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A Sense of Family

Nancy Dibble

My wrists got too tired to hold the chisel properly and it was three in the morning. Somebody had wound the clock—it was running—but the gabled room was empty now. I had a vague idea someone had made coffee but who it'd been and when they'd left were lost in the intense silence between me and the beast.

Terra cotta gets you in the back of the neck—you're always crouching at peculiar angles to check proportions and the angle of light. But marble, meat, gets you in the wrists, especially when you lose three or four days in it. I'd never asked Platz, the only guy I know who'll touch meat nowadays, if it hits him that way, but he's built like a Rodin model—all knuckles and knees—so it wouldn't prove anything. Women carry their strength at different angles.

I stretched in the skylight corner, the only place where I can straighten up. The room's quiet was like a museum's: pulled away from the half-carved beast in the middle of the floor I noticed the silence now. I opened the skylight to thin the haze of dust and smoke a little. Air outside was cold and for a while I just breathed, dopy with concentration. Needing to move around, I shambled down the three flights of stairs to check the mail. Besides a card informing me of my zip code and another from my ex-husband from Chicago, there was a letter post-marked Denver from my brother. I left the cards there but took the letter back upstairs. I couldn't remember the last time I'd had personal mail.

Jerry the welder climbed through his iron monkey-puzzle and followed me back to the loft, commenting that the silence had jarred him out of bed. I didn't apologize for the hammering since it was a fact, a thing neither of us could do anything about. It would be as futile as my apologizing for being tall.

Jerry went up and down the loft turning on bulbs, climbing a chair to slam the skylight, starting to make fresh coffee in the burnt pot. Marble chips crunched under his shoes and he ignored the personal silence with chatter.

“—my God! how traditional,” he was saying, throwing edged glances at the beast, the concave horse I was pulling out of the meat. “Straight out of a Roman piazza. Just knock off a leg or two and rough off that rotten patina and hand it off to the Met—”

The beast, which I was calling Sleeping Percheron, looked good in places in spite of the bald lighting. The translucence I was digging for was there in the lower curve of the belly and the slope of the neck. The weight was appearing. It was coming. I sat on a botched tombstone—one source of cheap meat—and tested the shape all over again. I had no impulse to defend it. Jerry seemed as far away as Saturn. Maybe the planets do influence us—my mother had always read our horoscopes aloud religiously—but I never took any particular notice. Any influence would be so filtered through folds of airless space that I wouldn't know anyhow, which may be a form of mental myopia.

“—no angles, no motion, no nothing. Just a lousy traditional fat horse, a bas-relief panel, for God's sake—”

I lost track of Jerry altogether for a while and read the letter. It was stiff and formal. My brother, whom I hadn't seen in a dozen years, was getting married. It was odd to imagine. I found a cigarette and lit it.

“Argue with me, for God's sake!” Jerry burst out. “I just demolished your whole historical basis!”

“Sorry, I didn't notice. How old are you?”

Jerry tucked his beard into his chest like an annoyed owl. “What's that got to do with it?”

My brother would be twenty-two. I tried to imagine what he'd look like.

“Twenty-three,” said Jerry, “but what's that got to do with it?” He glanced at the letter I'd dropped on the floor. “No money this month?”

“What?”

“Your alimony check.”

“No. . . . My brother's getting married. He'd be twenty-two now.”

“—well, fantastic! What is he?”

“Twenty —”

“No, I mean, like, what *is* he?”

“Oh, just a kid. Probably six foot odd, skinny if he takes after his father—our father. . . .” Jerry lost interest as soon as he gathered my brother was Civil Service and not physically remarkable, but once started I rambled on into infantile anecdotes I hadn't thought of for years. Jerry served up coffee and finally interrupted to ask, “When are you going?”

“Oh, I don't know. . . .” I hadn't thought about it. I picked up the letter and saw it was dated the 3rd. “What's today?”

“It's tomorrow, now.” Jerry tapped the clock, which hung from the ceiling on a string, and set it swinging. “November twelfth.”

“Did you wind my clock?”

Jerry pulled a face as if the question smelled bad. But I hardly ever asked questions: I always seemed to have to explain them. “What's that got to do with it?”

My brother was getting married on the 15th. It was a two-day haul by bus. My thoughts went in two directions then: half clung to the beast, resenting the interruption, and half watched the clock swing and wondered if, how, I'd go because I'd sunk all but nine dollars in the three-foot block of New Hampshire marble in the middle of the floor.

"I can't go," I decided out loud, with a vague feeling of relief, if only to have the matter settled. "I haven't got bus fare."

"You cashed your alimony check this month?" Jerry demanded, reading my face, and answered himself, "*What* alimony check? That bum. I'm flat, but maybe Lucian got something for the modeling job—but he brought home *tons* of food today. . . ." He was off down the stairs, calculating worriedly to himself.

I remembered Platz. Jarred into motion, my mind seemed to continue independent of intention or guidance. Platz, I remembered, had owed me seventy dollars for over a year. He owed me a few favors, too. When a block of lovely pink-veined meat, nearly two square yards of it, had come into town I'd told Platz, who could afford it. Platz was doing fountains and such on commission then and had more money than I did. The market for free-lance monumental horses is not enormous. Yet I'd had five hundred dollars for a stud portrait I'd done for the front gate of a quarter-horse breeder in Arizona . . . I remembered the time I'd had casting it . . . and Platz had asked me for seventy. I'd forgotten all about it.

Lucian's broad scowling face appeared behind the stair railing. He and Jerry had only been together a few weeks, so I'd only seen him a half-dozen times, just enough to decide I made him nervous. Whenever I saw Lucian he seemed to be at floor level. I think it was his way of looking down at me, as if he were saying, "If I stood up I'd tower over you, but out of consideration, I won't."

He fisted the spindles like bars and said through them diffidently, "Val, I only got a buck thirty-five. You can have that if you want. Got two fifty coming in next week from *He*, they're doing a three page spread. When's the kid doing it?"

"Friday. But I'd have to leave tomorrow to get there. Thanks all the same, Lucian. Tell Jerry—"

"He's calling up the busses for times and how much it costs. I got a three page spread," Lucian announced, in case I hadn't heard last time, "all to myself. Maybe they'd advance me something on the two fifty. . . ." He wasn't eager, but there was a brother-in-lawish resignation about him that surprised me. Through Jerry, it seemed, I had a claim on Lucian that he took for granted. And what was Jerry? A neighbor, whose flat I'd never seen because of the monkey-puzzle.

Lucian asked, "Can't your people wire you out something?"

I shook my head. "They wouldn't pay to have me buried."

Lucian looked down the stairs, embarrassed. He had a good head in profile, except that I do horses. Jerry came bounding up past him and stopped in the doorway fuzzing his sandy hair with both hands. A door slammed and some girl down the hall screamed, "Shaddup, I got to be at the U. N. at seven!"

"Shaddup yourself," Jerry responded, swinging out into the hall. In a sugary dirty voice he added, "You'll catch your *death* of cold like that, m'dear."

"What do *you* care?" she rejoined, and Lucian's head came up above the railing with an even heavier frown.

I levered myself up and went to the door. The girl, underfed and underage, gawped silently. I realized I must look like Frankenstein's mother. Absently I slapped at the marble dust embedded in my sweatshirt and combed my hair

with spread fingers, explaining, "We're trying to raise money. My brother's getting married Friday in Denver." There. Having said "we," I'd committed myself.

"D'y have to do it at four a m?" the girl demanded, with weakening indignation. "Hey, are you the one doing all that weird hammering?" When I nodded, the girl pulled the huge terrycloth robe around her with an odd smile. "That's OK then," she said, and twirled back into Joe's room. All I knew of Joe directly was that he always tripped on the second landing where the bulb is out; somebody had told me he was a pacifist, of the "Stop fighting or I'll kill you" school.

Jerry's owlish temper had been ruffled. He stared down the hall as if he'd missed the chance to say something devastating that was still heavy in his mouth. Then he glanced up. "Ninety-two eighty, round trip. Bus leaves at 8:20 Wednesday morning, one change."

"I got that three page spread—"

"It's all right," I told Lucian. "I can go to a guy named Platz who owes me some. . . ."

The girl had come back into the hall. Her half ton of hay colored hair had been brushed back and her thin child's face was earnest. "Look, Joe says could you use ten." I said yes and she stuck her head back inside, conferring. The drape of the heavy robe was interesting. Then she asked me, "Do you support war, he says."

"I just make horses."

"Politically immature," she reported inside. Then she came and handed me two fives. "We're Socialists, we got to share," she announced stiffly, so I wouldn't thank her.

Jerry instantly caught that. "And I thought you were a Christian."

"Go to hell, goy. He your brother too?" remarked the girl rudely and turned on her heel, a baroque exit in that robe. Lucian made a gesture which we all refused to notice.

"So what's with this Platz?" Jerry wanted to know. "Who is he?"

"He's about thirty, good bones. He does traditional things with meat," I itemized slowly. "He owes me some money from way back."

"Enough?"

"I think so."

Jerry turned to go downstairs, asking, "He in the book?"

"Don't bother, I can get him in the morning—"

"Look, I wouldn't give you two bits toward a lousy tombstone, but this is family. You want the money or don't you?"

"Yes," I decided. If my brother hadn't wanted me to come, he wouldn't have sent me the letter. And if he wanted me to come, then it was important that I be there. "Yes. But I'd better call him myself."

"You got no phone up here," Jerry reminded me patiently. "So come on." And he was off down the stairs with Lucian following. Unless I wanted to make an effort to be rude, and find a street booth, there was nothing to do but go along.

The monkey-puzzle, raw edges and corners of welded metal, filled the whole room. I ducked and weaved my way through, avoiding things that balanced and things that spun. Part of it was electrified, because neon blinked among its in-

nards. The idea of touching it terrified me. Somewhere ahead Jerry commented proudly, "Environmental art. It's a social construct, total involvement. Wait till I get the plastic panels and mirrors in."

"Isn't it great?" demanded Lucian's voice loyally.

"Don't ask her," Jerry snapped. His annoyance seemed to accuse Lucian of some subtle tactlessness it would have been too much trouble for me to figure out.

Under a shelf of the thing I found the phone and got Platz's number. The phone rang a few dozen times and then Platz's voice said, "What the hell."

"Platz, this is Val."

"Who?"

"Val. Corwen."

"Drop dead."

"I need the seventy. My brother—"

"Drop dead." He hung up.

Jerry was inside the monkey-puzzle, sitting in it. "So?"

"He's home. I'd better go over there."

Jerry blinked at me, waiting. "So: are you going?"

"I don't know how to get out."

He grabbed a bar and swung down quickly. "Sure, I wasn't thinking." Somewhere in the middle of the thing he stopped and asked softly, "What do you think of it?"

"Orpheus looked back," was what I found myself saying, because I'd been thinking of that, and of Theseus and Lot, mazes of social constructs.

"Sure. Sure, I get that." Jerry nodded soberly, as if storing the remark somewhere, and went on to the door.

After a cold echoing hour among the streets and subways I reached Platz's house, a brownstone across town. It wasn't actually far, but the subways run infrequently that late. I buzzed the buzzer and a minute later the door was triggered open. I climbed to the second floor and knocked at Platz's place and he let me in wearing a red silky robe with four-color explosions of embroidery all over it. I unbuttoned my peajacket but he didn't offer to put it away so I kept it on and followed him into the living room. Steam pipes banged and the room was stifling after the street.

"Sit, Val," invited Platz, flopping into an armchair. "Thought you'd died or moved months ago."

"Does meat get you in the wrists?"

"What?"

I stood near the couch but didn't sit. "When you work meat, does it get you in the wrists?"

"That's a crazy question. You didn't lope over here at five in the morning to ask me that." He rubbed his eyes, as if reminding himself of the time made him tired. His hands were huge, longer than they were wide, just as I remembered them; his face looked baked, with deep cracks around his eyes and mouth.

"What did you do with the pink?"

"The pink what? Oh, that. I got a dragon out of it, all bent into itself. Some guy in Jersey took it for a fake Japanese garden." His voice was flat, factual, and

did not warm the way I'd meant it to. He didn't understand so I tried again.

"I have a kid brother I haven't seen since he was ten. Named Lou. He's getting married Friday and I just found out—"

"You ought to strangle your postman, delivering at this hour."

I shrugged. "I was on a beast, I didn't check the mail. But it's in Denver, Platz, and I have to raise the bus fare by tomorrow."

"So what's that to me?"

"You owe me seventy. Can you get it for me by tomorrow?"

"When did I borrow seventy from you?"

I sat down slowly, puzzled. "When I finished that monument, the quarter-horse. It was in the summer. I remember how hot it got casting that beast. A year ago June. You haven't forgotten it."

"No," Platz admitted. He leaned his head back, straining the muscles under his dark heavy jaw. "So sue me."

"You mean you haven't got it?"

"I mean I don't give a damn about your brother. You say I owe you money." Platz looked at me, bored. "You got a paper? You got witnesses?"

"What do you mean? It's my brother and my money. When I didn't need it, I didn't ask for it. But now I need it."

"It'd take you six months to find out your throat was cut." Platz seemed to be talking to himself. "I'll make you an example, maybe you'll see. Try and collect for a statue you worked a year on, on a verbal contract. You try."

"What's the *matter* with you?"

"If you're stupid enough to lend money with nothing signed, I'm not so stupid I'm going to pay it back."

I'd held onto the idea that it was me, that I wasn't explaining right somehow. I'd been reaching for the right approach the way I'd search for a way around a flaw in a block. Platz was beyond my reach, conscious and yet not caring. I picked up a carved fish from the radiator.

"Fran," said Platz, and a scared looking woman with pointed features came out of the right-hand room and stood between us in the middle of the carpet.

"I don't want to have nothing to do with this, Larry," she said. She stood off-balance, one shoulder higher than the other. "This ain't got nothing to do with me."

Platz said to me, "If you start anything, I got a witness. I'll have you put away, so don't you start anything. . . ."

I thought about hitting him, about breaking his arm, and I thought about how the frightened little woman would look at me, and at him. Nothing would converge in that room, not even anger. The fish was hot from the radiator and had a bad grain to it. I didn't like holding it. Presently I set it down and left.

Walking back slowly I pushed at the alternatives like solid things that might give and open if I could only use my weight in just the right way. My hands hung gloveless, baking out the bad touch of Platz's fish with solid cold. Soon I couldn't feel them. I was homesick for the beast and the quiet around it. The streets were open and formless except for the wind crossing at the corners.

Hearing me on the stairs, Jerry came out into the hall, which had begun to collect grey light like ash. "Can he raise it?"

"He won't."

"Why not?"

I shrugged. "He doesn't care."

"That bum. What are you going to do now?"

I sat down on the landing and waited for the cold to ebb out of the soles of my shoes. My head hurt the way it had that summer, casting the horse. It had been a fine high-headed beast.

"Jerry. Can I use your phone to send a telegram?"

"Sure. Come on."

I groped my way through the monkey-puzzle to the phone and sent my brother a wire asking if he could manage to lend me the money for a bus ticket. Replacing the receiver, I blinked at the dim shine and hollow of the huge purgatorial construction, settling myself to wait.

"He has to send it," Jerry assured me softly. "He's your brother; besides, he asked you to come. . . . Want some coffee?"

"All right." After awhile I went back to my room, but was so off balance I didn't dare touch a chisel. One bad stroke could split the marble, thin now in places as china. So I stretched out on the cot and watched the light move across the beast. Around three that afternoon a telegram was delivered saying how sorry Lou was that I couldn't come to his wedding.

By that time I'd started to come down with a cold from the long walk back. I felt too miserable to work. Jerry heard me coughing and nagged me into eating. Joe's girl came with aspirin and Lucian brought three oranges as it was getting dark. The room was crowded with their voices but I didn't take much notice until they got into a screaming argument about the beast. Then I stood up and started explaining, touching the meat spread-fingered, outlining the depths that were coming. I forgot for a while being so far away from my family in trying to explain to them what I'd been reaching for.