

A Brotherhood Found

"Which way now, squirt?" David asked.

"I don't know," Matthew lied. He pretended to study the woods for a clue about how to proceed. He snapped the top button of his windbreaker against the mild cold and sighed loudly. He was hoping David would get them lost.

"I'm not lost," David said suddenly. "I just wanted *you* to pick this time." It was an Indian summer. The sun filled the sky with a reddish light. David looked up at the star and examined it for potential geographical hints. He was happy momentarily to be blind from the inquiry.

"That way?" asked Matthew, timidly pointing a finger.

"No," David disagreed, "we'll get lost through there, squirt. The only way is straight ahead." David also pointed, but more confidently than Matthew. He slid his canteen forward on its strap and unscrewed the plastic cap, which hung from a flimsy chain. The cap dangled pendulously in the air as David held the canteen aloft as an offering for Matthew, who beamed at it, his parched tongue visible between his lips. "Go ahead, squirt," David invited.

Matthew grabbed for the canteen and David pulled it away, laughing. A small quantity of water spilled from the mouth of the canteen to the ground. David eagerly admonished Matthew that the lost liquid was his share, wasted by his own carelessness.

"I'm not thirsty," Matthew claimed, tightly folding his arms.

"More for me then," said David, who took his brother's defiance as an opportunity to show him something. The canteen was almost full, but Matthew did not know how full. David lifted it to his mouth and drank from it greedily so that water trickled down his chin. He watched Matthew from the corner of his eye, expecting what he saw and enjoying it immensely. At first Matthew stared. He unfolded his arms and stuffed his hands deep into his pockets. Lips tightly shut and tongue withdrawn, he emitted a humming sound like a teakettle angrily approaching a boil. Then, when he couldn't take anymore, Matthew pulled his hands from his trousers in such a way that his pockets followed behind them. Soon he was jumping up and down beside David, snatching wildly at the vessel to gain possession of it.

It was no use. The difference in height and physical strength was too great. Matthew concluded by sinking to the ground in a cross-legged position with his chin resting on his hands. He stared ahead into the woods at the proper trailhead for getting home.

"Sure you aren't thirsty?" David remarked. Matthew didn't respond. "There's a little water left, squirt. Are you sure you aren't thirsty, squirt?"

Matthew turned his head to the side and frowned. He did not look up at David, but stared at David's sneakers. They were Puma's and bore the trademark white band on the side. Someone had written something on that portion, but Matthew couldn't read it on account of the cursive. He looked at it long enough to pull a few decipherable letters from it, such as "t" and "i". The other letters remained a mystery to Matthew, who shifted his attention to the top

of the sneakers, where two firm double knots twisted the laces into long, drooping bunny ears.

"Am too thirsty!" Matthew exclaimed, scooping dirt beside his foot. Although reversing his convictions, he was true to a bottom line defiance.

"You should drink," David advised. And to demonstrate his good will, he stooped in front of Matthew and placed the canteen in his lap, taking two large steps backward. "I can't fuss with you over here, squirt. I'm too far away, squirt."

Matthew eyed David suspiciously without moving. He did not drink as recommended, but waited for David to retreat two more steps until his back was against a tree leading into the woods and he could not go any further. At that distance David was sufficiently out of range and Matthew snatched the canteen from his lap and hurriedly poured its first surges of water against his entire face. Some of the initial flow reached Matthew's mouth, but a good deal of it also ascended his nasal cavity, which accepted it easily at that tilt of the head. Matthew coughed violently, but continued to drink, determined to hydrate himself no matter what the consequences. He wrapped his whole straining mouth around the mouth of the canteen and puffed his lips like a trombonist as he coughed and consumed.

"Take it easy, squirt," Matthew heard David say, but the drinking remained frenzied. In naive mimicry of David, and simultaneously in opposition to him, Matthew was prone to go overboard once he got going at all. He took great pride in this behavior and considered it very grown-up.

Once refreshed, the boys wandered down the trail decided upon by David. They were now low on water and the path was unfamiliar to them (despite David's occasional claims to the contrary), but the sun was still high enough for several hours of carefree daylight, which frequently pierced the thick canopy of treetops to illuminate a creepy outcrop of forest mushrooms along a nearby tree trunk or an abandoned sagging spider web in possession of immobilized prey. Morbid details like this latter one were particularly fascinating to Matthew, who immediately upon resuming the hike fell into a state of near bewitchment, so willingly did he trust the idea of being lost as David's ward.

"This is the best one yet!" Matthew frequently remarked, referring to the current outing, which crowned a long season of similar events.

"Is it better than last time, squirt?" David asked, having fun with himself that Matthew did not suspect they were penetrating unknown country.

"It's the same, but better," Matthew answered.

"But you remember this trail, don't you, squirt?"

"Yes," said Matthew, stopping to turn over a rock, beneath which two thick earthworms pulsed visibly with life. "Don't leave me behind!" he called after David, who continued to follow the trail, as if seeking its resignation to his will. Matthew replaced the rock gently and scrambled over the growing distance between himself and his brother. "I don't mind if we're lost," he said, panting slightly, pulling David's sleeve to slow him down.

"We're not lost," David snapped. A thick bead of sweat quivered beside his eyebrow and ran down his cheek, leaving a moist streak on his face, but David did not wipe it away, as if denying any reality to his exertions.

"Oh," conceded Matthew, looking down at his sneakers. A charged silence ensued, during which the woods slowly creaked and occasionally crackled like a dry fire. Matthew looked up at David and said nothing. His wide eyes were like the rising of two moons.

"We can go back if that's what you want, squirt," said David, shrugging indifferently. "It makes no difference to me, squirt."

"I don't wanna go back."

"I don't either," said David.

"I don't!" Matthew emphasized about himself.

"We're not lost," David assured him, touching Matthew's forehead.

The boys were soon lost despite the presence of the trail to follow. They had no idea where it was taking them or which direction they were heading or wanted to head. Several sections of the trail had deteriorated into arduous climbing that disoriented the boys and forced them to empty their canteen without fully quenching their thirst. At one section David carried Matthew on his back to transport him safely across a fan of unexpected streams with hospitable rocks in their beds if your legs were long enough to bridge them. There, Matthew suggested they refill the canteen, but David lectured him about microscopic worms and bacteria, and rejected the suggestion for the sake of the little

remaining good water in their possession at that time. It was a long afternoon of labor and the sun was dropping fast. The boys could see it more easily through the trees at that angle, and David expressed hope in that regard.

"The woods are thinning!" he announced pointing, no longer veiling his desire to emerge from them into familiar terrain.

"I don't want them to," Matthew said. "We can't hike later." He ran alongside David and kept running slightly to match David's hurried pace. The trail was only wide enough for single file and stray shoots and branches rubbed against Matthew's legs.

"I'm sick of hiking anyway," David declared, speeding up. The news was devastating to Matthew, who stopped dead immediately upon hearing it.

"What are you waiting for, squirt?" David called impatiently, looking backward over the new distance between the boys. A pair of squirrels dashed across the path between them and ascended a tree into oblivion.

"I'm sick of hiking," Matthew announced with a tone of bold originality. He crossed his arms and held his ground, demonstrating how sick exactly. He appeared to be finished with moving for the rest of his life.

"Hurry up, squirt!" ordered David.

"I have to pee," Matthew confessed, peering up the trail. The woods did not object to this disclosure and Matthew opened his fly and promptly watered the trail ahead of him.

Tired after a long period of silent marching the boys happened onto a clearing similar to the one where they first lost their way. Again David asked Matthew which of three branching trails they should take, but this time Matthew responded less equivocally and David assented right away, but not without disparaging the choice with a deep cynicism.

"We're lost anyway," David remarked.

"That's what I wanted," Matthew said, scratching a new bug bite.

"It isn't funny, squirt," David replied, rebuking a laugh that had not happened. The trail was wider now, suggesting an end to the woods in this new direction. David walked beside Matthew, but occasionally walked faster than him to make him work harder.

"Is this the last one?" Matthew asked, referring to the hike and the time of year.

"We know every trail anyway," David answered, a new ennui in his voice. The boys did not say anything for a long time after those words. Their prolonged silence wove an agreement between them that somehow the woods were less fun when you finally knew every trail.

David picked Matthew up at the airport. He admonished Matthew about the dangers of needlessly checking one's luggage when a bag small enough for carry-on would suffice for a weekend visit. It was a short visit, Matthew assented, but some things required extra space. He did not voice this rebuttal; he only thought it. Why should he talk about the room taken up by the presents

he brought for David's wife and two children, Matthew's nieces? That explanation would probably land him in a headlock, forced to confess David's gift before it ever arrived on the carousel. Besides, David and Matthew had not seen each other for ten years owing to Matthew's financial misadventures while in Europe. That trip was also supposed to be short. Had Matthew learned to pack heavily no matter what after spending ten years in an attempt to get home?

"I'm like Odysseus," he suggested, voicing a tangent.

"I don't get you, squirt," David said. He was very preoccupied with the arrival of Matthew's bag, and hurried Matthew to the baggage claim, where they waited tensely. As other bags emerged onto the rotating scales of the carousel, David eyed them intensely, hardly looking at Matthew, who stood meekly beside him. When Matthew announced the appearance of his weathered backpack, David clapped him on the shoulder fraternally.

Walking to the parking lot, David wore Matthew's backpack slung across his right shoulder only, and repeatedly waved off Matthew's single suggestion that the assistance was unnecessary. "I carried it all across Europe," Matthew said cheerfully, but David was walking too fast and too far ahead to oblige the conversational icebreaker. It was as if the simple naming of the continent put its actual physical distance between him and his brother.

In the car, David became more relaxed about the reunion. After several fastidious electronic adjustments of the safety mirrors, he leaned back in the leather bucket seat of his Lexis and told Matthew how good it was to see him

again. He rubbed Matthew's head and laughed about how long the tousled hair was. "It's good to see you, squirt," he repeated. "Letters aren't the same."

Matthew had never seen David's family, which popped into existence rapidly over the last four years. He had never seen photos, either, except the one sent by his mother after a Christmas with David. That one was only the newlyweds before any children were born. It said "David and Emily" on the back in familiar block print mixed with cursive. Then the message, "He will write," as if Matthew's mother knew all about the hopes and habits of her two sons.

In the photo Emily was a short woman with wide shoulders. The image was misleading, for Emily was taller than David by an inch. It was not until she stood by his side with David's arm around her that Matthew understood how David lifted himself at her expense whenever they stood that way, as in the photo. It did not seem to bother Emily, however. In fact, she often snuck into the position when David was standing aloof of her, staring who knows where.

"Are we going to get a chance for just the two of us?" Matthew asked David softly after meeting David's daughters, who giggled at Matthew's bohemian appearance. He felt himself drawn to this new family in such a way that he might not ask again, while to ask seemed important.

"We're going hiking, squirt," David answered, annoyed.

"Hiking where?"

"Hiking just the two us," David said. There was a sternness in his voice, as if he were ordering Matthew into the plans. "Tomorrow morning at eight." To

prepare for this adventure, the brothers hurried through dinner and quickly retreated to respective bedrooms. Matthew burped as David slapped him on the back by way of goodnight. He was already alone when his first laugh followed the exhalation. It was strange to laugh all alone about his own poor etiquette. Matthew wished for David's sake he would soon do the same.

At 8 AM, Matthew was wide-awake, and had been for two hours. He awoke with a difficult feeling that his brother invented the hiking plans out of thin air, and that now the two men were obliged to abandon the women of the house without a care for their feelings. Yet Matthew did care for their feelings. How odd it was for him to see how deeply. Did he care for their feelings more than David's? Matthew reconsidered the previous evening several times. With each review he became less certain of his original motive for inquiring about time alone with David.

In the car David told Matthew to lean back and enjoy the ride. "You don't have to think about anything," David concluded, as if thinking were purely repugnant. David demonstrated his remark by relaxing into the act of driving. He loosened his grip and held the steering wheel with only one hand, resting the other on the stick shift.

"Those are funny gloves," Matthew said.

"What, these? They're for driving."

"Where did the fingers go?"

"There are no fingers," David clarified unnecessarily.

"I meant did they come with the gloves or does the factory keep them?"

David looked at Matthew quizzically, as if suspecting an eccentricity. "Is that how they do it in Europe?" he quipped.

"I didn't ask," Matthew joked. "Anyway, I was just wondering because I thought they'd make terrific finger puppets. For the kids."

"You can't be serious!"

"No, I'm not serious," said Matthew. The discussion was effecting David's driving, which now contradicted any prior notion of facilitated relaxation for Matthew. At the next few turns David belatedly jerked the wheel with both hands, as if testing the adhesion of the leather over his palms. In the subsequent straight away, after passing two sluggish cars simultaneously, he peeled the gloves off and handed them to Matthew magnanimously.

"Put them on," David bid.

"They fit like a glove," Matthew punned, wriggling his exposed fingers.

"Of course they do. Say, how long have you been in the states now?"

"Don't you know?"

"I'm too damned busy!" David complained. It was the first sentence in an avalanche.

When they arrived at the parking lot and trailhead, the day was dawning very brightly. It was good weather for a hike, provided one brought sufficient water to counteract the heat. David parked the car and motioned for Matthew to get out, but did not speak. He had been silent for a long time, as if stuck on the threshold

between a thorough or a superficial examination of his own life. Matthew was surprised to see how much was there to take stock of.

"Have you talked to Emily about any of this?" he inquired, stepping around to the back of the car, like a mirror reflection of David's actions.

"Check this out," David said, lifting the trunk. From a well-organized assembly of boxes and plastic tubs, David removed a piece of hiking equipment and held it aloft before Matthew. It was a belt of some kind. It had clasps and adjusting rods. "It's for water. You put the bottles in here," David indicated two empty cylindrical pockets, "and then buckle over your waist."

"That's great," Matthew noted encouragingly.

"Cost a fortune," remarked David, relapsing into complaint mode. He became disgusted with the object and tossed it into the trunk, disregarding it. David closed the trunk and heaved a sigh, looking squarely at Matthew. Matthew did not move or speak, and David looked him up and down several times, measuring him in some way.

"You look like I did," David said. Despite its sadness, the remark filled Matthew with a sudden rush of pride, and he blushed slightly.

"We're brothers," he said.

"We're brothers," David repeated, noting it to himself.

At the trailhead, David did not stop to look over the available trails, but took the leftmost option at a stiff pace. It was not a hard trail. In fact, the two-mile flat loop was too easy. Had it not been for the excellent visibility and beautiful vistas

of distant hillsides covered in luminous conifers, the outing would have ended before early afternoon. Confronted by this possibility, David apparently did not want it, and often stopped at a vantage point to look across the valleys, and point to the areas where big business was certain to swallow Mother Nature.

"I get angry at that for the kids," he explained. "They'll never have it how we did, traipsing through the woods, getting lost in all of it."

"We never got *too* lost."

"That was because of me," David snapped. He was bitter. "You've never had to worry about anything. It's been a free ride for you the whole way. Disappearing to Europe, living with Mom and Dad when you're almost thirty years old, dreaming of your art work."

"I brought you some," Matthew stated after a long silence. "I hope you want it. I have some canvases of a Portuguese family I knew."

"That would be nice," David said absently, not turning his head. He looked across the valley to the distant crest of a hill. Was he looking at a shadow? He seemed to be looking at nothing at all. Then he blinked a few times and resumed walking ahead of Matthew.

Matthew opened the door with a warm smile on his face. His eyes seemed to widen over the years like two slowly blossoming flowers. David had not looked into those eyes for almost twenty years. They were inviting to him now. He swiftly heaved his suitcase and asked if he could come in. Matthew laughed at the question as he pushed open the rickety screen door.

"If you want to," he said, making fun of the house.

"I'm not planning on staying long," David declared. It was hard to corroborate that claim with David's visible difficulty with his luggage. He banged it against the low doorstep upon entering the house and then dragged it behind him a little during his first inward steps. What could he possibly be carrying at that great a weight? Then it dawned on Matthew that David was significantly older.

"It's too bad about you and Emily," Matthew said. He did not mean to pry. It was his habit to speak to the point about everything. He saw that David was confused, as if confronted by his brother's candor, which he did not understand.

"Oh," David said.

"I'm going to hug you now," Matthew warned. He extended his arms and David noticed the paint along Matthew's fingers and palms. For a man of routine like David the disorder and disharmony of the myriad colors transmitted something tribal, as if an African aboriginal were about to swoop up from a fireside crouch and lift David from his feet. He was surprised to experience this imaginative vision. It seemed to have something to do with the house, the walls and corners of which overflowed with striking portraits and angular, primitive statues.

"Are your hands wet?" David asked, referring to the paint.

Matthew frowned, affirming the question.

"Do my face," David promptly requested. But Matthew did not understand. He watched as David took him gruffly by the wrist and squeezed his hand into a

fist with the index finger extended. "Do my face," he repeated, and dragged Matthew's extended finger horizontally across his own cheek, drawing a wide, light streak of magenta. David looked into Matthew's wide eyes and observed a reflection of himself with the paint on his cheek. "Do my other one," he said. He did not have to guide Matthew anymore. In the space of a second, a curled knuckle pressed against David's cheek, then a thumb and the heel of Matthew's palm. Matthew continued these manipulations until a complicated arrangement of hexagrams adorned David's cheeks and his long forehead. Then he held David at arm's length to examine the work with a mischievous glimmer in his eyes.

"You always were the handsome one," Matthew said. The words effected David strongly, and a powerful guffaw escaped him. It echoed among the artwork and the empty interior of the room like a trumpet blast. The faces in the portraits seemed to be hearing it eternally, and the numerous statues were all frozen in their dance to the song that surrounded it. David looked around the room and observed how much life inhabited these images and shapes of things past and expired. Their vitality was a mystery to him. It made him pensive and sad.

David spent the first week of his visit in a bedroom. He came out only to feed himself sparsely and mutter sorrowful apologies to his hosts. As his introspective reclusion deepened, these communications assumed a remoteness that made them completely incomprehensible. Soon David declined to impart them at all,

resorting instead to a dreary eye contact and a slow, shuffling step. At last he retired to the bedroom and did not emerge again for almost two complete days.

"Do you want to talk?" Matthew asked, poking his head into the room. The shades were drawn and the paintings on the walls looked like windows onto starless outer space.

David groaned. He stood up from the bed and walked to the wall and faced it.

"David, I want to carve a statue of you," Matthew said. "I found a beautiful piece of wood and I won't take no for an answer."

"I'm hoping you'll talk," Matthew said bluntly as he started the project. David was sitting in a chair staring at the wall. "In fact, I intend to prolong this piece until you say something to me."

"Keep the shavings," David said.

"That's a good start," Matthew responded, interested. He asked if David had any other unusual requests.

"Tell me what you think of me," David answered. He did not raise his head. If anything, it sank further onto his chest. Matthew studied his brother carefully, observing the contours of David's scalp and the bulbousness of his hunching shoulders. He put his hand to his mouth and held the thumb and forefinger between his lips, thinking.

"What I *think* of you?" he finally asked. "I think you're a beautiful man. You have natural strength in your body, a purely physical power. It eclipses your head."

"I'm not thoughtful," David interpreted.

"No, but you are who you are."

"But I'm not happy!"

"When have you been?" Matthew asked. The question was mostly rhetorical, as if clarifying the scarcity of a particular kind of happiness throughout the entirety of David's life. Yet it also offered the possibility that happiness was a flower of many seasons.

"I was happy that summer in the woods," David suggested. He was leaning forward on the edge of the chair with his face turned toward Matthew.

"Yes, you were," Matthew accepted.

"I was happy when Emily and I met. I was happy about Nicole and Lana. I was happy when you returned from Europe."

"You didn't show it," Matthew said.

"I forgot how. I don't think I ever knew. I never knew," concluded David.

"Besides, I was angry at you for not following me."

"Following you where? I'm the one who went away."

"It's the same difference," David objected. He was angry all of a sudden. He could feel the tension in his hands and he wanted to smash something.

"Don't pretend you don't get it. I know you understand, squirt."

"Understand what?"

"That I never could have done what you did. That I made it possible for you and you passed me without saying a word."

"I didn't know it was a contest."

"You didn't have to!" David shouted, slamming his hands on his thighs and rising to his feet. "I was the one who looked out for everything and you made a fool of me! Did you ever think of anyone but yourself for a minute?"

"I didn't think I mattered that much."

"You didn't think you mattered that much!"

"No."

"But you did. You did matter that much."

"I didn't know it," said Matthew, inclining his head. The sun shone through the windows and illuminated the floor.

"How couldn't you?" David asked, resuming his seat. "Is it because I called you squirt?"

"It's because I called myself that, David."

"Because you called yourself that?"

"Yes, I considered myself your inferior, *an* inferior."

"But you weren't."

"No, I'm not. You're not either."

"I'm not either?"

"You're not superior," Matthew clarified. "You don't have to be."

"Someone should have told me that forty years ago," David laughed, shaking his head. "I'd have bought him a toaster!" The men shared a laugh and

smiled at each other for a long time. The afternoon sun climbed a wall and spread its heat.

"Our toaster sucked!" David eventually remarked.

"I inherited it," said Matthew.

The sculpture proceeded quickly. As requested, Matthew saved the wood shavings, which collected around the base like an aureole. In the short period of the sitting, David had a chance to converse at some length with Matthew's wife Mary and stepdaughter Camille, and he learned that they made their own tea from local flowers and herbs. David tried it for himself, and immediately felt good, especially when his second cup arrived on a tray bearing two slices of toast.

"Your touch, I suppose," David commented to Matthew. But the sculptor did not look up from his creation, despite his laughter, which he concealed. Camille was not old enough for such treachery and burst into hysterics.

"You're grumpy!" she told David out of the blue.

"And you're lucky I can't move," he responded, screwing up his face.

"David should be grumpy," the girl said, walking to the statue. David could not see the front of it and he was not allowed to look during breaks. Matthew lied that this rule applied to all his work, and covered the statue with a bed sheet.

"Is he grumpy enough now?" Matthew asked, pretending to work fiercely on the face.

"No," Camille said.

"Now?" Matthew asked, practically slaving.

"No. Grumpier! Grumpier!"

"Now?" Matthew exclaimed.

"Now he's *too* grumpy!" Camille replied. "Put him back to less grumpy."

Then she turned from the statue and dashed from the room.

"She's a dream," David spoke half in jest.

"If you can make her stand still, I'll give you a toaster. Give me a piece of that." And Matthew helped himself to a whole slice.

At the unveiling, David became very serious, insisting on a toast. At first he did not get the pun, and could not understand why everyone was laughing. It slowly dawned on him and he frowned that language itself was opposing his earnestness. "I guess I just wanted to say," he said sheepishly, "that--" But the moment was inhospitable. It did not want David to verbalize his immense gratitude or explain to his brother how he may have saved David's life. David lowered his head and accepted this contradiction of his rehearsed intentions. He smiled over his champagne glass and lifted it before his brother and paused there to say thank you with his eyes. Mary added the word "cheers" and they drank.

David looked at the statue in his house. He could no longer find the middle-aged man from the statue when he looked at his face in the mirror. The forest of wrinkles was too thick and bore too many paths for an easy journey backwards in

time. He reached forward and touched the statue's wooden cheek and noticed the shaking of his hand without concern. "You were supposed to follow me," he heard himself say. "I was supposed to go first. You never waited your turn." David leaned forward and put his arms around his likeness in fulfillment of a promise. "That's okay. That's okay, squirt," he said, as if consoling a replica of Matthew. "I'll take care of you now."