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# Brothers

## Matthew Perron

Donny Green sat, listless, in his father's recliner, listening to the realtor and the young couple talking in the kitchen. He checked his watch. Thirty minutes remained until he had to beg Nelson for a job. His insides recoiled at the thought of asking his older brother for a favor. But the nagging reality of being 45 years of age, being unemployed, and having returned to sleep in his childhood bed left little choice. He rose to his feet, strode to the kitchen doorway, and cleared his throat.

Three heads turned. The young brunette gave her lower lip a quick tug with her top teeth.

This flattery, perhaps because it was unintentional, made Donny feel better, so he focused a quick smile on her to let her know he'd noticed. "Got to be somewhere in fifteen minutes," he said to the realtor.

He nodded. "Okay. Your parents left me a key. I'll lock up."

Donny grabbed his own keys from the pegboard hanging next to the fridge, flashed the young wife a last grin, and left the apartment.

As he walked down Court Street, the ping of an aluminum bat sparked a thrill of recognition.

Through a chain-link fence, he saw a group of boys taking turns hitting, pitching, and defending the left side of the concrete field at Carroll Park, just as he had done 30 years ago. He crossed the street, leaned against the post of an open gate, and lit a cigarette. A batter lofted a fly into the gnarled branches of the giant tree protruding from the pavement in deep left, an automatic double when Donny had played. Beyond the center field fence, a group of older men played bocce. Some of them looked like the ones he remembered from boyhood. After one of his countless home runs to center, he'd loved to watch them curse and rub the ball against the pavement before throwing it back. He chuckled and sat on the first-base bench.

A new batter trotted in from shortstop.

"Hey," Donny said as the kid picked up the bat. "How 'bout a few hacks?"

"Got to field to hit."

Donny stepped on his smoke and walked toward him. "Just three swings."

The kid shrugged, handed over the bat, and hooked his thumbs into the loops of his low-hanging shorts to watch.

Donny took a practice cut, and the bat all but whipped around on its own. If he'd had a stick like this, he could've terrorized the bocce court.

The pitcher turned toward the fielders. "The old guy gets three swings."

Donny wondered how anyone could throw a baseball without getting caught up in a shirt that big, and he squared his feet in the batter's box. "Old, my ass; pitch the ball." He swung hard and drove the ball straight into the pavement, where it bounced up to glance off his thigh.

The pitcher laughed. "Everybody take a few steps back."

Donny relaxed and got the second pitch right on the sweet spot. The ball arched toward the old men. But some floppy-haired kid loped over, and the ball dropped harmlessly into his glove five feet short of the fence. "What the hell?" Donny whispered. He handed the bat back to baggy-shorts. "That's it for me," he said, rubbing the muscle under his right armpit. "Just missed it," he lied.

"Where you going, old fart?" the pitcher said.

Donny gave him the finger and walked back through the gate. He checked his watch: still 15 minutes. Across the street, a crane stretched into the low Brooklyn sky. He stopped in front of the construction site and peered through a hole in the temporary wooden wall. A gaping and empty hole in the ground filled him with morbid fascination. Not a worker in sight, here was the embodiment of the economics threatening to bury him. He stood longer than he should have with his eye to the peephole, dreading the meeting, until he finally forced himself to continue down the sidewalk.

At the pizzeria, his brother sat back-to-the-door in a booth with a newspaper spread over the plastic tablecloth. As Donny approached, he stared at the circle of scalp spreading over the crown of Nelson's head and absentmindedly rubbed the stubborn paunch forming above his own belt before clapping his brother's shoulder.

Nelson smiled, shook his hand, and rose to give him a half-hug. "Here he is. The prince of the runway returns."

Donny laughed and dropped onto the lumpy bench. "Yeah, the glamorous life..." he shrugged, "not all it's cracked up to be."

"How long you been back?"

"About a month and a half."

"Get out of here."

"I called you around three weeks ago."

"Three weeks?" Nelson shook his head. "I can barely keep my head above water these days."

"How're Sheila and the kids?"

"Sheila's fine. The kids are growing up."

Donny nodded. "Used to be when I arrived they'd jump on my back, beg me to do a handstand or juggle fruit from the fridge. Last time, they couldn't be bothered."

"You've only been by—what?—two or three times in the last five years?"

This was not a turn in the conversation that Donny wanted to pursue. "Man, look at this place." He waved at the white statues, pots of plastic flowers, and framed cat photos hanging on the wood-paneled walls. "Hasn't changed a bit."

"Some things never do."

Donny ignored the dig. "Well, this neighborhood certainly has," he said. "Can you believe Mom and Dad are selling?"

"No, especially now that the area is actually nice."

"You never could've convinced me all those boarded-up storefronts on Smith and Court would ever open again, let alone become boutiques and sushi restaurants. Damn, used to be nothing on Smith Street but dime bags."

Nelson shook his head. "Now my daughters go there for designer clothes."

A mustached, middle-aged waiter wearing a black vest over a white shirt approached.

“You guys drinking?”

“Bottle of wine?” Nelson said.

“Got a shoot tomorrow on a river up in Westchester, and I have to wear a bathing suit. Can’t be bloated.”

“For who?”

“Cigarette company. Probably wind up flying off some fricking rope swing into the freezing water twenty times. But it’s the first job I’ve landed since I’ve been back.” He shrugged. “Who knows when the next one comes?”

“Well ... at least you smoke.” Nelson turned to the waiter. “I’ll have a glass of the house red.”

“Just water,” Donny said.

The waiter dropped a couple of menus on the table and walked to the bar.

Donny read the choices and had to eliminate almost all of them. “I can’t even remember the last time I ate pasta.”

“Not even in Milan?”

“Especially in Milan.” He made a half-circle with his index figure under his jaw. “Not chiseled, no work. By the end over there, I practically lived at the gym, and I still couldn’t sniff a shoot.”

The waiter returned with his pad. Nelson ordered lasagna. Donny asked for grilled chicken on a bed of lettuce, light on the oil.

“And that’s why you’re back?” Nelson said.

“Fact is, I’d love to still have the lean, smooth-skinned good looks that sell. But I’m losing it, and it’s not going to get any better, is it?”

“You had to know this day was coming. But, knowing you, you haven’t saved a dime, have you?”

“No.”

“Tell me you didn’t arrange this lunch to ask me for money, because you’re as bad a risk as I can imagine.”

Donny slowly shook his head and forced himself to let the insult pass. This was no time to fall into old habits. “I don’t want your money,” he said.

“Well then, what do you want?”

“Nowadays, you need a résumé to get a bartending gig,” Donny said. “Forty-five years old with a high school diploma and no experience doesn’t leave a lot of choices. Modeling may be ending, but I’ve still got some looks.”

Nelson only nodded.

Donny put his elbows on the table and leaned toward Nelson. “I need you to help me get a job at your company.”

“The streets are crawling with people looking for work, and you have no sales experience.”

“I’ve been selling myself for twenty-five years.”

“No, you’ve been gallivanting around the world boning runway models. Meanwhile, I’ve been back here busting my ass and raising a family.”

“Believe me, I didn’t want to ask.”

Nelson sipped his wine. “My boss isn’t going to let me hire you without some kind of résumé,” he said.

"We could write one together."

Nelson gulped the last of his wine, put the glass on the table, then sat back in the booth.

"Donny, I'm your brother and I'd love to help you, despite your faults, but we sell software you know nothing about."

"So tell me about it."

"It allows people to hook up to a server without a computer. All you need is a screen, a keyboard, and a stick-drive."

"Sounds great, like it would sell itself."



*Illustration by SWOSU Design Studio*

"It's more complicated than that."

Donny twitched nervously. "Just give me a chance," he pleaded.

"Careful. Hot," the waiter said, placing Nelson's lasagna before him, then plopping Donny's chicken onto the table without a word and going back to wipe silverware at the bar.

They ate in silence.

"You know it's only a matter of time before the agency drops me," Donny finally said.

"I'm sorry to hear that, but really, it's not my decision."

"I know I didn't go to college. But I'm no idiot. I've been around, and I understand people. Just give me a chance; you don't even have to pay me until I make a sale."

Nelson squirmed in the booth and looked at the row of bottles behind the bar. "You're putting

me on the spot." He sighed. "All right, I'll give you some literature. But I'm not promising anything."

Donny nearly spilled his water lunging across the table to shake his hand. "Thanks, man. You won't regret it."

\* \* \*

"Morning, Donny," said Liza, the brunette receptionist, as she gave him a glinting smile, flashing her fetchingly misaligned teeth. Since his first day at the office, she'd been sending signals he'd ignored for the sake of his brother and the job. But it hadn't been easy. Liza, so different from the women he'd dated in Europe, with her Long Island accent, pug nose, and field-hockey build, had taken an erotic hold of him. And why had he been restraining himself? After a month of cold calling, he'd soon felt as empty and disinterested as he'd felt

when he was unemployed.

“Love those earrings,” he said. “Where’d you get them?”

“Really? You like them?” She tilted her head and lifted a hoop with her fingertips. “Sample sale in Soho.”

“Very tasteful,” he said. “Feel like getting lunch today?”

“Love to. Any place special?”

“It’s a surprise. See you at noon.” He went to the kitchen for a cup of coffee and discussed last night’s Mets loss with a fellow salesman for longer than was prudent. When he finally arrived at his cubicle, he stared down at the phone. Finally, he reached for it and noticed Nelson standing in the cubicle doorway.

“I can’t believe, after I stick my neck out for you, that you’re pulling this crap,” he said.

“Pulling what crap?”

“The same crap you always pull.”

“For Christ’s sake, Nelson, not again.”

Nelson sat on the corner of the desk. “Liza is only twenty-three. Why the hell are you chasing her?”

Donny leaned away from his accusing finger. “Who says I am?”

“I just saw you ask her out.”

“For lunch.”

“When it comes to you and women, it’s always only about one thing, and it ain’t lunch.”

“Man, how many times do I have to tell you? Me and Sheila went on a couple of dates before you two even met. So what? It was nothing. Do you badger her like this, too?”

Nelson looked away and his shoulders slumped.

“I might’ve known. You’ve never even mentioned it to her, have you?”

Nelson stared over the top of the cubicle and didn’t reply.

“We’re getting a little old for this kind of jealousy, don’t you think?”

Nelson stiffened. “You haven’t changed a bit,” he hissed under his breath.

Donny picked up the receiver. “You mind? I’ve got work to do.”

\* \* \*

Donny and Liza entered a sushi place on 53rd. Donny pulled out a chair for her at a table by the corner of the bar. “Would you like a drink?”

“Sure. Orange vodka and 7 Up,” she said, ordering the sweet drink without the slightest self-consciousness.

Donny ordered at the bar, then he placed her cocktail and his beer on the table and sat across from her. “Lots of sushi places in New York aren’t even Japanese owned,” he said.

“How can you tell?”

“In Japan, there’s no salmon with cream cheese or boiled shrimp roll, and none of the sushi is flash-fried or glazed. And see that guy?” He pointed to one of the chefs slicing with his knives.

She nodded.

“In Japan, sushi chefs have to study for twelve years. That guy ... all he needs is a hat and this.” He touched his fingers to the skin behind his eyes and pulled his lids narrow. “For all we know, he’s Korean.”

For a moment she only looked at him, long enough for him to regret the stupid joke. Then she burst into laughter.

The waiter arrived to take their order. Donny was pleased to note that she didn't order anything he'd mentioned.

"Did you live in Japan too?" she said.

"Tokyo, for a year."

"It must be interesting to have lived in so many different places. Say something Japanese."

*"Doh ee tashi mashti."*

She cocked an eyebrow. "And what does that mean?"

"It means thank you. Westerners walk around saying don't touch my moustache." He chuckled.

Those teeth ... Donny felt a stirring in his loins.

The waiter laid a porcelain platter of sushi between them. Liza, with her charming lack of pretension, ate with her fingers. They gossiped harmlessly about other people in the office, and she told Donny about the restaurants in Forrest Hills, where she lived with some girlfriends. "Would you like to have dinner this weekend?" he said as they finished their second drink.

"You mean a date?"

Her raised eyebrows surprised him, but it was too late to turn back now. "Why not?"

"Well, for one thing, we work together." She dropped a tuna roll into her dish of soy sauce. "And you're old enough to be my father."

The room seemed to recede. How hadn't he seen this coming? He'd always prided himself on his ability to gauge what women wanted, and he'd been positive that Liza was interested. Suddenly, it seemed hard to be sure of anything. Gestures she'd made tumbled through his mind, the times he'd caught her staring, the dream she said she'd had about him, the lingering touch of fingers when he passed her a newspaper.

A chair grated against the floor and broke his trance. She sat before him chewing her food, oblivious. "Hope I haven't made you uncomfortable," he said.

She picked up the roll. A greenish-brown drop trailed down her wrist. "Of course not," she said, popping it into her mouth and swiping her arm with a napkin. He lacked even the power to embarrass her. For the rest of the lunch, she told him stories about ridiculous young guys hitting on her in bars, treating him like a doting uncle. Donny maintained a wry grin.

Back at his desk, he stared into his blank monitor at the crinkles forming at the corners of his eyes, then lowered his chin and rubbed the fat collecting on his jaw. It was a relief to pick up the phone.

\* \* \*

After work, Donny climbed the subway steps. A mingled murmur of laughter and children's shouts emanated from Carroll Park, so he cut through on the way home, eager for distraction. What galled him most of all was that on the way to that ridiculous lunch, he'd strutted past his brother's office door as though he were modeling a \$10,000 Italian suit. And, as if that weren't enough of a conceit, he'd smiled at the scowl contorting his brother's face. It seemed neither

of them had matured a day since they stopped having to share a room. As he walked under the high boughs of the trees past the World War I Memorial, he saw the old neighborhood guys playing bocce in the fenced court, and he sat on a bench by an adjacent horseshoe pit to watch.

The men were scattered, standing or sitting on white plastic chairs. Some wore ball caps and others fedoras; many wore gaudy watches, gold bracelets, or both. A few had canes leaning against armrests where they sat. The smell of cigars hung below a dissipating cloud. Donny heard the distant chatter of the boys playing baseball and looked back through the chain links, hoping one of them could clear the wall and force the somnolent old men to respond. But the fence rose tall and implacable between them. One of the old men said something. Suddenly, the rest began to guffaw. They shouted, pointed at one another, and their mirth seemed to multiply until some were bent over, holding their stomachs.

Watching them, Donny felt his sour mood beginning to lift. Nelson would love hearing about his date. He slowly shook his head until the corners of his lips rose and he began to laugh.



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