

Storefront

MY FATHER'S YOUNGER BROTHER, SAM, WHO HATED MY FATHER, died last year. He outlived both my father and their older brother Max. The three brothers ran a business together for over forty years, the Stanley Furniture Company, named after a five-and-dime that had occupied the site in Chester, Pennsylvania, until the 1930s. Their start came during the Depression when the brothers and their mother (their father died when they were all boys) found a storefront building to live in on Third Street in Chester. They'd put their clothes dresser in the window because that was the only space large enough for it. A man came by, assuming it was for sale, and asked them the price.

My grandmother didn't hesitate. "Twenty-five dollars," she said, which was twice the amount she'd paid for the highboy dresser.

She took the money and bought two other dressers, sold those at a profit and bought four more. That, the story goes, is how they got into the furniture business.

After World War II, business became so good they soon needed three warehouses to stock inventory. Max, the eldest, managed a second store on Third Street while Sam, the youngest brother, worked with my father at the main store around the corner. My father was the front man, selling, ordering, traveling to the furniture shows in Chicago and North Carolina, handling the advertising and promotion. Sam, meanwhile, although he occasionally sold out front, ran the back office, managing the store's accounts. His desk was at the end of the store's center aisle, behind a counter with an etched window of sea-green glass where customers made monthly payments.

Max had only an eighth-grade education, same as my father and Sam, but he aspired to higher culture, getting involved in theater when he was a young man and dating actresses, acquiring a taste for opera, and marrying, ultimately, into a wealthy upper-crust family, heirs to the Frank Beverage empire. He had wavy golden hair, dressed in Brooks Brothers suits, spoke in a commanding baritone, gestured as if royalty on stage, and generally carried himself with patrician

airs, although he could easily descend into a rant, yelling through the barricaded doors of his West Philadelphia apartments (that he'd bought with his wife's money) to demand the rent from his tenants who counter-demanded he fix their plumbing first. Once, when Max was still running the store on Third Street in Chester before he became a landlord in Philly, he'd walked over to the main store and gone into the vault, which was right behind Sam's desk. He took a cash box of silver dollars that belonged to all three brothers and were used as gifts for birthdays and bar mitzvahs.

"What are you doing?" Sam asked him.

"I'll return them," Max said, but he never did, an act Sam found as unforgivable as when Max squandered all the money from the sale of their mother's house after she died (an investment that "went bad"). Max had taken unaccountable sums of money from the store he ran on Third Street, while Sam, who felt bossed around by my father and Max all his life, had dipped his hand in the till too, claiming both brothers were cheating him. My father didn't get involved. Perhaps he accepted the store's social Darwinism or perhaps, being the optimist that he was, he wanted to believe things were always better than they appeared.

WHEN I WAS TEN, I DECIDED I WANTED TO BE A BUSINESSMAN LIKE my father. I'd come in on weekends to watch him sell—his patience and intimacy with customers, his singular focus, a young couple perhaps, just married, whose parents had bought furniture from him many years ago. The young husband worked as a machinist at Baldwin Locomotive or maybe a cutter at Scott Paper. The wife was pregnant, and they'd just moved out to the suburbs but still drove into Chester to shop because they were loyal and they'd grown up here.

My father would listen, ask questions, take their history: What were their likes and dislikes? Colonial? Contemporary? French Provincial? What colors did they have in their new house over in Springfield? Did the den have a lot of natural light? He only wanted them to be satisfied and comfortable, and he'd put his hand over his heart in pleased agreement at the yellow lace curtains the wife said she planned for the nursery. Or maybe his pale blue eyes would dim with concern behind his horn-rimmed glasses when the husband mentioned his father's worsening problems walking because of his diabetes.

He'd wait for the right moment, then surprise them by remembering what the husband's parents bought at his store more than twenty-five years ago when they were just starting out. *Yes, they still have that coffee*

table! the husband might say, or *That was me and my brother's bedroom furniture!* My father would nod, smile benevolently. Like a clairvoyant working the crowd, he knew the secret was to say too little and not too much: nine out of ten boys slept in twin beds with pine headboards. And then he'd put his hand gently on the small of the wife's back and guide her to a recliner—she shouldn't stay on her feet too long with the baby due in a month—and they'd flip through fabric colors for the sofa model they'd already picked out. On his order pad, he'd write down item numbers. Would there be any more off the list price? The red-lettered sign in the window (which had been there for years) screamed SALE!! He'd soothe their worries. All would be figured out at the end. The end? Their eyes would dart around the store. All? And he'd take them downstairs to the basement where everything from baby strollers to vacuum cleaners to throw rugs to cribs to grandfather clocks to prints of Washington crossing the Delaware were for sale. He'd show them the new fade-resistant webbed patio furniture—very popular this season! And perhaps...well, they really should have a cedar chest for their damp basement. Soon they'd come back up and pause again in front of dinette sets the wife had admired, and my father would throw out names...Broyhill, Drexel, Link-Taylor, Thomasville, the best of the manufacturers, and tell the husband that the table's maple was milled in one of the finest factories in North Carolina. He'd show the husband a brochure with statistics about hardness of the wood and qualities of the three coats of finish, while the wife studied her reflection in the glistening polished surface. My father invited the husband to crouch down with him so they could examine the craftsmanship and beveling of the legs. Then they'd disappear with him into his office where he'd write up their contract.

In about twenty minutes, they'd come out, shaking hands, excited and nervous, having just financed the transaction to the tune of several years of payments. They'd walk over to the glass window with its round speaker hole and slotted opening for payments. My uncle Sam would get up from his creaky chair. A long knifelike shadow of a man whom you might glimpse from the side on a dusty street corner, his eyes tracked you like two large black olives. He would take their deposit and give them a payment book with the solemnity of placing a Bible in their hand.

Back in enchanted furniture land, my father would escort the couple down the center aisle to the front of the store, out the high, sky-blue double doors that swung both ways like a saloon entrance, under

the glass transom stenciled with **STANLEY FURNITURE**, and pause with them on the sidewalk, partaking of a final moment. He'd promise them that if they should have any problem whatsoever with their purchase he'd come over personally for a house call within forty-eight hours. He would contact them the day before the delivery. And, please, let him know when the baby arrives.

I'd be reading a comic book in the appliance section of the store, scanning occasionally the black and white TVs and the one or two new color models for 1961. I'd glance up to see his exuberance at the sale immediately fade when Sam barked something at him—a customer problem, a billing mix-up, a warehouse delivery. Only a minute before, my father could have come right out of one of my comics, a super-powered salesman of sorts. But now, his voice would be low and guarded when he answered Sam, straight information only, though, interestingly enough, always a touch conciliatory. Bitterly dark weather would cloud up the store like poison gas: I could hardly breathe there for all the tension. I don't know how my father's two other salesmen, Sowden and Travis, and the two secretaries tolerated it. Somehow they just ignored the bad blood. Sowden was a big man who looked like his name, with rosy cheeks, always jolly and in a good mood, and Travis was as compact as Sowden was expansive. Travis had a resonant, if buzzy, voice, greeting customers as if talking from inside an old radio. They never complained and had mastered an important precept of sales and of working for a family business: the neutrality of pleasantness.

Sometimes my older cousin Bruce, Sam's son, would be there too. He would take a two-dollar payment and then slip the customer's statement card into the hulking NCR tabulator. Sometimes he'd just do his homework. Bruce was an academic star at Chester High School, a tennis champion, president of student council, and the pride of his family. I was thirteen when he started college at Johns Hopkins. We all expected that he'd go to law school or study medicine; no matter what he did, we knew he'd continue to be a success by every measure.

But just shy of graduating from Johns Hopkins, he drove up with some friends to Millbrook, New York, to seek out Timothy Leary and wound up staying on the estate's three-hundred acres at Leary's Victorian mansion, dropping the famous and highly potent Owsley acid. One evening, after Bruce had left Millbrook and moved back to Baltimore, he got stuck in traffic while tripping. He smashed the car in front of him, then threw his car into reverse and hit the car behind him. He got out and started a fight with the driver in front, then bolted

toward the harbor in his sandals and bellbottoms, flailing his arms as he went. A workman scooped him up as he ran by and held onto him until the police came and took him away to jail.

ONE AFTERNOON, RIDING MY BIKE THROUGH CHESTER PARK, I DECIDED to stop in and say hello to Sam and Soph. I'd never been to their house and had no idea what to expect. Around the store, Sam could hardly bring himself to say a word to me. I was an extension of my father in his eyes, or at best invisible. They had a row home on the Chester side of the park in an older neighborhood. My father had built us a new home at the Garden City entrance to the park, a large Colonial house on three-quarters of an acre, a home featured in the *Chester Times* for its mix of period authenticity on the outside and modern furnishings on the inside, an obvious step up from what Sam could afford for his family, though I didn't give the disparity much thought back then.

Sam opened the door and stared at me a moment. "What?" he said. "I...I just stopped by to say hello."

He blinked sharply. He was wearing an open-necked shirt. I'd hardly ever seen him without a tie and jacket. His gray hair was combed straight back in thinning quills and his mustache, which usually all but covered his upper lip, had been trimmed.

My aunt Soph came to the door.

"I just stopped by to say hello," I repeated.

It must have dawned on my uncle then that I had no ulterior motive. He threw open the door, a broad smile on his face—I'd seen him smirk but never smile—and they both nearly mauled me with hugs and warm greetings as they took me inside to their small dining room. Soph offered milk and lemon cookies and bagels and lox—it was a Sunday—and they both asked me questions about myself, about school, about my brother (who was away at college like their son, Bruce), as if they hadn't seen me in years, which in some sense they hadn't. Though I came down to the store almost every day, if just to ride along with my mother when she picked up my father (we had only one car) and Sam was always there, we never acknowledged each other. This wasn't Steven, son of Benjamin from The Store. This was their nephew, fourteen years old, whom they'd always loved and cherished. They brought out photographs to show me of Bruce at Johns Hopkins—this was before his breakdown in traffic and before Timothy Leary—and pictures of their daughter Sandy's wedding, just married in Baltimore, though of course we hadn't gone or been invited.

Soph went upstairs and came back with a box of clothes that Bruce had outgrown, sweaters, shirts, sport jackets, ties, and asked if I would take them: “We’re alone here,” she said. “What should we do with all these things?” When I left they embraced me—Uncle Sam hugging me!—and came outside to stand on the sidewalk, wave fervently, and watch me pedal down their older tree-lined street back through the park to our side of the world.

I’VE THOUGHT MANY TIMES ABOUT THEIR OUTPOURING OF AFFECTION that day. The most plausible explanation is I had somehow stepped out of time, out of the sweep of our family history. With my simple knock on their door to say hello, I’d short-circuited years of acrimonious suspicion and caught them unawares as the loving aunt and uncle they would have liked to be, except for the years of bad blood that stood in the way. I had not been mistaken when I saw tears in my aunt Soph’s eyes as I left—freshly cleansed from a life void of family closeness.

The next day, a Monday, my mother and I came down as usual to pick up my father from work. When I walked in, I looked at my uncle expectantly for some acknowledgment of our breakthrough. There was nothing. Just a scowl as deep as the worn grooves in the floor of the store’s rickety freight elevator that I was never allowed to ride. I looked again, to make sure he’d caught my eye, and I smiled, but his expression was as unwelcoming as black ice. My hopeful anticipation at seeing him turned to pinching frustration. Nothing had changed. My intervention had produced no magical reversal, and in my disappointment, I could never bring myself to stop in on my aunt and uncle again.

I LISTENED TO MY COLLEGE PROFESSOR EXPLICATE D.H. LAWRENCE’S “The Rocking-Horse Winner,” about a boy who rides his childhood rocking-horse into a trance state from which he returns with the names of winning racetrack horses. No matter how much money he wins and gives secretly through his uncle to his unhappy mother, she remains disheartened. The walls continue to whisper, *There must be more money, there must be more money*. At the story’s end, the boy, riding his horse in a fury of determination, lapses into unconsciousness after reckoning the winner of the big Derby. Later that night he dies from fever. “Poor devil, poor devil, he’s best gone out of a life where he rides his rocking-horse to find a winner,” the boy’s opportunistic uncle offers as a summation of his nephew’s existence at the story’s conclusion.

As I sat in class and took notes on the possible interpretations

of the story—Lawrence’s interest in sex and the insatiable demands of repressed desire; a social commentary on the evils of capitalism and industrialization with death as the price of success—the professor also offered that you could take every mention of the word “money” and substitute “love” (this was 1970, after all) and read the story as an allegory for a materialist life stripped of human connection and meaning. “Steeped in loneliness,” he added. “Bereft of heart.” I thought of my own depressed mother, Jeannette—she’d been born Jane but her name had been changed to Jeannette after her first-grade teacher in 1918 thought she was too pretty to be called Jane—who brightened every time my father would bring home news of a big sale at the store, though her lifted spirits never remained long before she became worried and anxious again. And I thought, too, how much as a child I’d wanted to earn so much money that it would make my mother happy once and for all and win her unfettered love.

STANLEY FURNITURE WAS GOING DOWNHILL FAST WHILE I WAS IN college. White flight had taken its toll on Chester and mostly left behind black workers at low-paying jobs with little income to support the economy. With crime on the rise, people feared coming into town to shop. Many of the businesses had relocated to the suburbs, and Sam tried to persuade my father to go too. I had always considered it noble of my father that he chose to stay in Chester out of loyalty to the city and its black residents. He dreamed of rejuvenating the town and chaired the redevelopment committee, implementing business campaigns—Saturday sidewalk sales, free parking, a pedestrian mall—to get people downtown again. But Sam interpreted my father’s staying as his wanting to remain a big-shot in the Chester community rather than move the store to a strip mall in Springfield where Sam believed they had a better chance of succeeding. It was yet another example for Sam of how he wasn’t listened to and taken seriously. When business became so bad that the store could no longer support two partners, Sam left and took a job as a salesman at Stern’s in Philadelphia. Meanwhile, my father hung on, despite the boarded up stores around him. He ran the business with one salesman who came in on weekends and for holiday periods, and a part-time secretary (my mother helped with the books), and the cleaning lady who kept the diminished inventory dusted off.

At Stern’s, Sam was on the floor one day when Max walked in looking for cheap furniture to fill up his West Philadelphia apartments near the University of Pennsylvania so he could rent them for more

money to students. Sam came over to him and stood there a moment. They hadn't seen each other in five years. Max looked at him blankly.

"Max," said Sam, "it's me, your brother." Max's mouth opened. He hadn't recognized his own brother. "Just like in the Bible with Joseph," Sam would say later. They embraced but nothing came of the encounter. They never saw each other again, though when Sam brought up the meeting to Bruce years afterward—he couldn't get over Max not recognizing him—a tear ran down his cheek. Still, it wasn't enough to keep Sam from crying out "I hate that son of a bitch!" when Bruce pleaded with him to reconcile with Max before they both died. Decades had not softened his fury.

Had they always been enemies? I know little about their parents, my grandparents, who died before I was born. I'd heard that my grandmother was a taskmaster, and in many ways, she had to be. Her husband, my grandfather, died before the boys were teenagers. She lost two other children: a son, Izzie, at twelve, and her only daughter, Bernice, at eleven. Izzie, the eldest, was looked up to and loved by them all, and evidently kept the boys in line, their leader—hair white like a baby's, a pure blond, my father recalled. He had a congenital ailment called a leaking heart, a defective valve that often causes scarring. The phrase, when my father told me, resonated with a romantic fatalism. Bernice, a prodigy on the piano, had a brilliant future ahead of her until she died from influenza. Perhaps the three remaining children took their grief out on each other, the tender emotional heart of their family cut out by the death of their two favorite siblings, especially the loss of their only sister who doted on them and had a knack for making each of the brothers feel special. By the time they were teenagers, Max, Sam, and Ben were helping their mother run the army and navy store, but the business went bankrupt twice before they called it quits and scraped together enough money to move into the storefront building in Chester and got their serendipitous start selling furniture. She made the boys work. That's mostly what they knew, work and survival, and the ever-present wolf at the door, the poorhouse being real in those days. This should have brought them all closer together, but maybe there was too little love to go around and too much work. Then again, there was plenty of time for love in my family but that didn't stop my brother and me from being at each other's throats over money too.

I HAD NO INTENTION OF BECOMING A WRITER. I WAS GOING TO FOLLOW my father into business. I liked to play sports, and when I did read,

it was *MAD Magazine* or comics, avoiding anything between hard covers. My brother, Louis, was to be the future writer. Unlike me, he wanted nothing to do with business or selling and spent his time on more ethereal pursuits, especially the avant-garde, reading everything from Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood* to the Russian surrealism of Andrei Bely's *The Silver Dove* to Robert Graves's *The White Goddess*, and, in his less literary moments, gazing through his telescope to make star charts. No one had any doubt he would become a writer; it was what he did in his spare time even in junior high, typing stories on his Olivetti portable with titles like "At the Center Lies a Body" that were part crime capers, part German Expressionist meditations on evil in which characters contemplated the idea of action.

"Nothing happens," I would tell him about the stories.

"It's not supposed to," he'd insist. "All the movement takes place in the mind of the killer."

"What killer? He's not in the story."

"He's *suggested*," Louis would say, a word like "ineffable" that he used frequently in talking about his work. "You're so literal," he would accuse me.

Our split, like my father and his brothers before us, came over money. Louis was in the midst of a bad marriage, teaching four classes a semester at a college he didn't like in a small town he hated, and in debt up to his nose. He asked for money—I now had some by marriage—and then he asked for more. Always he'd call at the last minute and declare it an emergency: he needed to make a car or house payment; the utility company was threatening to shut off the electricity; his wife's nursing degree was in hock until they paid off her tuition bill...I sent the money at every request. Meanwhile, my parents had their own problems: the store had gone bankrupt by this time; the house had fallen into disrepair; the refrigerator and washer had died; they had medical bills from my mother's continuing strokes. What I didn't know was that they were also giving money to my brother, which was really the money I sent them. My wife—we'd only been married a year—felt confused by the peculiar money rites of our family, not to mention cornered and intimidated by the nest of baby bird mouths that had suddenly become gargantuan maws demanding succor.

I told my brother that I couldn't send him any more; I had to concentrate on Mom and Dad. His demands were creating resentment and strain in my marriage. I didn't tell him that my continually bailing him out was only reinforcing his dependency on

our parents, via me, or maybe on me directly. When he called late one night to ask for an emergency loan of a hundred dollars to pay his car insurance, I said no. He blew up. Here I was taking a trip to Europe with my wife and we couldn't even loan him a hundred dollars for car insurance! To him it was only a hundred dollars, but to us, after many such emergencies by this time, it was the principle, as it always is the "principle" versus the specific reasonable request. I didn't hear from him for months, nor would he return phone calls. They rarely answered the phone, letting the answering machine get it, because, as he'd told me, creditors called all the time, threatening them in their own special just-within-the-law way.

We sent him and his family Hanukkah presents. They sent them back to us, still wrapped.

Two years later I saw my brother at our mother's hospital bed—the first time we'd spoken during all that time. Our mother had suffered her worst stroke yet. She was on an IV and clot-busting drugs and hooked up to a cardiac monitor and blood pressure cuff. A ventilator was inserted in her windpipe. She kept opening and closing her mouth as if gasping for air. The nurse told me she was in discomfort, though she didn't know if it was pain exactly. My brother Louis was in the room and said, "Steven is here." My mother opened her eyes, blinked, squeezed my hand. Her lips were cracked and dried and her tongue looked bloated and spotted with blood. The nurse said that was just the rawness from the tube in her throat. She had a 102° fever. This was her second major stroke and only my father was optimistic she wouldn't die.

She drifted off, what turned out to be unconsciousness. The machines started beeping wildly and the nurse picked up the phone and barked "Code 99!" Two teams of medical personnel appeared and began to resuscitate her, while Louis and I waited outside. "She suffered in life and now she's suffering in death," my brother said.

Our mother would die three months later, but that evening the doctors were able to stabilize her, and my father, brother, and I went back to the house for some rest. I don't remember how it started or why, but my brother and I got into an argument about his having to be the one on the scene here in Philadelphia to take care of Mom and to support Dad while I was out in Colorado without any responsibilities other than to call in. The argument progressed to my general selfishness. "You always make it easy on yourself," he said, "and money, I suppose, gives you the right to feel like you don't have to help out in any other way."

The next thing that happened—the phrase always seems so pallid

as a transition in these cases—was that I had my hands around his throat choking him. He struggled to unclench my hands, gasping for air and for me to let go, flailing at me when I didn't. Our father ran into the room, and in tears begged us to stop, "For your mother, please, for your mother, don't do this!" and all the hate went out of me. I stood there empty of venom, deflated in shame, picturing my mother's poor terrified face. A miserable, rented cry tore from me as I stooped over catching my own breath. I have never attacked anyone like that before, or since, but I could well imagine killing someone in such a moment of anger, and I saw reflected in my brother's eyes both his fear and the naked atavism of ourselves at the bleakest moment of our brotherhood.

"I FOUND OUT WHY SAM WOULDN'T GO TO YOUR FATHER'S FUNERAL," Bruce told me.

It was the fall of 1999, and we were in Teaneck, New Jersey. My brother was marrying for the second time. My cousin Bruce had come up from Baltimore for the wedding. He had six children, two of them adopted. He owned a software company that specialized in applications for agencies that worked with the disabled. He and his wife had recently adopted a fifteen-year-old girl from Ghana, brought to this country for medical treatment for the polio she suffered as a child. And he'd started a pilot program that hired the homeless in Baltimore to refurbish old computers. His latest project? Developing funding to build an orphanage in Namibia.

In many ways he'd turned out to be every bit the mensch his parents had expected, except he was a Christian. For a year they didn't talk to him after he became one. "They had no problem while I was living at Millbrook with Leary doing acid, but when I took to Jesus, then they freaked out."

Bruce, taller than me, about six-two, still had most of his hair—unlike me. He had the same color eyes as I did, hazel, and his forehead sloped back at the same angle as mine, the same flat Russian shape as our fathers' skulls. We'd found a quiet place to talk in the backyard where Louis and Jean had just married under the chuppa. Bruce had been explaining—always a mystery to me—what caused the final rift between our fathers:

"Ben was running the business by himself. Dad had been working at Stern's for three years. Then, in 1974, the IRS started coming after Ben for federal withholding tax from employees' paychecks. He hadn't

been paying it. Also the state came after him for sales tax—I don't know how much. Ben asked Sam for help and Dad hung up on him. So your father told the state that Sam was still his partner and to collect the back taxes from him. One day Mom and Dad came back from work to find a notice on the door of their home. It said the house was being seized for the payment of back taxes. Mom didn't have any money. She was working in a low-paying CETA job and Dad wasn't making much at Stern's, certainly not enough to come anywhere near what was needed to pay off the taxes and release them from the lien. Dad didn't know what to do, but Mom stepped in and called Max. She made a proposal. Dad would pay one-third, all they could afford, Ben would pay one-third, and Max would pay a third." Bruce took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes.

"What happened?" I asked.

"Max hung up on her."

I remembered something while Bruce was telling me this. My parents had put their house into my brother's name just before our father declared bankruptcy. I'd always been told it was just standard procedure for protection from bankruptcy. Nothing about anyone else's house being jeopardized.

"Who paid all the taxes?"

"My sister. Sandy paid everything—from the period when Sam worked at the store and from after he left too."

I wanted to get up and walk around the block, try to make sense of what I'd just heard. I had trouble believing my father had called Harrisburg and sold his younger brother down the river like this, sacrificed him. He would always say how much he loved Sam and protected him as a child, and I wanted to hear his side of the store's story.

But he was dead, almost five years now, from a heart attack. Max had died too, and only Sam remained, who had Paget's disease, his bones deformed and fragile, and I couldn't ask him.

"I don't want you to think your father is the villain here," Bruce said, seeing my concern. "Ben worked harder than Sam or Max and deserved to be the boss. He gave his life to the store. I know because I saw him constantly on the go there, talking to the reps, working the floor, taking all the flak when things went wrong. Dad never wanted to be in the business, and I believe he felt trapped there all his life. He and my mother took a six month honeymoon after they married—six months!—while all the time collecting his salary from the store. And he was the one who got to take their mother on driving trips to

California and Florida while the other boys stayed behind to run the business. It's hard to say if Ben and Max treated him like a perpetual little brother because he acted that way, or he acted that way because they never let him have any power."

Substitute the word power for money.

We walked over to watch my brother and his new wife Jean feed each other a bite of wedding cake. Bruce told me he became a Christian after his breakdown, though not without much personal turmoil. "I was a Jew after all, you know, allergic to Jesus. I'd been looking for something to take away the angst I'd had all my life. I didn't see any contentment in our family, I didn't find it at the synagogue, and I certainly didn't see the presence of grace anywhere at the store." Then he met a young woman, a Christian, who eventually became his wife.

I didn't want to reduce his decision to that of a psychological reaction to his upbringing, but it struck me that he'd chosen a faith based on a practice unknown among our fathers: forgiveness.

I glanced at my brother standing with his new wife alongside their wedding cake. He beamed; he was marrying someone for love, not need, and I saw that Jean loved him dearly too, loved his sometimes brilliant, sometimes fractured talk and his capacious laughter: "You laugh just like the Car Guys," she'd told him when they first spoke on the phone, falling in love with his outsized amusement at the world. How my brother and I reconciled adds to the great store of commanding evidence for the human comedy. I'd come to New York City to watch one of my stories read by an actor to an audience at Symphony Space. I'd invited my brother. He declined—too busy—but then called back a few weeks later to say he could make it after all. It just so happened he was going to be in New York at the same time for a film conference, staying at a hotel across the street from mine in Midtown. He would like to go hear my story...but could I get him a free ticket? I swallowed my irritation—couldn't he even afford the ten dollar ticket?—because we'd started talking on the phone by this time, making small steps toward becoming brothers again. As it turned out, even though I left a ticket for him at the box office, he bought one in advance on his own.

At the reading, which he said he enjoyed, he met my editor. Afterward, a number of us, including my brother, went out for drinks, and then Louis and I walked back to our hotels, stopping on the way at a bookstore. He bought close to ninety dollars worth of books. We went upstairs to my hotel room to talk. He was exceptionally complimentary about how well he'd thought the story had gone over,

but before he left, he asked if I would reimburse him for his ticket to the reading. I tried not to explode.

“I left you a ticket at the box office.”

“I forgot.”

“How could you forget? You were the one who asked me for a ticket.”

“I have a lot on my mind,” he said.

I gave him the ten dollars, which meant I’d spent twenty, counting his unused ticket at the box office.

Five-thirty the next morning the phone rang. It was my brother. He’d rolled over in bed and crushed his glasses; he couldn’t see a thing without them. An extra pair was in the glove compartment of his car, in the hotel’s parking garage below.

“Can you get them?” he asked me.

“What?” I was groggy and exhausted from the events and celebration of the night before—I’d only gotten to bed a few hours ago.

“Can you get me the extra pair from the car?”

My eyes shut. A weary moment passed before the solution to his problem occurred to me. “Have the bellhop or valet bring them up,” I said.

And then, as if no reasonable person would disagree, he declared, “I’m not going to tip that guy two dollars to go down and get my glasses!”

“Wait—you want me to get out of bed at five-thirty in the morning, get dressed, go across Eighth Avenue to a dim parking garage and bring you your glasses because you don’t want to tip somebody *two dollars!*”

“I can’t see.”

“I can’t believe this, Louis! You just paid ninety dollars for books—”

“I can’t find my wallet without my glasses. *You* could bring two dollars and give it to the bellhop.”

I hung up, just like my father and his brothers had hung up on each other.

Was my brother’s behavior a reaction to the successful reading of the night before or just our usual money madness or were rivalry and money so entwined through the generations that they had long ago forfeited their separate properties?

I thought for certain the incident would effectively lose us all the ground we’d gained, but not long afterward he called and said that he

had wonderful news, thanks in part to me: he was dating my editor's best friend's sister. My editor, knowing his field was film theory, had sent him an anthology of writing about film she'd just edited; my brother had called to thank her and knowing she was single (although not knowing she was attached) asked her out. She'd explained her situation but told him about her best friend's sister.

As he and Jean posed for pictures now, my brother seemed the happiest man alive. I don't know what comes of moments when you put your hands around your brother's throat, if they can truly be buried or forgiven or redeemed by setting your estranged brother up to meet his beloved, but we have managed to move beyond our troubles. I sometimes marvel at the irony of how carefully we avoided any business relationship—we wouldn't fall into the same trap as our father and uncles!—and yet we'd nearly let money ignite our relationship into ashes.

I said goodbye to Bruce. He asked me to visit him and his family in Baltimore if I should be on the East Coast again soon. I told him to look us up in Colorado, two thousand miles from here; it was no coincidence that I'd moved so far away. When I was younger I imagined I'd always live near my parents: my troubled mother, with no end to her sadness, my fantasies of redeeming her suffering through taking over the family business and making millions. Nor could I protect my father from what I privately feared in my idolizing of him—that he was but a common failure, and I could become one too. Instead, I had ridden my rocking-horse out West to where people always believed they'd find gold in one form or another. I was fifty-one years old, and I knew I wouldn't realize the winning ticket that I always hoped would bring lasting fortune to those I once most loved. But I knew, too, I would not die doing so.