's neat."

What did Billy think? Was it really neat to be inside Doris's neat little body? There were mysteries about the female body that had always puzzled him, and he thought he could get them cleared up without having to ask, which had always embarrassed him just to think about it. He was suddenly lighter now, and his knees no longer ached.

"Watch out for those knees," he said.

"Wipe yourself up after you pee," she said.

That was the night they fell in love with themselves. Always complete narcissists, now they found they couldn't take their eyes off each other—that is, off themselves. They were like kids in a home movie who never tired of seeing themselves jump off a diving board

or, in reverse, be sucked back on to one; but here they saw themselves in 3D, with the addition of Odorama and Surround sound. *Is that what I sound like? Is that what I look like?* Whenever one or the other walked into the room, he or she was greeted with rapt attention instead of the utter indifference to which he/she was accustomed. When one talked, the other, miraculously, listened. Whatever they said took on a new interest and had persuasive force instead of being lightly or derisively dismissed.

It was not surprising then that sex, too, had a new edge to it. Each was an old pro and, at the same time, a novice, if not quite a virgin, and they did not rush into it. On the contrary, they were very circumspect, hardly touching. They talked about sex but only clinically, and usually because Billy needed to be educated about feminine hygiene. Doris was confused about the erections that occurred at night and first thing in the morning combined with the urge to pee; Billy assured her that she did not need to have an orgasm every time she had an erection.

Billy, being a man at heart, was naturally curious about how it felt to have sex as a woman, and he reasoned that if he were going to have sex with a man, it was all right to have sex with himself, since he had already done so many times in the past. He wondered whether Doris would be able to take the man's role in sex and penetrate a woman, particularly when that woman was herself. A man must be aroused, and he was uncertain what would arouse Doris since he had never concerned himself with her arousal in the past. He even thought that he might have to be unfaithful and find another man with whom to have sex as a woman, but this was disturbing for a number of reasons: lack of male prospects, fear of rejection, fear of exposure, fear of discovering in himself a homoerotic interest in other men. Another possibility was to have sex with another woman, which was definitely appealing but also fraught with psychological peril. Finally he decided that if Doris couldn't have sex with him, he could just hire a college student to do the deed. He reasoned that he would be supporting higher education.

A week after their reciprocal metamorphoses, Billy decided to make a move. As they lay in bed with the lights out, he began with an appeal to religion, saying that God had ordained that a husband and wife should do their conjugal duty to one another. Doris was silent. "Did you hear me, Doris?" he said.

"I think you should call me Billy," she answered.

"There's no one here but us," he said.

"I know," she said. "But call me Billy."

"All right, Billy," he said. "You're my husband. I need you. I want you." He began stroking Billy's arm and then her chest, lightly brushing the palm of his hand across the nipples under the light cotton T-shirt, then letting his hand stray down the belly toward Billy's crotch. Before his hand arrived at its goal, Billy rolled over on her side and put her arms around Doris and pulled him to her. They kissed. They had never kissed so passionately before.

They were inventive with sex, giving generously what they had never known how to give. Their bodies, no longer young, resisted the positions that they imagined, and so they compromised. But what they lacked in limberness and energy they made up for with patience and enthusiasm. The new Billy expertly performed cunnilingus, bringing the new Doris to his first female orgasm, while the new Doris did things the old Doris had never imagined: sucking, rimming, finger fucking. He climbed on top and guided Billy inside of him while her moistened fingers adroitly found his button. And when the new Doris had been thoroughly fucked in his vagina, he next introduced Billy into his rectum. He thought he might even have preferred it there.

They wordlessly performed unspeakable acts, yet never had sex been so physical, so intimate, so expressive, so loving. Whatever one wanted, the other seemed to understand and instantly respond. What both seemed to want is for the sex not to end. In the past, it had always ended with Billy's orgasm, followed by detumescence, a poorly aimed kiss near the ear, a slipping away into stertorous sleep. The new Billy, having once achieved orgasm, was eager for another and eager for Doris to achieve his. They paused but did not lose

physical contact, gradually gathering their strength to resume. Each time they made love, it was, to Doris, like riding a long wave that eventually tumbled him in the surf. In the end, he was washed up exhausted on the beach, his partner, naked as Adam, beside him.

It seemed, when he awoke, that he had never slept so soundly since he was a boy. He looked lovingly at the man lying beside him and wanted to start making love all over again. Instead, he sat up and put on the nightgown that had lain crumpled on the floor during the night. His stirring roused the slumbering man. "What's that?" the man said. Then he felt a hand tug at the nightgown. "Come here, Love Bug," the man said. *Love Bug?* Billy thought. *You never called me Love Bug.* He pushed the hand away.

"I've got something here for you to take care of," the man said.

"You just need to pee," Billy said. "After I do."

Who knows why, but they continued to inhabit each other's bodies after that first evening when they woke up together, and did not switch back while they slept, a condition that pleased the new Billy somewhat more than it pleased the new Doris. Her knees hurt, and she let him know what a poor job he had done of maintaining his body. She was determined to lose weight, partly because she knew it would relieve pressure on the knees; and it had the secondary benefit of reducing gas emissions. As she slimmed down, she could discard some of Billy's oversized clothes and buy new clothes. Her taste did not differ very much from his, so people remarked on his weight loss but did not suspect that Billy was an entirely new person.

He had a much harder time adjusting to his smaller, lighter female body. For one thing, he could not wear heels. Accessorizing, which was something on which Doris had prided herself, was beyond him. She would have to pick out his jewelry and help him on with it every day, or her friends would have known something was wrong. In fact, they did; but they attributed it to age—so many of their other friends had suffered that slow erasure of personality called

dementia. The new Doris didn't seem as interested in travel and food and the arts, and she had picked up a habit of discoursing at length on contemporary politics, a subject in which she had shown zero interest in the past.

What saved Billy and Doris from embarrassment was that most of their friends were dead. Billy understood that they needed to make new friends, so they sold the house in which Randy and I had grown up (he was indifferent, while I, surprisingly, was shocked) and moved into a retirement community on the Eastern Shore where their meals were served in a dining hall so that they didn't have to explain to anyone why Billy rather than Doris was doing all the cooking.

Dad said that they practiced dancing in their condo so that they would not foul up on the dance floor in front of their new neighbors. It proved to be surprisingly easy, since Mom had always preferred to lead and Dad, now lighter on his feet than she, had the opportunity to perform the twirls, albeit in flats. Dad said that he managed being a woman but that it was like speaking a foreign language in which you were not fluent: you thought about whatever you wanted to do or say and translated it into another gender. He lacked spontaneity but, at his age, he passed.

He said that one of the things he liked about being a woman was the freedom it gave him to express his emotions. He had fought through the war, from just after Pearl Harbor to the aftermath of D Day, when he was finally furloughed from shell shock. Emotions were dangerous territory, and when Randy and I were boys, the most reliable emotion Dad expressed was anger, in Vesuvian eruptions. But as a woman he found that he could express any emotion with complete freedom. He also found that he could touch other people more easily, both other women and men as well, although he quickly learned that touching another woman's husband was a tricky business—better to let him touch him as he stood passively accepting the man's embrace and peck on the cheek. But if they were alone, he might whisper something about how seductive

the man's cologne was. He was flirting and enjoying it thoroughly, thinking it was harmless.

He especially enjoyed flirting with Dudley Wigglesworth, who lived with his wife, Betsy, in the same retirement community. Before Billy and Doris were married, Dudley had been his chief rival for Doris's affections. Now Dad enjoyed tormenting this old man, leading him on, leading him to the edge of adultery only to swear that his devotion to Billy would never permit him to be unfaithful, which sent Dudley into a rage.

Such a flirtation naturally got around the entire community and raised eyebrows. For Betsy Wigglesworth it was particularly humiliating, but she was not the sort of woman to confront Doris openly for his bad behavior. She had a natural dignity and felt that it was best to ignore the scandal and wait for it to subside and blow away. Still, she could not help looking reproachfully at Billy, indicating that she ought to restrain her errant wife. Billy, who knew exactly what game Doris was playing, was likewise humiliated. She knew it was a meaningless, though malicious, flirtation, and had asked Doris to stop, saying that if he didn't they would have to leave the retirement community and find another. Doris promised that he would stop, that he would break off all relations with Dudley, but he had already inflamed his old rival to such an extent that he had alienated Dudley from his wife. It was a case of collateral damage, and he was very sorry about it. He cried. He asked for forgiveness, but Billy said it wasn't she who needed to forgive him. He would have to apologize to Betsy and to Dudley.

Unfortunately, it was too late. Betsy and Dudley were not interested in reconciliation. When Doris called Betsy to apologize, Betsy said, "Oh, no, don't apologize. I ought to thank you for showing me what an idiot my husband has always been. He told me that he had always been in love with you, that he had married me on the rebound, that our marriage was nothing but a sham. So thank you for showing me that my fool of a husband always valued a slut like you over a faithful wife." *Click.*

Dudley, too, was uninterested in apologies; he wanted action. "Listen to me, Doris. I have always loved you, always dreamed about you. We're both old, but your beauty has never dimmed for me. How much longer do we have to live, either one of us? A year? Two years? Maybe just a couple of months. Shouldn't we at least live our dreams before we sleep forever? Shouldn't we be granted at least a glimpse of paradise? Don't say anything, Doris"—he held her close to him—"just stay with me. Pack a few things—I can pack in an instant—and we'll go. We'll go to Tahiti, to the south of France, wherever you like. We don't owe anything to anybody. . . ."

He shoved Dudley away. "You stupid, pathetic man. Your dream of paradise would be over at the airport when you discovered that you had forgotten your passport. You couldn't manage two steps without Betsy, yet you would throw her over in an instant for a 'dream.' You are dreaming. Wake up! We're old and we are going to die, sooner rather than later, so let us die in peace with a little dignity, which may be the only thing left to us, if we're lucky. I have said my apologies, to you and to Betsy, for my unforgivably foolish behavior. If I am unforgiven, so be it; at least I have learned a lesson. If you and Betsy cannot reconcile, so be it; perhaps there is a lesson for both of you to learn, but that's none of my business. My business is with my husband. Goodbye."

In the event, Dudley and Betsy did reconcile, reluctantly, and Doris remained unforgiven, which is why Doris and Billy found themselves a few months later in Cockeysville, at Broadmead, not far from Overlea. Billy had slimmed down considerably and walked more easily. Doris had gained a little weight and taken up golf. A few of her old friends were amazed by this display of late-life athleticism. "Billy used to talk so much about golf," Doris joked, "that I had had bad dreams about it. I figured I might as well take it up." While Doris golfed, Billy traveled. He found a nice younger man named David to accompany him on these trips and share expenses. David, it turned out, spoke French very passably and had a degree in art history, which greatly enhanced Billy's appreciation of French culture. She was flattered by the younger man's attentions and was



amazed by how easily they made love, so differently from the way she and Doris made love yet essentially the same. Intimacy was intimacy, pleasure was pleasure. She found that, even as a man, she enjoyed being fucked, feeling David inside her and his arms around her. They often talked, on these trips, of finding a small stone house in Provence and keeping a little garden to grow their own herbs and vegetables. It was a sweet dream, but Billy always wanted to go home to Doris, who always welcomed her and welcomed David as well. He never saw the younger man as a threat to their marriage. After a couple of years, David gave up and found a different companion closer to him in age, a Frenchman named Yves, and finally got his little stone house. He sent Billy a photo and an invitation to visit. By then, however, Billy had given up on travel. He was 89 years old. It was time.

My parents' adventure had gone on for five years before it was revealed to Randy and, subsequently, to me. By then, they had grown accustomed to their gender reassignment. "At our age," Dad told Randy, "there isn't a whole lot of difference between men and women. We want the same things: peace, warmth, absence of pain, a healthy appetite, distraction from worry, loving companionship, contentment. We take comfort in our routines. We are two old shoes."

"It sounded like Dad," Randy said, "but it came from the mouth of a frail old woman who I'd swear was Mom." Still, he said he was convinced. "It was too weird for either one of them to have made up," he said. He left that lunch in a fog. He said he wanted to call me but couldn't. When he got back home, he couldn't even tell his wife, Elva, what had happened. The following day, he wasn't sure if it had happened or he had dreamt it, so he decided to call Dad. An odd question had occurred to him, and he wanted to ask Dad's opinion.

"What happens when either one of you dies?" he asked.

"I guess we die," Dad said.

"But *who* dies?" Randy asked. "If your body dies, do you die or does Mom?"

"I've wondered that myself," he said. "In a way, it doesn't seem fair for one person's body to give out and the other to die. We ought to die when our own body dies, and I think that when it happens, we will switch back. But I don't know. We'll have to wait and see."

Another question occurred to Randy. "Why did you decide to tell me now?"

"Maybe it was the beer," Dad said. "Should I not have told you?"

"I'm okay with it," Randy lied. "Have you told anyone else?"

"We did tell Father Okema, eventually," Dad said. "Your mother wondered if we were under some kind of spell and needed exorcism. Father Okema assured us that it was not an unheard of phenomenon, though it occurred mainly in the West and never in Africa, to his certain knowledge. Mostly, he said, long-married couples so completely identified with one another that they ceased to exist as individuals and had their existence only as a couple, and in these cases, when one of the pair died, the other died shortly afterwards. He was beaming when he said this, so we took it to mean that it was a good thing."

Randy said he heard Dad's voice in the background saying "Is that Randy?" Dad said it was. Mom said, "Tell him not to worry."

"Did you hear that, Rand?" Dad said.

"Yes, sir," Randy said.

"That was the captain speaking. Better follow orders."

If there is a moral to this fable, I suppose it is not to worry. Life is weird. You live as long and as well as you can and suck up the weirdness.

Since learning about my parents' curious condition, I have been back to Baltimore several times with Travis, and my parents, both of them, greet us with hugs and kisses. They always ask when we are getting married, adding that they can't wait forever. It's a bone of contention between me and Travis, because he wants a big, lavish wedding where I would prefer a quiet civil ceremony. Mom and Dad side with Travis.

"We'll get married," I say, "when it's legal everywhere and we can file our federal income tax jointly." That gives me several more years

of breathing room, although the world today seems to be unpredictable and rapidly changing, and I worry what Obama might do next.

