

Brotherly Love · *Kelly Cherry*

THIS IS THE STORY of my brother. He used to live with me. I had one tiny, octagonal room off Broadway; one wall was all windows — three floor-to-ceiling windows in a bay, with top and bottom shutters on the inside. We slept in the same single bed — chastely, of course, like five-year-olds. My husband had recently divorced me and I was in no shape to handle anything heavy. I could barely get through work each day. Then there were the dates, at night. I must have dated every lonely heart on the Upper West Side. I paid money to go to mixers where we all stood around secretly staring at each other, wondering what it was about us that had doomed us to each other.

We looked at one another slyly, skeptically, sizing ourselves up over the Triscuits and stale cheddar (this was in the pre-Brie era). This exchange of glances led to greater things — movies, dinner in Chinese-Puerto Rican restaurants. Walking home, I would ditch my dates in Zabar's; I was a whiz at slipping down the counter to marvel at the pumpkin bread and then darting out the door just when my date was ordering bagels. I wondered if they ate the bagels anyway, or did they throw the bag angrily onto the street when they discovered they'd been dumped? Armies could have battened on those bagels. The truth was, I was afraid to bring the dates home. I'd have to introduce them to my brother. They'd see the single bed, and how was I going to explain that?

"It's none of their business," my brother said, but he liked it whenever people made him their business. He liked being thought outrageous. I think he wanted people to see that single bed. It had an old-fashioned green headboard painted with red and yellow flowers. My mother had picked out the headboard for me after my divorce; I think she wanted to believe I was her little girl again.

I can't remember if I invited my brother to live with me or if he invited himself. He was breaking up with a woman who was older than he was. He didn't have a job. He had signed on as crew for a round-the-world voyage, but the boat sank off Cape Hatteras. What are you going to do? You can't let a member of your family suffer out in the cold. It's not like a date — it's a connection for life. So he came to live with me. We slept on our sides, back to back. The trouble was, he was always pulling the covers

over to his side; I began to plan for this, and each night, I'd bunch the edge of the blanket up in my fists and fall asleep holding on tightly. By morning, the covers were all on his side.

He was really good-looking back then. He had green eyes and brown hair and was tall and thin and strong, and smart with his hands, and women flipped over him. He was generous with his money, when he had any, and time, and would do anything to help out a friend, but the friend would have to pay a price, because my brother also had a mean streak. He could be sarcastic. He liked cutting people down. I saw that in him but I never reprimanded him for it because he was my brother. Besides, who was I to hold myself superior? (It was a question I asked myself at every mixer.)

So finally I brought home one of the dates. His name was Jerry, and I liked him a lot. He had a little stringy moustache like a harp and a way of touching my arm non-threateningly when he talked. I could trust him, so I brought him home.

My brother was sitting in the Boston rocker, like John F. Kennedy, smoking a cigarette and drinking whiskey. I had a cat then, and she was sitting on his lap. He stroked the cat, and the cat purred, and I said, "Jerry, this is my brother. He lives with me."

Jerry looked from my brother in the rocker to the single bed and back to the rocker and said, "Pleased to meet you."

"You want a drink?" I asked Jerry.

"No thanks," he said. He plucked at his moustache as if playing arpeggios. "I have to be going."

"I'm sorry you have to go so soon," my brother said.

I let Jerry out, hung up my coat, and came back into the room. "You really like this fellow, huh?" my brother asked.

I said yes.

"You want a drink?" my brother asked.

I said no.

The stars were shining in through the three windows, bright and still. My brother shooed the cat from his lap. I kept expecting him to say something sarcastic about Jerry, but he didn't. After a while, it was time to go to bed. I closed the shutters and changed into my nightgown and got under the covers. I grabbed my side of the blanket as usual, and before I knew it, I was asleep.

Toward morning, when the room was at its chilliest, I woke up. The

blanket was again on my brother's side. We were back to back. I rolled over to see if there was any way I could sneak it back toward my side, and as I was surveying the situation, I realized my brother was crying. Tears were leaking out from under his eyelids and forming a soggy circle on the pillowcase under his cheek.

"Why are you crying?" I asked. But he didn't answer. He was awake, but he wouldn't answer. I kept looking at him in the delicate weave of light and shadow that came through the shutters. The pillowcase got wetter and wetter, and a few weeks later, he moved out.