

The Family Reunion

By Konrad Cajgler

Nightly chill bit any skin not hiding underneath thick layers of clothing. Specifically, the appendages of the hands, their bony fingers. Such dryness of the cold air was too much to take for the Little Brother, and so he decided to walk back home. Back into warmth that had by then faded to memory. And he cursed audibly his lack of gloves. And he threw them inside his pocket, but it was not enough. They were still cold. Soon finding himself almost swept aside by the furious flurry of gusts, the orange and yellow lights of the house came to view, barely shining through the throng of dead leafless bushes. He walked, but the action of his feet was less like taking steps and more like sliding across the almost icy gravel path. Either way, he was moving forward. By some miraculous divine intervention, he came to the threshold of his household, up the stairs towards the front door where there was a roof above his head—just as the rain and sleet begun pelting from the heavens above.

Without wasting a moment in the countryside weather, he opened the door and went in.

Within a second he was greeted by the almost forgotten blazing warmth. The sweet rosy smell that permeated across the foyer had enveloped him in a certain nostalgia. From out of the darkness he came into the light, he remembered the youth spent in this house, the years he spent growing and learning here. Afflicted by an almost melancholy mood, his heart ached to walk further through the tight corridor of the foyer. And this tight space contained the minimal necessities; a shoe rack of stable oaken built, with see-through plastic sheet covers for the mud that stuck to the boots. He specifically recognised one pair that belonged to his brother...; the first thing he stepped upon after entering the house was the green carpet runner, with a thick layer of dark dirt clutching its soft fabric, it was a door mat that had welcomed him so many times before and it surprised him

to see that nobody changed or cleaned it in all those years; above a table there was a mirror with its small crack in the right bottom corner over which was a beautiful collage of leaves, needle pine branches and decorative plastic acorns. He examined all these details closely, then leaving his shoes behind on the rack he made his way across the foyer. There was a light at the end of the corridor coming from an open doorway. That doorway lead into the living room.

Here, in the grand spaciousness of it all—compared to the tight foyer—there lie on the floor a carpet of puffy fluff. It was a colourful thing matching the velvet drapes blocking the windows on the farther side of the room and the wall to the right. Standing still in the doorway, the Little Brother breathed in. Sighed. The source of the warmth that had so welcomed him into the house had revealed itself, and it was the infernal fire blazing safely from the inside of a grey-brick fireplace. The flames were tended to by a figure striking with a metal rod at the burning wooden tinder that creaked and snapped in the heat. From the posture and height of the figure, from those broad shoulders and the strawberry-blond hair springing from the top of his head, the Little Brother recognised the figure to be the owner of the boots—those muddy boots in the foyer.

Perhaps now is the best time to mention, and the Little Brother's mind had steered into a similar thought process, that he himself was the youngest out of six siblings. He was the Sixth. Taking a step into the living room, socks engulfed in the fluffy carpet with the warmth coming from the fireplace, the figure noticed him. He knew the person standing by the fire had to be his brother, but he did not know which one. He did not ponder on whether that made him a bad family member, maybe he should've. Maybe if he recognised the figure faster, he'd be better prepared for whatever came next? Just before the figure turned around, making his face seen, the Sixth felt a great thundering snap inside his head. A terrifying thought presented itself in a space of a second: what if the figure was the one sibling that had been his bitter rival since childhood? Not just a simple rival competing for the affection of their mother, or the praise of their father, but such that the relationship had broken down beyond all repair. The wounds on both of their backs still stinging never to be healed. But the thought dispersed into a puff of smoke as soon as he recognised the

contour of the figure's face, the pointy nose. There was no doubt, the shadowy figure was his elder brother, and the Fifth youngest brother of all his siblings.

The Fifth looked at the Sixth, half of his face lit by the crackling fire, the other blackened by shadow. A smile appeared on his face.

The Sixth said his greetings, walked past the Fifth and uttered no other word. His own blond hair graciously flowed above his head. He could see the tips of it shining in the blazing light of the fireplace thanks to a reflection in a mirror. A mirror that had been hanged up on the wall across the room, across from the fireplace. The mirror stretched wide at least a metre, and throughout his silent walk the Sixth could spy with the corner of his eye his own reflection. Seeing his body in the mirror, he remembered to straighten his back. He walked to the far end of the room past the sofa that faced the fireplace, and he shrugged as he walked beside it; the same sofa with a front raised and the backrest angled too acutely, offering no respite for the shoulders or the back, and killing any blood flow to the legs. Shivering with the dozen recollections of having to sit on that cursed thing, forced by his parents as punishment for petty disagreements, the Sixth walked up to where the drapes masked the windows, beside which there was a great mahogany bookshelf.

Upon inspection of the books stacked side by side on it, he picked one out without even reading the title on its spine. Taking the book into both his hands he opened it somewhere in the middle—ignoring the introductions, the foreword, the writer's notes and the analytical post-mortem of the author's career as well as a prologue that had nothing to do with the story. Then, he took a seat on a large armchair just in front of the bookshelf. Having sat down, due to the chair's soft cushions, the warmth from the fireplace and the late hour, the Sixth almost dozed off into a sweet slumber. Almost. The cackling of the fire, or the creeping laughter of his older brother had snapped him into full alertness, awakening his awareness. Once again taking a look at the book he opened, he began reading. Only then he realised that the book he had chosen was a story about a troubled man—it was not difficult for him to self-insert into that role—a troubled man who had searched far and wide across the smog-ridden cityscapes in search of his biological mother...

Knock knock, knock knock.

The four thuds on the door startled the Sixth and the Fifth. The younger brother looked at the older, and the two stared at each other while the door kept being pounded as if by angry fists of a mob. Yet the Sixth only turned his nose down towards the pages of his book, ignoring the knocking. Almost as if in frustration, the Fifth threw the metal rod at the special little stand to the right side of the fireplace which only barely caught it in place. Then he ran out of the living room. The loud banging on the door ceased as the Fifth answered it, the creaking of the door opening echoed across the foyer, the corridor and its noise drifted into the living room. The guest who so impatiently knocked on the door, was the Fifth's older brother. The Fourth.

And there was a great big cheer that the Sixth heard from the foyer. Moments later, both brothers walked side by side into the living room, squeezing through the tight doorway.

The Fourth brother was the Sixth's bane. The traitor of their childhood entered with such a smug almost frostbitten red nose on his mug that the Little Brother shuddered, nearly dropping his book. Instead, the book in his palms snapped closed as if he was done with it. (He wasn't).

The brothers, still side by side, made their way towards the fireplace. The Fourth warmed his woollen-gloved hands by the fire, while the Fifth returned to stoking the flames. The eldest seemed to have forgotten to take off his jacket, hat, scarf and the already mentioned gloves. There was still a cold haze around his clothes, almost as if the cold air from outside gripped his very being and refused to let go. Though he was dressed appropriately for the weather, there was still a vague plebish fashion sense that grieved his tattered attire. From the sick bright yellow lapel of his jacket, to the mismatched dark blue hue of his pocket flaps, the scratch marks that looked as if they were made by a rabid cat or an army of rats clawing on his body while he slept on the hard ground under some bridge somewhere... But the Fourth did not notice the Sixth's scowled gaze or did not care to show that he noticed it. Nevertheless, the Fifth noticed, and once he did, he threw the metal rod at the little stand again, all while trying to catch the focus of the Sixth.

For a moment, the Little Brother's energy was expended on trying to re-open the book still clutched in his hands, however his attention was drawn by the total and uncharacteristic silence of the Fourth brother. Not that he himself had anything to say. The Fifth's aggressive gesture did not go ignored however and seeing the eyebrows of the Fifth pointing downwards onto his nose, the Sixth turned his head, looking at the mirror opposite the fireplace. Part of him would've preferred to look out of a window. In the warm comfort of the house, staring at the cold and dark wilderness somehow brought even more comfort to him—but the drapes were drawn.

Without any prior warning the Fourth took off his hat. Then his gloves, one hand at the time while holding his hat in his mouth. Then, throwing them onto the sofa and with audible but indescribable gasps and groans ran up to the Sixth and with a demanding glint in his eyes sat down on the armchair, invading it with no shame whatsoever he threw the Little Brother out.

'I'm the older, the wiser, so listen to your elders!' the Fourth jumped back up, scanning up and down with his eyes the Sixth that had attempted to challenge him. After two seconds of silence, he sat back down triumphant.

The Sixth looked at the Fifth trying to communicate with his glassy wet eyes the injustice that had just been served to him, but the brother only stared at the flickering fire. With no help against the eldest of the three, he had no hope but to sit on the awkward sofa. As in the past, he could not find a comfortable way to rest his back, and by the time another knock on the door came, his shoulders ached.

Before any action was taken with regards to the knocking at the door, the Fourth looked at the Fifth, then they both turned their eyes on to the Sixth. But the youngest could not move out, his legs were dead. All he could do was read more of his book. The Fifth nodded, and looking back on the Fourth, took a coin out of his trousers pocket.

The coin was tossed, both brothers called out "heads" or "tails", and when the Fifth lost, he demanded that the rules of "best out of three" be followed and respected.

Twice more was the coin tossed. Twice, after the Fifth's defeat, did the Fourth's call prove wrong and so the eldest lost the flip of the coin.

He, his feet shaking as if in dire pain, slowly sat up from the armchair, both hands pushing him upwards as they were propped upon the armrests. Seeing that the Sixth was engrossed in his book, and having believed that his legs were indeed dead, the Fourth ran out from the armchair to answer the door. He did not even greet whomever it was that did the knocking, instead he ran back to the armchair—but alas, it was too late! The Sixth reclaimed it. The thud of the door echoing into the living room, soon came in the Third brother, soaking wet.

'Got caught in a little rain?' Asked the Fifth standing by the fireplace as he reached out for the metal rod.

'Just a bit.'

The Third, in his long trench coat walked towards the wardrobe to the left from the doorway, and it dwarfed him in height and bulk. Trying as hard as possible not to shake off any residue rain drops that had still clung to his coat, he smoothly slid it off his shoulders and hanged it on a wooden coat hanger he picked up from inside of the wardrobe. He was dry, aside from the chestnut locks on his head and everything below the knee that was dripping as if he fell into a river. Only after taking off his coat and hanging it by the fireplace, did he realise that he left a wet trail with his soaked feet and socks. As he saw the footsteps he left behind in the carpet, he planted the palms of his hands firmly on his forehead. After a moment of silence, the three other brothers seemingly forgot about him entirely. They all had their own things to do: The Sixth was reading, the Fifth stared at the fire with a smile creeping on his face and the Fourth... Well, the Fourth loitered about, refusing to sit on the sofa. The Third took off his tuxedo jacket and hanged it by the fireplace.

'So, when's dinner?' he asked, loosening his black tie.

The Sixth brother turned a page of his book, his eyes taking a second to glance at the rest of the living room but still enthralled by the words in his book. The fidgety Fourth looked at the calm Fifth, then at the Third still waiting for a response.

'Seven o'clock.' said the Fourth.

The Third nodded, looked at the clock above the long mirror and made his way to the sofa—
KNOCK, KNOCK—he ran out of the living room to answer the door.

Soon, with a great tremor and heavy stomping, following the Third brother who silently walked back to the sofa and sat on it, in entered the Second brother. With him was the First. Both had great long beards and long coats. They whispered to each other as they whipped off their coats near the fire and threw them inside the wardrobe. Then, both the Second and the First sat on the sofa, with the Third in between them. As the Sixth was also seated, it turned out that only the Fifth and Fourth were standing. And the Fourth did not seem very happy about that.

'That must be mother!'

The Fourth announced upon hearing violent knocking at the door. Though it was the Third that got up from between his elder brothers and made his way to the foyer. The hinges of the door screeched as it swung open, and all in the living room listened intently to her reply as their brother welcomed in the woman. When she walked into the room, they all saw that her cheeks were red, as was her nose. She came closest to the fire in silence, moving the Fifth out of her way. Her entire body almost touched the whipping tongues of flame then, and the Fifth reached out to grab her and move her away from the danger. But before he took a step, he stopped himself and only looked away in thought. She, on the other hand, took the opportunity to turn around and scan the room with a disappointing scowl at all of her sons, stopped halfway and looked into the reflection in the mirror opposite.

Knock...

The noise at the door startled them all.

Knock...

None of them moved.

The sound repeated and continued. The Sixth put down his book and stood up; the Fifth shifted his focus from the mother and faced the doorway; the Fourth stopped fidgeting and pacing

back and forth and also looked at the doorway; the Third found himself standing right by the doorway as he followed his mother into the living room, almost screamed at the sudden noises from outside; the Second and First stopped whispering amongst themselves, stood up and were completely still except for their hands stroking at their beards. The only person that did not face the doorway and the darkness lurking beyond its threshold was the mother. She stared long at the mirror, at the reflection of her old cold and wrinkly face.

Knock... knock... knock...—it did not stop. The noise built up; the pacing multiplied! Faster and faster it did not cease!

'Open the bloody door you dimwits!'

The Third ran towards the door upon hearing the mother's scorn.

But before he could open it, it swung open throwing him across the corridor past the doorway.

On the floor and tending to his pain, he didn't notice something run in. The Sixth, Fifth, Fourth, Second, and First looked at what it was, but the mother stayed by the fireplace, her eyes locked on the mirror, locked at her own reflection.

First and Second were thrown out of its way. Fourth was pushed aside, into the fireplace beside the mother; He screamed and burned and in panic ran out, jumped atop the sofa and fell into the mirror. It crashed down on the floor.

It scattered into a thousand pieces. In the chaos and confusion, one piece of it broke away and fell under the mother's foot. From the reflection of this one piece, she could see a face.

It wasn't her face, or the face of her children. The piece through which she looked was small, itself bearing a few cracks, but she could see enough of a face that if it were a human one, she would recognize it as such. The face opened its mouth and its white sharp teeth unclenched, revealing a long tongue slithering out...

The End