Reluctant Brother

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Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

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Cover Page Footnote
"First Prize Winner" Appeared in the issue: Winter 1996.
First Prize Winner

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That's where my brother was. Straight up the road. It wasn't my idea to go see him out here in the middle of nowhere. In fact, if it hadn't been for my parents urging, I would have left him alone. But they pleaded with me until I gave in. They said he might be sick or injured or dead. I knew he wouldn't be.

A few minutes after talking with the old Haitian, I found the dirt road blocked by a giant tree, tipped over to stop all visitors. Tipped over by my brother. I knew his house couldn't be too far off now. It was dark and since I didn't want to spend another night in my station wagon, I made up my mind to keep going on foot. I thanked God again for the warm night.

The moon gave me the necessary light as I made my way over the enormous trunk and up the dirt road. I heard all the sounds around me, every little chirp and snap had now taken on a sinister nature. I kept telling myself that if I stayed on the road, the forest wouldn't get me. His domain couldn't be too far off.

The road was gradually sloping upwards and I knew that my brother had decided to live on the highest spot possible, where he could see all and none could see him. By midnight, everything but the road was dark. I tried to look up and focus only on the moon, hoping to distract my mind from my throbbing feet, but the darkness before me demanded my full attention. I wished that my brother would come to meet me, show me the way to where he lived, but that couldn't happen because he didn't know I was coming.

The moonlight gave way to something that almost made me run back and forget everything. I would have done it had I not known it was the work of my brother and not some twisted soul.

On the pike in the middle of the road stood a head. It looked human and fresh, but as I focused on it, plastic. It was a pale white doll's head. I think it might have been my sister's. When my breath came back to me, I planted my feet firmly in front of it and lifted it out of its misery. The eyelids bobbed back and forth in gratitude. I took the wooden pike out of the ground and snapped it over my knee. Something chirped in the forest around me and I moved on quickly, leaving the head by the side of the road.

Most people would think my brother crazy. After all, he moves out here in the middle of nowhere, cuts off all communication with the outside world, and then tries to stop his family from seeing him. But I had to see it to believe it. He was once quick-witted and down to earth. Had he really gotten so bad?

He had only applied to one school, Harvard, and when he didn't get in, he gave up and stayed home. He didn't stop studying, though. No, he read more than ever. Rarely did I see him without a book in his hand. My brother is the type that knows a little bit about everything. "It just bothers the hell out of me not to know, that's all," he told me once.

But then he started to change. He was older than my sister and I, and always very protective, until he began hating us. He got angry when we left for college, told us it wasn't necessary and that we were rushing things.

"Why are you in such a hurry to get out there?" he would plead with the pitiful look of an aging man trying to hold on to something that was slipping. In response, we would ask him things like, "Don't you want to meet new people, see the world?" But he would only say, "Hah! Why would I want to do that?"

He told me once that he already knew everyone. He said that's what high school was for: so you could meet all the dirtbags and sleazeballs while they were in their early stages. Then he'd make grand gestures with his hands and tell me that there were only a few types of people, and that he had already met them all.

"So, tell me," I would say, humoring him, "how many types of people are there?"

"The kind I hate and the kind I like even less than those." He would sprinkle these remarks at us with a crooked smile, and we would laugh, humor him, tell him to pass the salt. But he got worse.

My sister and I did well in college, but our triumphs were always dampened by that shifty-eyed recluse sitting on that sofa, curtains all drawn securely, surrounded by old, yellow-paged books. With his eyes full of tears, he would look at us when we returned from school and talk about the times when we used to follow him around like some sort of god.

He yelled at us when we came home late for New Year's. He started talking about the way he just couldn't take it anymore. When I returned to college and opened my suitcase, I found my old teddy bear with a note taped to its forehead:

I DIDN'T WARN YOU. My sister got one too, but hers just said:

DONT BETRAY THAT PERSON YOU ONCE WERE.

My mother would cry and tell me that he refused to look at her or Father. He would get out old picture albums and look at them for hours, sometimes even taking a magnifying glass so he could focus in on details. Then one day, after getting angry at my mother for dyeing her hair, he said that he had to leave. That was almost ten years ago. He made us angry and ashamed. Our family would have been perfect if it wasn't for him. So we took the chance and let him go, hoping that he would return one day, happy and all fixed up. But too much time passed, and last year we didn't receive his cheap little postcard, so they sent me to find him.

As the road got steeper, I saw that some little toy cars were buried in the dried mud a few steps in front of me. I rescued one of them and remembered that it was one of mine. It looked so small that I wondered how I could have ever imagined it was real. The tiny doors were rusted shut and the clumps of mud stuck to it made it look like a fossil. I threw it back and walked on.
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He must have planned it. He probably knew that I would be coming sooner or later. Although I couldn’t imagine why, he must have thought this was a way of stopping me from reaching him. I was tired and in no mood for any of it. I just wanted to see him, talk for a bit, leave, and then go back and tell our parents that he was just practicing some healthy eccentricities. Sooner or later he would no doubt snap out of it and come down.

Eventually the road disintegrated onto a broad, treeless plateau. In the middle of the moonlit clearing were three trailers. They stood parallel to each other and there were planks connecting their entrances. Off to the side of the odd campground was a rickety gazebo. In it was a barbecue grill made from a rusted garbage can. In front of the gazebo was a child’s bicycle with the seat raised to such an absurd height that is looked like a hump — all together the skeleton of some poor camel. Taken in all at once, the place looked like an ethereal daycare for forgotten children.

I walked cautiously into my brother’s world. A bumpy little pathway led up to the center trailer entrance. My feet sank slowly into the pathway and I stooped down to see that under the light dirt covering, it was nothing more than a long strip of styrofoam. I shook my head in wonder.

A thumping noise was coming from behind the trailers. I followed the noise cautiously and there, behind one of the trailers, was my brother. He was throwing a tennis ball against the side wall and catching it.

I was happy and relieved to see that he hadn’t changed much. After everyone told me how much stranger he had become, I expected to see some long-bearded, filthy-looking man sleeping in a hammock. But there he was: clean, unagitated and smiling confidently to himself while he played catch with the side wall. In his mind, it was probably the World Series.

Engaged in that absurd act of throwing those balls under the glow of that pale moon, in striped pajamas with his meticulously combed hair, near the edge of a cliff towering over a world that he wanted nothing to do with, he looked like madness incarnate and there, behind one of the trailers, was my brother. He was throwing his throwing arm to the stars above and smile confidently. Probably another no-snap out of it and come down.

I felt ashamed as I watched like I was seeing something private, something that no one but him and that wall should be a part of. It would probably go on all night unless I spoke first.

“Who’s catching — Yogi Berra or Thurman Munson?” I said as I walked out of the shadows.

Like a squirrel surprised by a curious child, his head shifted mechanically towards me.

The game over, he dropped the ball on the floor and ran towards me. He gave me a grand old hug. He held onto me so tightly I thought he wanted me to shrink in his arms. I was his little brother and he loved me. I returned the hug with just as much enthusiasm.

“Ha! Pablo, my little brother!” he said over and over again. His voice was energetic and happy.

We both backed away and stood looking at each other.

“C’mon on inside,” said my smiling brother.

For the next hour he gave me a tour of his place. One of the trailers was a library and another was just a large bedroom. He took me to the middle one and we sat facing each other at a small table in the “living room,” as my brother proudly called it. We were surrounded byoverflowing bookshelves. There was an atlas opened to Antarctica on the couch. He saw me glance at it and told me that it would probably be a nice place to live. Sitting on the table between us was a science textbook opened to a chapter on genetics. There was no television or radio in sight. I had many questions and decided to start with the most obvious.

“How did you get these trailers up here?”

“Oh, you mean my mansion? The old Haitian — you must have met him— his sons helped me tow them up. One of his sons has one of those huge king cab trucks. Took us a whole day — and it hurt — but we did it.”

“How about the gazebo?”

“My summer kitchen. The old Haitian gave me that as a ‘welcome to the neighborhood’ gift. It was in his backyard, and he said if I could take it down, I could keep it. So I took it apart — spent a whole week doing it — and then brought the pieces up here and built it.”

“Aren’t you afraid of living here all by yourself?”

“No way. There’s nobody around here except the old Haitian and his sons, who live in the city. Sometimes they come up here and we talk about boxing and stuff. But really, no one comes up here with the wrong intentions.”

“For God’s sake, what are you doing in this place?”

“I know what I’m doing, Pablo. I’m perfectly happy here.”

“You know what they’re saying about you? They’re calling you crazy.”

“Crazy? You know me better than that, Pablo.”

“Here’s what I know: your brother packs his bags one day and disappears, leaves everyone he knows without giving any explanation as to why, then he sends a postcard saying that he’s in Nevada and everything’s fine.”

He leaned forward in his chair and looked me in the eyes. It was still hard for me to believe how young he looked. Although he was thirty-seven, he looked ten years younger. I was sure that anyone, if asked, would say I was the older brother.

“I looked around,” he said in a low whisper, “and saw things I couldn’t have.”

“What things?” I asked in a matching whisper.

At this point my brother got up from the table and stretched his back. He rubbed his hand over his smooth chin and then stared down at me accusingly, like I was to blame for something.


“And you know what? I decided that not having those things doesn’t bother you as long as you can’t see them; if they’re not there to flaunt themselves in front of you.”
He must have planned it. He probably knew that I would be coming sooner or later. Although I couldn’t imagine why, he must have thought this was a way of stopping me from reaching him. I was tired and in no mood for any of it. I just wanted to see him, talk for a bit, leave, and then go back and tell our parents that he was just practicing some healthy eccentricities. Sooner or later he would no doubt snap out of it and come down.

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I nodded.

"You started growing, changing, the world starts telling you that you have to have all those things, or otherwise you’re nothing. Everybody starts leaving you behind. Well enough already. I don’t need or want anything that’s out there.

"That, my brother, is why I left. I’m not doing too bad either. Look at me. I look ten times better than you do. I love this place."

Wanting to change subjects, he pointed at the textbook on the table and smiled.

"That’s interesting stuff; you know anything about genetics?" he asked.

I shook my head.

"You think there’s a gene for everything?" he asked.

I shrugged.

"They say there might be. I wonder if there’s a losing gene. You know, a gene that some people are born with that prevents them from succeeding. Could you imagine that? That would give a new meaning to the term ‘born - losers.’ Could you imagine being born knowing that no matter how hard you try, you can’t win?"

I began to say something but he cut me off.

"That old Haitian, he whispered, ‘is a very old man.’

"How old? And what’s a Haitian doing in Nevada anyways?" I asked.

"I don’t know exactly -- about a century maybe. As for his nationality, well, I call him the old Haitian because that’s where he used to live before he came here. He’s originally from someplace else. He’s got a name, but it’s too hard to pronounce.

I met him in Carson City – he goes down there every once in awhile to see with his own eyes how much everything’s changed. He’s the one who told me about this mountain -- told me it was just the right place for me to live. He told me that I could live here for a very long time as long as I didn’t have too many visitors.

"Well he didn’t seem to mind me going to see you; he was the one who pointed me in the right direction," I said.

"The occasional visitor is okay. As long as he doesn’t stay too long. You’ve already stayed too long. Even as we speak, you’re chipping away at the effect of this place. That Haitian doesn’t even let his sons hang around too much. They come to visit about once a month. Then they take off before they kill their father."

"What are you talking about?"

"He once told me that right after they leave, he starts to feel his age. It takes him about a month to get back to his old shape again. He’s a good guy. It’s a damn shame he got this place so late. Otherwise, he’d probably look as young as -- "

I put my hand on his forearm gently and stopped him.

"You know what this is doing to our parents? They never kicked you out. There was no reason to leave in the first place. So you’re afraid of the world. We all know that. That’s no secret. But you didn’t have to go."

At the mention of our parents, my brother clenched his teeth and rubbed his chin harder. I sat back and sighed heavily.

He regained his composure and walked over to the refrigerator, asking me if I wanted some iced tea. He took his seat again.

I drank the tea heartily and spun the empty glass across the table to him, just like air hockey when we were young. He stopped it with his palms and gave me a sad smile.

"How’s sister?" he asked, his mouth twitching as if it hurt to ask.

"She’s fine. She’s all grown up. She’s not the college girl you left."

"Well good," he said, "that’s all I really wanted to know."

"I brought some pictures of everyone. I thought you might like to see how they’ve all changed."

"No, no, no thanks. I don’t really. His hand was back on his face. I could now hear the gritty sound of the stubs against his knuckles.

"Damn, it’s already growing again," he whispered in apparent disbelief.

I opened my backpack and took out the thick envelope of photographs. Opening it, I threw the first photograph on the table. He glanced at it quickly and turned away like he had just seen something which would only feed his nightmares. Then he smashed his fist on the table and hurried outside. Like an obnoxious little brother who gotten the best of his sibling, I followed him out with photograph in hand.

He stood with his back to me, digging his shoes into the styrofoam walkway.

"They’re your parents. Don’t you want to see them?"

He turned around to face me and I could see that he was ready to cry.

"Those two gray-haired people are not my parents," he said intensely, while pressing both fists against his face desperately.

"And that pregnant woman sure isn’t my sister."

I walked up to him and put my hands gently on his shoulders.

"But they are," I said softly.

I tried to sound as kind and forgiving as possible.

"You’re an uncle now. You’ve been away too long. Everything’s changed."

Look at me. I’m going to be getting married soon. Please, come back to us."

As he backed away from me I saw something that will stay with me as long as I live. His movements were awkward and mechanical, like those of an actor from a silent movie. But the terror in his eyes was haunting and fresh; the look he gave me as the lines in his face began to grow madly in all possible directions! In a matter of seconds, a scrappy, unshaven man approaching middle age stood before me. Even his clothes had aged; the stripes on the pajamas were now faded.

I stood there looking at him as if he were some monster.

"You see?" he said, his voice now guttural.

I nodded slowly.

"Like I said, you’re messing up the effect of this place. I think it’s best if you leave now. This is the same thing that happens to him, except his sons know where to leave. You know what it’s like to have a decade or so fall on you all of a sudden?

His eyes focused on something behind me and I spun around nervously.

There was nothing there, just the black forest. But then part of the darkness began to move; it came closer until it took the shape of the old Haitian. He approached us slowly. His eyes were serene, unmoving, and aimed directly at me. He walked with a watch a dagger through..."
I nodded.
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"They never kicked you out. There was no reason to leave in the first place. So you're afraid of the world. We all know that. That's no secret. But you didn't have to go."

"I opened my backpack and took out the thick envelope of photographs.
"I brought some pictures of everyone. I thought you might like to see how they've all grown."

At the mention of our parents, my brother clenched his teeth and rubbed his chin harder. I sat back and sighed heavily.

He regained his composure and walked over to the refrigerator, asking me if I wanted some iced tea. He took his seat again.

I drank the tea heartily and spun the empty glass across the table to him, just like air hockey when we were young. He stopped it with his palms and gave me a sad smile.
"How's sister?" he asked, his mouth twitching as if it hurt to ask.
"She's fine. She's all grown up. She's not the college girl you left."
"Well good," he said, "that's all I really wanted to know."

"I brought some pictures of everyone. I thought you might like to see how they've all grown."

"No, no, no thanks. I don't really," His hand was back on his face. I could now hear the gritty sound of the stubs against his knuckles.

"Damn, it's already growing again," he whispered in apparent disbelief.
I opened my backpack and took out the thick envelope of photographs.
"I brought some pictures of everyone. I thought you might like to see how they've all grown."

"I opened my backpack and took out the thick envelope of photographs.
"I brought some pictures of everyone. I thought you might like to see how they've all grown."

I stood there looking at him as if he were some monster.
"You see?" he said, his voice now guttural.
I nodded slowly.
"Like I said, you're messing up the effect of this place. I think it's best if you leave now. This is the same thing that happens to him, except his sons know when to leave. You know what it's like to have a decade or so fall on you all of a sudden?
His eyes focused on something behind me and I spun around nervously.

There was nothing there, just the black forest. But then part of the darkness began to move; it came closer until it took the shape of the old Haitian. He approached us slowly. His eyes were serene, unmovinf, and aimed directly at me. He had an unbuttoned flannel shirt exposing a pendant hanging from a nylon string around his neck. It was a metallic figurine of a watch with a dagger through it.
He bent down and looked at my brother, like a doctor looking at a patient. Then he looked up at me, frowned, and shook his head. The confusion on my face begged for answers. His voice came out tired and weak.

"To some of us, time can be a disease. Only those of us who hate it enough can know its weak points. It doesn't have dominion over all parts of the world. If you find that place where its powers are weak, it will leave you alone."

He put his palm on my brother's forehead and sighed heavily. I went to speak but the old Haitian stopped me. "You have nothing against time. It follows you around, clings to every pore on your body. It's a parasite. Leave here, you're contaminating us."

I felt dizzy, light-headed. I was seeing something absurd, something impossible. But I had to act. I had to run, get out of there. For his own good.

Before I hurried off, I ran into the trailer to pick up the rest of the photographs. I could see my brother laying on the flimsy walkway, recovering. The old Haitian, or whoever he was, patted him on the shoulder kindly. As I hurried past them, my brother waved goodbye. I instinctively walked over, but the grimace he gave as I got closer told me he didn't want to feel the pain of another year. I went back and positioned the doll's head on the middle of the road, then I ran down that mountain as fast as the darkness allowed, taking whatever I had brought to them back with me.

— Emilio Lopez

Second Prize Winner

Untitled

carried
by that

Eating

in the silent scream
impending doom
caged by fear
which has
come near
in words
and dirt
the fallen tear
soak
the earth
in which
you lay
can hear
your screams
like yesterday
that
is
this
which
holds me still
yet still
that void
I cannot fill
so sit inside
this maze
I must
of mother thoughts
and broken trust

— Kelly Callahan