

The Reunion

I hadn't seen my brother, Cliff, in more than a year, not since the big scene with mom and dad at the house. It'd been at the Sunday dinner table. Dad had just finished shoveling a load of mashed potatoes into his mouth when Cliff told them. Dad abruptly got up and went outside. Mom just broke down and cried.

I looked over at Cliff. He was staring at his plate. I wanted to say something to him, anything, but my mind was a blank. There didn't seem to be any words that were appropriate to the situation.

Cliff politely excused himself and went up to his room. Later dad tried to talk to him. So did mom after she'd calmed down. But everything was in hushed whispers and I couldn't hear what they were saying. The next morning Cliff was gone.

I'd tried writing to him at least a dozen times, but no reply. Then all of a sudden there he was at Mike's party. Mike greets me at the door and introduces me to the guests in the living room. Besides Mike, the only other person I know is Jackie, Mike's girlfriend. Everyone else is new to me.

"There's beer in the fridge," Mike says with a sly grin. "Help yourself."

I go to the kitchen and there's Cliff, sitting alone at the kitchen table, a can of beer in his hand. I stop cold when I see him. He looks up, just as surprised as me.

"Cliff," I say, when I finally get over the shock. "You're the last person in the world I expected to see!"

"Well, I never imagined meeting you here either," Cliff says.

"Mike told me he was having this party and that someone special was coming. I didn't know it would be you."

"You know Mike. He gave me the same line."

"So when did you get back?"

"Yesterday."

"You here to stay?"

"No, just for a visit. I've got a few loose ends to wrap up."

"Where are you staying?"

"Right here, with Mike."

Cliff pulls out a cigarette and lights it. "Could you hand me that ashtray over there on the counter?"

"I didn't know you smoked."

"Well, times have changed."

I get the ashtray and place it on the table in front of Cliff.

"So, how do you like the big city?" I ask.

"It's all right. There's nothing to keep me here, that's for sure."

"You working?"

"Sure, I've got a good job."

"Doing what?"

"It's a job. I work."

I walk over to the refrigerator and pull out a can of beer.

"Wow, what a shock," Cliff says. "I thought you never touched the stuff."

I snap open the tab and suck foam from the top of the can into my mouth. "Like you said, times have changed."

"So, how are mom and dad?" Cliff asks.

"They're fine," I reply. "You're going to see them, aren't you?"

"I wasn't planning on it."

"They know you're here though, don't they?"

"How would they? I didn't phone."

"You really should see them while you're here."

Cliff flicks the ash from his cigarette. "I know you have good intentions, but I really don't need

any advice from my kid brother.”

“Someone’s bound to tell them that you’re here.”

“I hope it won’t be you.”

“I still think you should see them.”

Cliff shrugs his shoulders. “I’m making my own decisions now.”

There are a few moments of awkward silence. Cliff looks down, then away, avoiding any eye contact with me. Crushing out his cigarette he says, “I really should be getting back to the party.”

He stands up from his chair and walks toward the door, but before he can leave I say, “Did you hear I’ve quit?”

Cliff stops at the doorway, then turns back to face me. “Oh yeah, why’s that?”

“It’s hard to explain.”

“But I thought you were dead set on it. Nothing was going to stop you.”

“Well, everything’s different now.”

“So, what are you going to do?”

“I don’t know. I really don’t. It all turned upside down.”

“What do the folks think about it?”

“They’re upset, of course, although not as upset as they were with you. Dad says flat out that he’s through helping me.”

“And mom?”

“She didn’t actually say anything, but you know how she thinks.”

“You’ve lost your way.”

“Exactly.”

“And how do you feel about it?”

I don’t answer. I just sit there fidgeting with my can of beer.

“Look,” Cliff says. “If you don’t want to talk about it, you don’t have to. I understand.”

He comes over and puts his hand on my shoulder. For the first time I feel a bit of warmth coming from him.

“I need to move out,” I finally say.

“Oh my,” Cliff laughs. “First me, then you. Where you gonna go?”

“I haven’t really decided. What do you think? Maybe you and I could—”

“Forget it,” Cliff says, suddenly cold again. He takes his hand off my shoulder. “If you want to come to the city, that’s your business. But don’t include me in any of your plans. Don’t even think of staying with me.”

Cliff turns to walk away just as Mike is coming through the kitchen door.

“How are you two gentlemen doing?” he asks cheerfully, not noticing the sullen expressions on our faces. “It looks like you both need another beer. I’m here to get one myself.”

Mike walks over to refrigerator and pulls out two beers. He gives one to Cliff, one to me, then returns to get another for himself.

“By the way, Cliff,” Mike says. “I just talked to Jackie. It turns out that she can’t take you to the airport on Monday after all. She’s gotta work.”

“She told me she’d be able to take the day off,” Cliff says.

“Yeah, that’s what she thought. But she says she’s already called in sick three times this month and the boss is getting on her case about it. I hope that doesn’t leave you in a pinch.”

“Yeah, well....”

“I can take you,” I cut in. “I’d be happy to.”

Cliff looks at Mike, then at me. “You don’t need to. I can find another way, I’m sure.”

“It’s no problem,” I say. “Like I said, I already quit.”

“I appreciate your offer but, honestly—”

“What’s the matter, Cliff?” Mike says, the cheerfulness fading from his face. “Let family help family.”

Cliff breathes in deeply. “Well, all right then. The plane leaves at ten.”

“I’ll pick you up at eight-thirty,” I say.

“Thanks,” Cliff says, forcing a smile. He then excuses himself and walks through the door to the

living room, leaving Mike and me in the kitchen by ourselves.

“So what’s going on with you two?” Mike says.

“I dunno. I can’t understand that guy.”

“He doesn’t seem so happy about you taking him to the airport.”

“He just needs a little more space.”

“Well, don’t get angry about it.”

“I’m not angry. It’s just that...hell, I don’t know.”

Mike and I both sit down at the table. I open a second can of beer. This time there’s no foam on top of the can. I start guzzling.

“I thought he’d want to see you,” Mike says. “That’s why I invited you over.”

“Maybe it was a mistake.”

“No, no. I’m sure he’s happy you’re here.”

“He certainly isn’t acting like it.”

“I guess it’s still hard for him to be around family.”

I take a long draught of beer. “I’m his brother for Christ’s sake. I was never against him.”

“He told me about your parents.”

“Yeah, they took it pretty hard.”

“You’ve got to admit he had a lot of guts telling them straight out like that.”

“Indeed, and I suppose it would take even more guts for him to face them now.”

“They don’t want to see him?”

“Yeah, but not for the reason you think,” I say, finishing my beer in one final gulp. “They figure it’s their fault.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

“Well, who fault is it? Both of us put them through a lot of shit.”

“It’s no one’s fault. Why does it have to be somebody’s fault? Nobody has to apologize.” Mike looks at me straight in the eyes. “Why can’t you all just accept Cliff the way he is?”

“I don’t know about mom and dad, but I don’t have any problem with Cliff. It’s not about me accepting Cliff or even Cliff accepting me. It’s more about Cliff accepting that I accept him.”

“Sounds complicated,” Mike says, putting his hand on my shoulder the same way Cliff had. “Don’t worry, you and Cliff will patch things up.”

Mike grabs two more beers from the refrigerator, hands me one, and we both go back to the living room to join the party.

There’s Cliff, seated on the couch, with Jackie and everyone circled around him, listening intently. Cliff doesn’t notice us walk in. He’s leaning forward, animated, gesturing histrionically, as he continues telling the story Mike and I had missed the first part of.

“So there we were,” he’s saying, with that whimsical smile of his I hadn’t seen in a long time, “sitting in this diner at three o’clock in the morning eating blueberry waffles and wondering whatever happened to Danny!”

Everyone laughs. I walk over to a cushionless chair in the corner of the living room and sit down. Cliff looks over and sees me.

“So what finally happened to Danny?” Jackie asks, giggling.

Cliff doesn’t seem to hear her. He’s still looking at me, suddenly quiet.

“Hey, Cliff,” someone else calls out. “Come on! What happened after that?”

Cliff looks slowly back to the others, like he’s coming out of a dream. “I dunno,” he says finally. “It doesn’t really matter.”

A couple of people laugh, but the story’s fallen through.

“I didn’t mean to interrupt you,” I say softly.

“It’s all right,” Cliff says. “I was finished.”

“He’s got a million stories, doesn’t he?” Mike says, trying to recover the mood.

“I know,” I say. “And I was along for a lot of them.”

“So, what really happened to Danny?” Jackie asks.

“Well, just to set the record straight,” I say. “Danny was halfway to the city before he figured out

he'd lost his wallet and didn't have any money!"

Everyone suddenly revives and we all have a good laugh.

"I knew it," Mike says, chuckling.

Cliff is still sitting there, withdrawn.

"Hey, Cliff," I call over to him, thinking that I might be able to ease the tension. "Did you tell them the one about at that weekend at the lake?"

It's clear he doesn't want to talk, but to avoid being rude he says, "Which one?"

"You remember, the time we lost all our clothes."

"Oh yeah, I remember. You tell it to them, though."

"But you could tell it a helluva lot better than I can."

Cliff stands up abruptly. "Sorry, but I'm getting tired. I think I'm going to turn in. Do you mind, Mike?"

"Heck, Cliff. This is Saturday night!" Mike objects. "It's still early. Don't quit on us yet!"

"Mike...really," Cliff says insistently.

"Yeah, go on." Mike waves him away. "You can have my bed. I'll sleep out here on the sofa."

Cliff says goodnight and goes upstairs, but with his departure the party's over. Everyone starts getting up to leave.

"You and him had a lot of good times together, didn't you?" Mike says to me at the front door.

"Yeah, we did," I reply.

Cliff doesn't have much to say the whole way out to the airport. There's a million things I'd like to talk with him about, but I'm afraid that he'd end up taking anything I say the wrong way. The words start to flow only after we get to the security gate.

"Thanks for bringing me out here," he says.

"Don't mention it," I answer. "Did you get around to seeing mom and dad?"

"No. It would have been nice, but it just wouldn't have worked out."

"You still want me to keep mum about you being here?"

"I guess it really doesn't matter one way or the other now." He reflects for a moment. "But what's the harm? You can tell them everything. And say hi from me."

"I will. Oh, and don't forget to write."

"Hey, you know me. I'm not much of a writer."

"When will I see you again?"

"I don't know. I really don't. But if you're ever in the city, look me up."

"Sure," I say. "Maybe just for a visit sometime."

We shake hands and he leaves. He goes through the gate without turning back to wave goodbye.