

Brothers

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Not long ago, in the middle of a record-cold winter in New York City, I looked out of my apartment window at the slush and refuse on the street below and realized that out there, somewhere in the darkness, a man who bore my first and last name was hopelessly foraging through garbage cans and sleeping on subways—and that it was up to me, somehow, to do something about it.

The man in question was my stepbrother, the son of my father's second wife.

"Little Peter," as he is still known in my family, was diagnosed as having schizophrenia only recently. Before that he had been considered merely a difficult adolescent, a delinquent young adult, a slacker, an alcohol and drug abuser, a college dropout, a disappointment, and a failure. Given the world of privilege in which he'd been raised—the private schools, the music lessons, the European vacations—those of us who knew him best considered his fall from grace to have been caused by nothing less than a spectacular case of bad attitude. Even just a few years ago, in Idaho, after he'd assaulted his mother by pushing her down on the floor of her porch and banging her head against the boards, a psychiatrist assigned by the state to assess his chances for involuntary commitment concluded that my stepbrother was just a "spoiled kid" who needed a swift kick in the pants.

Schizophrenics live in a world of violence that matches their internal chaos; they assault and are assaulted (and also commit suicide) with greater frequency than the rest of the population. Peter's increasingly troubled career does not contradict this. In a bar fight in Leadville, Colorado, local drunks used Peter's head as a battering ram to break down the tavern's front door; he received three months in jail and had to pay for the damage to the door. In Montana he was run over by a harvest combine while sleeping off a drunk. The blades sheared off both of his hands; in Salt Lake City, after the hands had been meticulously reattached, he used them to push a nurse down a flight of stairs. One night, in Indianapolis, he was clocked in a new car going 110 miles an hour past the governor's mansion. Convinced that pursuing cops were in league with a ring of automobile thieves, he crashed into a police roadblock. Last year he spent more than a month in a lockup in Blaine County, Idaho, after trying to break into the rock musician Steve Miller's summer home. And so on. One cannot account for, much less count, the number of times he has driven drunk or been arrested, beaten, kicked, robbed, and thrown off trains. If his life maintains its current trajectory, Peter could easily be dead by the time he's forty. He's thirty-three now.

On that winter day I decided to do what I could to help Peter. Fully aware of his history of violence, I went out to find him. I chose a corner on West Twenty-third Street that I knew he had frequented in the past, sat on a concrete hump at the entrance to a taxi garage, and waited for him to show up.

Sure enough, a few minutes later the doors of a coffee shop across the street swing open, and Peter emerges, to stand, beetle-browed and uncomprehending, in the low rays of winter sunlight. Like a lizard, he seems to be gathering just enough warmth to make his limbs move.

He wears torn jeans and a stained corduroy jacket that is too small for his thick and doughy body. The sleeves of a flannel shirt stick out beyond his jacket's sleeves, and over the flannel shirt is a long and untucked T-shirt. He's growing a beard, and his hair, once blond, is now orange mixed with toffee brown, and is molded over his head like a bowl. Even from the other side of the street I can see that his eyes, always remarked upon as Paul Newman blue, remain brilliant and clear.

Scratching himself sleepily under the arms, my stepbrother begins to lumber down the street, and I get up to follow. His walk is one that stray cats and homeless men develop unconsciously, an ambulatory cringe that says to the world, "Don't beat me, I'm moving on. I'm just taking this broken sandwich, this container of moo shu pork, this spit-soaked cigarette butt. You didn't want it. Now I've got it. I'll stop defiling your view in a minute." Peter has a bend at the waist and a thickness in the back that is almost a hump, and his beggarly flinch remains even when he thinks he's alone and unobserved. The demeanor, the shuffling walk, and the clothes are so familiar that he could quickly and easily disappear from sight, falling in with the other ragged, baggy beggars—a third to a half of whom are schizophrenic—who form the grotesquerie of the New York City landscape.

His foraging starts immediately. He picks a white paper bag from a trash can, pries it open, and rattles the interior. The sound and motion are familiar and mechanical; they remind me of the motions of a caged fox returning again and again to its pan to check if any specks of food remain.

It's wrenching for me to recall, as I watch him, that this is the boy whose music teacher at Dalton said he played violin like "the next Paganini"; the same angel-faced five-year-old whom I carried on my back on the green lawns of Connecticut; the boy who later took skiing vacations in Austria and who received so much largess each Christmas that his parents would hide it from us, the earlier set of my father's children, so that we would not know how favored he was among us.

Peter pries open a few more garbage cans and rummages through their contents. He does not dig very deeply, I notice; anything too compressed will be rotten, he will later tell me, understandably proud of his urban foraging skills. Here is pay dirt: a folded carton with three slices of pizza inside, and napkins, too, creased in a triangular wad. Peter goes to a corner deli, emerges with a take-out cup of coffee, and sets up shop on a loading platform across the street, where he can absorb wintry sun and congealed cheese at the same time. I go to the deli too, get a coffee and a doughnut—and, on second thought, another doughnut, a jelly one—and go out to join Peter on his chilly ledge.

He greets me without a single question, even though we have not talked in seven years. Whatever tiny devils are working in his head, they are quiet this afternoon.

We have a long, philosophical conversation regarding the tao of drinking tea—Peter likes to sip green tea at the kiosks of Chinatown. He pulls out several books on Eastern thought, each one curled and thumbed. The world is controlled by a single clear note, he says, produced somewhere deep in the universe, as from a Chinese gong. Exceptional musicians, among them Ozzy Osbourne, have the power to tap into that note and open up a funnel into our brains. But anyone can tune in by listening hard enough: it's what you hear on the last seat of the last car on the A train when it rumbles across the Jamaica Bay causeway at two in the morning.

Do you talk to your mother anymore?

She doesn't want to hear the truth, that I'm living like a rat on the street and licking the crumbs off my frozen whiskers.

Has the winter been exceptionally cold?

Perhaps the sun is pulling her skirts away from the earth, shocked by what she's seen.

Shambling off in search of shade and shadows, Peter puts in a touch for twenty dollars. "It's so hard to budget your money in New York City," he confides to me. I leave thinking that I've helped him out, but the truth is that the drug dealers on Fourteenth Street will skim the money from him within minutes.

That afternoon I become a keeper of sorts. I check Peter into the Riverview, a run-down but clean and safe hotel near my home in Greenwich Village. I gamely start the process of procuring medications, which he refuses to take, and social services, with which he refuses to cooperate. Within a few days I spend more than a thousand dollars, to very little effect.

He stays in New York for an intense month or two, until the electronic demons return to scribble messages with sharp ballpoint pens on his naked scalp and he boards the Greyhound bus for nowhere, anywhere: he's a Neal Cassidy without women, without Jack Kerouac for a biographer, a beat figure riding through the night without friends, fresh clothes, a shower, or money—and, of course, without glory.

I am his only friend, the one he calls from a pier in San Francisco; from a psychiatric hospital in Twin Falls, Idaho; from a phone booth in the crack zone in Miami, when he is feeling suicidal. I'm the one he begs to wire him \$100 at the spur of the moment so that he can go to a Santana concert with a companiero he's just picked up in the Albuquerque bus station; the one who talks long-distance to his court-appointed lawyers, psychiatrists, and jailers; the one who tries to make sense of his multifarious and inchoate needs and assertions.

I keep a record of sorts, a noir journal to mark the dark passages of my stepbrother's mind. The more I chronicle our strange and sometimes sad encounters, the more I am

convinced that his story, the story of the American schizophrenic, has not been truly told, or at least not been told forcefully enough to sink into our uncaring, hidebound national consciousness.

The journal grows over the years, as I learn more about the disease and begin to explore the shadowy places, psychic and real, in which my stepbrother spends his time. At a certain point, I make the decision to involve Jim Syme, a photographer I've known and worked with since art school, in the project. Jim and Peter quickly develop a rapport that at times I find impenetrable. They share an interest in sailing and in the vast unknown desert spaces of the Southwest, in flying saucers, government plots, and grand technological conspiracies of all kinds. When Jim first takes out his camera, Peter's face freezes, but after a while, despite his fear of police and surveillance, Peter loosens up and lets out a wary grin.

Sometimes I fear Jim has become too involved. He drives alone to Leadville, Colorado, a furious three-day road trip, to spring Peter from jail, where he has unexpectedly landed because of a standing warrant. They drive for days in a wide, eccentric orbit around Denver, following Peter's instincts, until they spin off for Idaho to pay a visit to Peter's mother at her river-rafting company. It's a demented odyssey that I am able to monitor, hour by hour, via my cellular phone, from New York. I quote passages from *On the Road* over the airwaves to keep up Peter's and Jim's spirits.

One night, Peter, Jim, and I are holed up in a dim motel room near the airport in Miami. The following morning Peter is to go into drug rehabilitation. It is a hard-core hospital lockup scene about which he is understandably leery. After dinner, to allay his nervousness, Jim and I allow him to drink beer after beer.

"Do you remember when you used to saw away at that old violin of yours?" I ask. "We all thought you were going to turn pro. You were always pounding away on the piano, too. What ever became of all that?"

Peter pulls his boating cap low over his deeply tanned face. "That was a long time ago," he replies. His huge, scarred right arm lies on the bedcovers like a beached whale. He's been scanning the channels for hours and is somewhat alarmed at the presence of Leonardo DiCaprio on the television screen everywhere he turns.

"Do you have the same love for music that you had before?" I ask. "Do you still listen?"

He thinks. The tapes in his bag run more toward heavy metal than baroque.

"I still hear Bach in my head," he says at last, slowly. "I hear it every night when I'm alone. Mostly Bach. Sometimes it's Mozart. Sometimes it's others."

"Other composers? Classical composers?"

"I hear the notes playing in my head, but they are notes no one has ever heard before."

"Music you've composed yourself?"

"I guess." He seems wary.

"Could you write them down?"

"I would if I had the time," he says, turning back to the TV screen. "But all that just seems like a lot of work to me."

Peter has chosen to inhabit the dark places that most people spend their lives avoiding.

Take him to a nice, well-lit restaurant and he feels that people's eyes are lasers etching cruel patterns into his heart. Out on the sidewalk, the sun pours over his head like a nuclear fountain. He demands the darkest possible sunglasses; they must be from Chinatown, for spiritual value, and they must cost five dollars—no more. I try to buy him a pair of Ray Bans, but he rejects them because they are not dark enough, not cheap enough, and, more important, because they might draw attention to his existence. He wants to walk the streets unknown, invisible and alone.

Sometimes I forget how hard it is to "help" Peter. His present way of life has its own codes and values, and they are not to be lightly broken. For example: I take him into an army-navy store to try on a new jacket and boots, to replace his torn, filthy ones. He fidgets in the store, complains about feeling conspicuous, and won't try on any of the shoes. Finally he loses his temper. "I'm a street person," he says, almost in despair. "Don't you understand? I don't want to look any different than this!"

When I first found my stepbrother on West Twenty-third Street, his head was awash with strange, angry conspiracies concerning President Clinton and a microchip the government had supposedly planted in Peter's brain to monitor and control his thoughts. I was afraid of Peter then—afraid of what he might do to me, or my family, or even my credit rating or my police record, since we do share the same name. But the years have mellowed Peter. I have seen movement. I have seen progress. He has lost his interest in the evils that flow from Washington. His pursuits have narrowed. He likes to travel by bus, to arrive in a strange city at night. Doing what he calls his "alone thing," he goes for days without talking to anyone, consumed with the repetitive movements of bare survival. He has become, in certain essential ways, a man who knows himself and is content with his lot.

"Which of us has known his brother?" Thomas Wolfe asked, in *Look Homeward, Angel*, and in the same sentence wondered, "Which of us is not forever a stranger and alone?"

When I look into myself, I find that Peter and I are not completely unlike in our stance toward the world. We have both been slow starters, school dropouts, idle dreamers, social moles, and knee-jerk antiauthoritarians. The difference is that, painfully, I have learned to adjust, to hold back, to temper my impulses to the occasion, and, eventually, have found a

home. Peter cannot, and he is therefore condemned to live his life in an endless circle. "As far as I've come," he once admitted to me, in a message left on my answering machine from a truck stop somewhere in Nevada, "I really haven't gotten anywhere." Wherever he is now, I hope Peter someday finds a home too, because everyone deserves a place they can stay a while.

END

