

## GENESIS

*By Toti O'Brien*

Women came mostly in pairs.

Maybe not always. Still I remember several sets of two. Sisters, and one is more beautiful than the other, I register with a slight discomfort. There's unbalance, there's lack of symmetry in the ways of destiny or life.

Well, I know little of destiny. The whole concept is too imbued of past and future for me to understand. I am barely managing a timid present. I don't know lots about life, but you need a kind of container, an overall frame, a recipient wherein you can throw miscellanea—like I toss my toys in a large wicker crate, at night, kind of promising I'll sort them tomorrow.

I have noticed this sister-thing tends to repeat itself. It occurs in a loop. I know two sisters, for instance, the prettiest of whom didn't marry, while the other did and had two daughters, the prettiest of whom will not marry while the other will (this prodigy is still in the making, but I'll see it unfold as I grow older, as I keep observing).

Now how it is possible? I have already ascertained prettiness gets you love. The concept has been hammered especially in fairy tales, yet it doesn't hold water. Something must be at play, so powerful it overturns beauty's rule. What? I am clueless. Should I ask? I have, once or twice. Why didn't X (or X<sub>1</sub>, her niece) marry? Replies are so evasive they confirm my suspicions. Something mighty and mysterious is at work, puzzling, and vaguely alarming.

Pretty loners and plain spouses have still much in common, though the spinsters harbor a martyred and melancholy smile, while the wedded ones have ruddy matter-of-fact expressions. They all wear black, and their chests are sunken.

Which has nothing to do with their breast size—not supposed to be appraised anyway, unless so imposing it can't be possibly ignored. Wide or small-breasted, women here have caved-in chests, as if breathing were painful—had been since early childhood, perhaps since day one.

Chests are compressed, squeezed, all buttoned-up—an invisible weight bending the top vertebrae, as if burden had been dealt by whoever organized the game in an even-so-slight disproportion. The female population having been overloaded, just going from sunrise to sundown unavoidably shrinks a girl's vital sap, crushing her ribcage, lowering her sternum, fostering a beaten pose of resignation.

Will this happen to me? I have reasons to suspect it will, that I marry or not—there's no difference. But my lack of familiarity—I said—with destiny, prevents me from a clear sense of cause and effect, therefore I don't panic. Not quite. I avoid prophecies, worries, anticipation.

Eager for distraction, weary of the dimly lit interiors where females are confined (is lack of oxygen, after all, what collapses their lungs?) I run outside—in the orchards and fields, over wooded hills, across sand beaches.

There is where men are—besides at the bar, but that only applies to the evening hour and to festive occasions.

Men don't wear black except for church or funerals. They wear working hues—dark and dull—browns or greys. In the fields, on the boats, in the orchards, in the pastures they are mostly alone. Sometimes they sing to themselves, otherwise they are silent.

I am well aware those males found in nature are to be avoided, because virtually dangerous to females, especially under age. I know they can do you things and before I learn of which kind, I have intuited they belong to the aggressive, harmful, painful domain.

Yet I can't avoid meeting men as I explore my surroundings. Like trees, boats, clouds, fruit, bird or fish, they are a prominent feature of the giant container—life, for lack of a better term.

Men are busy. So are women unless they make coffee, serve it in ridiculously small china cups then sip it so slowly, you understand its very function is to still time, keep them idle for a minute. To the same purpose men light and smoke cigarettes, briefly putting down whatever tool they were symbiotically embracing. They take a sit, suck, inhale, puff out, stare at nothing.

Men I met in my lone discovery tours are fishermen, shepherds, hunters, lumberjacks, mostly peasants. All of them, but peasants especially, are intent at something, forcing them into steadily looking down. Their skin is thick and tanned, leathery. Their eyes—when they lift them because a naïf, stupid town-girl dares to say hi—are invariably blue. This doesn't happen to women, go see why.

Watery, yet not reminiscent of the ocean—which is denser, full of purple and green—theirs is the pale ceruleum of the sky. All the peasants I know have azure irises, innocent, lost, riveted to the rich brown of dry lava they labor nonstop as life demands of them, because that's what life does.

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