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Walter B. Levis

Brothers

Corned beef on rye, pastrami on a roll. The meat on both sandwiches is piled about three inches high, accompanied by scoops of coleslaw the size of softballs. Ari, ignoring the food, sits at a small table in the back of the deli, his newspaper open, its leaves spread over the two large pink platters.

He's waiting for Jason, his older brother, who sounded particularly high-strung when he called this morning and insisted on meeting today for lunch. The urgency was alarming. Something must be wrong, Ari thought, which, in Jason's case, would mean either money or women. Life's two necessities, as Big Bro would put it. If only he would grow up, Ari thinks now, but then he immediately scolds himself for being so judgmental. To love is to accept; to accept is to love. He wonders where that line comes from. Something he read, or from his rabbi?

In any case, his brother is almost forty minutes late—without even a call—and Ari is pissed. If something came up, why no call? And why isn't Jason answering his cell? Fighting to contain his anger, Ari adjusts his yarmulke then pushes aside the newspaper and looks at the sandwiches. The top pieces of bread have slid off the mountains of meat. Such ridiculous portions, he thinks, such opulence, such waste. Kosher meat, sure—but why pile on so much?

He's fallen into a foul mood. And his neck hurts. Must have slept in a funny position, he thinks, squeezing a small knot of muscles at the back of his head. And these damn chairs—hard plastic, as bad as the waiting room down at Legal Aid, where he has worked for the past eleven years. Ari hates the chairs in that room, has always hated those chairs. All those people hoping for a shot at justice, sitting there so uncomfortably. Why? Why have such crappy chairs?

He glances at the table inches from his own. There's a large woman with rolls of skin on her neck. He catches her in the middle of taking a bite of her own enormous sandwich. Turkey and chopped liver? Yes, he sees a wad of the gray pasty liver dribble from her mouth and stick for a moment to her chin before plopping onto the back of her thick wrist. She licks it off and is about to swallow. But, with a lump of food in her mouth, she freezes, one cheek bulging. She seems to have realized that Ari is watching. Her large, round head slowly turns. Ari smiles and blinks quickly and looks away. Again, he adjusts his yarmulke. It's brand new, and he's still getting used to being a "Torah ambassador," i.e., wearing a yarmulke in public.

He checks his watch. Five more minutes, that's it. A wasted lunch hour, he concludes, and takes a deep breath. Being late is one thing, not showing up

is another. Of course, it shouldn't be that surprising, he thinks. My brother has always been narcissistic, so totally self-involved that missing lunch would be no big deal.

Or would it? Has Jason ever done this before? Completely blown off a lunch date?

Ari's anger, which for the last twenty minutes has been so freely flowing, suddenly stops—like water turned to ice. With a faint shiver, he realizes that he's completely failed to entertain the possibility that his brother might be hurt or injured or suddenly ill or...anything's possible in New York, right?

Just then, he sees Jason push open the restaurant's heavy glass door. Frantically waving one hand, breathing hard, his face is red, his hair a mess, one corner of his tight curls bulging to the side. He looks more like a mad professor than a hotshot businessman. Wonder if the appearance is part of some business strategy? Ari thinks, barely noticing how quickly his concern has faded, flushed away by a fresh rush of anger.

Hurrying to the table, Jason says in a loud voice, "You wouldn't believe the conference call I was on with these monsters in LA. All I'm trying to do is open an office out there, right? It's not brain surgery. But with these guys—sometimes I hope for an earthquake. Kill the whole deal. Anyway, sorry I'm late." Before Jason sits down, he pats the yarmulke on top of Ari's head.

Ari slaps his hand away. "I got you a sandwich," he says.

"You really wear that all the time now? Even in court?"

"Yes, I've told you a million—look, I've only got about three minutes. Here, pastrami."

Ari pushes a pink plate toward Jason, who lowers his big frame into the small chair—a circus bear sitting on a stool. Ari's always wondered how his brother could be so huge while he himself is so scrawny.

"Pastrami?" Jason asks, and Ari notes the tone in his brother's voice, a subtle accusation, his big paw hovering over both sandwiches.

"Yes," Ari says, "I got you pastrami." He points to the other sandwich. "This is corned beef."

"That's yours?"

"I thought you—what, you want the corned beef?"

"No, no, no. This is fine."

Jason picks up the pastrami sandwich and takes a huge bite. One motion. Grab and chew, his whole head seems to shake. Nothing to detract from the physical experience, the pure joy of eating. No pause for prayer, no need for the "holy." This, in fact, is exactly what Ari believes separates him from his older brother: Jason's inability to comprehend the life that Ari is so determined to embrace.

He adjusts his yarmulke. There's something nagging, pulling at Ari's

attention like the faint ache of that stiff neck. It's a question that he can't quite form, some kind of unacknowledged doubt, a vague threat that he often feels when he's around Jason. It involves his own sense of superiority, his conviction that the gulf between him and his brother involves Jason's failure, not his own.

He watches Jason eat, chewing with his mouth partially open. He's always eaten this way, like a little kid with a stuffed nose. Chronic sinus problems are, in fact, part of the reason. But right now it strikes Ari as purely disgusting: the way Jason's thick lips smack, little bits of chewed-up food flashing into view. Disgusting, this big-bear, neocon racist with the gun collection. That his brother is actually a card-carrying member of the NRA—that's the real kicker.

But brothers you are and shall always be...

What is that from? Something in Genesis? Or did he make it up? Or the rabbi—Ari's been speaking to his rabbi about his brother. But he can't recall the conversations. And he can't quite hold the feeling of threat in his mind but only senses it, again, like that faint ache of his stiff neck. Sometimes it just hurts: the sad truth that the bonds of love attach themselves in ways we cannot help.

And what is the bond? His brother has achieved success in exactly the ways that Ari himself has failed. Money and women. Yes, there was the divorce, and Ari did what he could to help his brother through that rough time, which included therapy twice a week and a spell on antidepressants. But Jason, with that ability of his to seize a cliché and make it a perfect fit, did, indeed, do as he promised: he "bounced back." Within a year, the depression was gone, the therapy over, and the women returned, a steady stream of new dates. Plenty of attractive ones too.

So is it jealousy? Nothing more than that ancient, ugly emotion, the throat-grabbing rage of Cain and Abel? Ari, who tends to get tangled in his own convoluted emotions, has sometimes wondered: Am I so screwed up that I can't get over a simple, stupid sibling rivalry?

He leans forward, rubbing his neck. "Well...?" The folded newspaper, balancing at the edge of the small table, drops to the floor. He ignores it. "What's going on?"

"It's nothing really," Jason says, still chewing.

"What do you mean nothing? You made it sound like if we didn't have lunch today, you were going to have a heart attack."

"How's the corned beef here?"

"Fine. Excellent, actually. This is the place we came with Dad. What do you mean nothing? I thought this was some urgent—" Ari notices Jason staring at his sandwich. "You want some of this?"

"Maybe I'll have just a bite."

"I thought you wanted pastrami."

Ari gives him half the corned beef sandwich.

"No, that's too much," Jason says, taking the half sandwich. "You talk to the folks this weekend?"

Ari sets both elbows down hard against the table. The silverware bounces. Water splashes from the glasses. "Jason," he says in a low tone. "I've gotta be in court in about twenty-two minutes. Did I race all the way up here to chitchat with you?"

"All right, all right." Jason unscrews a jar of hot mustard. "Remember the woman I told you about, with the picture I showed you—"

"Violet?"

"Good memory. Violet Williams. She's not working for me anymore—has got a new job, and now we're, uh...we started seeing each other a few weeks ago."

"Mazel tov."

"Not so fast with the mazel tovs, please. I'm very conflicted about this thing." He leans forward and whispers, "And not just because she's black."

"What are you conflicted about? Give it a chance."

"That's exactly what I'm doing, and this weekend—well, this weekend she stayed over both Friday and Saturday nights."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"I...I'm not sure. I mean..." Jason dips his knife into the mustard, then spreads it onto his sandwich. He is careful to spread it evenly, touching each corner of the bread. Finally, he says quietly, "Let's just say she's not exactly a nice Jewish girl, you know? I mean, it was...uh, very X-rated. Like triple X-rated."

Ari shakes his head. He can feel a crooked smile creeping across his face. "Yeah? So about this you're complaining?"

"No, but—I don't know. It's...it's crazy. I feel like a teenager. I mean, I'm too old for sex to be this important to me. All I do is think of her and I get a hard-on."

Ari shakes his head. In spite of himself, he feels his smile broadening. "This is what's bothering you? I came up here to listen to this?"

"I know it's crazy. I need another twenty thousand dollars worth of therapy, don't I?"

"At least. Want my advice? I'll give it to you for nothing."

"Please. Anything to save twenty grand. Just don't make it too Jewish, okay?"

Ari looks away. There it is: the sting, the bite, the difference. He pinches the bridge of his nose. "Why do you joke about that?"

"I'm sorry. I still can't get used to the, you know..." He motions to the

yarmulke.

“You know, that’s exactly the kind of crap—”

“Ari, come on, I was joking.”

“Right—joking. Forget it. Look, I gotta go. Congratulations on your new relationship.”

Ari pushes his chair away from the table, then stands.

“Come on,” Jason says. “Don’t be like that. I’m sorry, really. Tell me what you were going to say.”

Ari hears a soft cracking sound—his weak knees popping as he bends down to pick up his newspaper. He stands slowly. “Look,” he says, tucking the newspaper under his arm, “pleasure is a blessing.” He pauses, looks around, suddenly feeling as if everyone is watching him, as if he were making a speech, delivering a sermon. He senses it again, the threat, a fear of being insincere in what he’s about to say. He doesn’t want to preach. But he doesn’t fully grasp the simple possibility that it’s not Jason’s secular attitude that needs a lesson but his own religious commitment that requires more attention. He glances at the woman who’d been eating the turkey-and-chopped-liver sandwich. She’s looking now at an oversized chocolate chip cookie, staring down at it like she’s reading a map. Finally, she picks up the cookie with both hands and takes a large bite, then gazes out the window, her thick cheeks jiggling as she chews.

Ari turns back to Jason, who’s looking at him with an impatient frown on his face. “Come on, Ari,” he says in that familiar raspy whisper, “I was just kidding.”

The doubt, the confusion, the simple yearning to be closer to his older brother—if the gap between them isn’t Jason’s fault, Ari wonders, what would this mean? That his own commitment to God is being tested?

His feet suddenly ache, a dull pain rising from his arches into his shin and knees, reaching faintly up to the sides of his hips. He sits down on the edge of the plastic chair, his newspaper crinkling loudly on his lap. Through the haze of his jumbled feelings, he notices the strong smell of the deli’s cookies and cakes, a warm, sugary odor, strangely mixed, he thinks, with the pungency of onions. The smells seem to surround him as he hears Jason ask again for his advice, saying something about how unbelievable this new relationship is after all he went through with his first wife, the big Jewish wedding, what he calls the whole kit and kaboodle, and now to end up crazy with a *shvartza*, which is the word he uses. It makes Ari want to wince, but Jason uses it more than once, making it sound like some kind of term of endearment. His little *shvartza*, he says, isn’t just terrific in bed, she’s also smart and ambitious and thoughtful, and her business sense is—

Ari lifts his hand, signaling to stop. His sense of the moment has narrowed, focused. The smells have faded. There’s something else he feels angry about,

but he's not sure what. And anyway, there isn't time to address it. "I gotta be in court in twenty minutes, Jay. My advice is simple: accept your blessings with grace and humility." He gets up quickly. "You going to the folks' on Friday? I'll see you there. Anyway, we'll be in touch." He stands and starts toward the door.

"I'm not sure I can make it Friday," Jason says after him. "Violet and I—"

"Bring her," Ari calls over his shoulder, waving. He pushes through the glass door, grateful for the outdoors, for the absurd sense of safety he always feels amid the throng of traffic in midtown Manhattan. As he steps to the corner and waves for a cab, he feels a strange sense of having successfully warded off some terrible evil.



The abrupt departure leaves Jason surprised at his sudden solitude. He looks down at his plate, tracing his finger along a crust of rye bread. A moment passes, during which he's vaguely aware of the woman sitting next to him chewing loudly; then he suddenly grabs a pile of napkins and wraps up the half a sandwich Ari left untouched on his plate. He gets up from the table quickly, his chair squeaking as it scrapes the tile floor.

But it's too late. He sees Ari just outside the restaurant getting into a cab. He didn't even eat, Jason thinks, not a bite. And now he's going to be in court all afternoon. For...a trial? A hearing? Jason isn't sure. In fact, he realizes that he doesn't have any idea what Ari is working on except for that crazy pro bono thing with the drug dealer who earned a college degree while in prison.

He stands there a moment, holding the wrapped-up sandwich, grease stains seeping through the napkins.

Accept your blessings with grace and humility.

Sure, Jason thinks, what the hell. I'm lucky, and always have been. But this whole thing with Violet, all this pleasure, pure physical pleasure, and the surprise of her being black, what it takes to just accept this is—what? Jason feels a twinge of fear grab the center of his belly, a tightness, almost a cramp, as if he needs to release an enormous belch. He swallows, waiting. Nothing comes, but he finds himself chewing over what Ari said. Ridiculous, he thinks, angrily. It's just the usual passive crapola. Acceptance, submission, the ol' higher power bit. That's what Ari's getting at: grace, humility, God.

Angrily, he drops the wrapped-up sandwich on his plate and sits back down and grips the edge of the small wobbly table. He imagines pushing it over. He can picture it: no tables to share, no food in common, everyone sitting across from each other with nothing between them but blank, awkward space. Grace, humility, God. Jason gazes back at the door of the crowded restaurant. A group of what looks like Japanese tourists have entered, their

necks adorned with small cameras. The pressure in his belly rises, and again he feels about to belch—but nothing comes. Instead, unconsciously, the tips of Jason's fingers have begun passing lightly over the wrapped-up sandwich like a blind man reading Braille. What if Ari's right, he thinks, what if there's really a whole other way to live, a mysterious power to be gracefully and humbly served? He wonders. Yes, sitting there in the crowded deli, Jason suddenly and intensely wonders what it's like for his brother. The rituals, the rules, the prayers. Ari must like it, he thinks. But why? How can all the gibberish and superstition be so meaningful to his own brother? Educated, intelligent, rational. My own brother, he's no fool!

He shifts the weight of his big frame in the little plastic chair and notices that the cramping pressure in his belly has started to fade. What did I hope to accomplish by having this lunch with Ari? he wonders. What did I really want? Advice? Approval? To feel for just a few minutes close to my little *nudnick* of a brother like I used to, when he was up in the top bunk with his flashlight reading till all hours?

Again he grips the wobbly table and imagines pushing it over, not angrily but calmly just because it's there, in the way. And his mind suddenly races and he wonders: Why do Ari and I always meet at restaurants, always restaurants, never a walk in the park, but always a meal in a deli with a place to sit a table between us a context structure solid *thing* wobbly and annoying and marking the tragically stupid disagreements of color and size and shape of the surface and who eats what when where why and how...

Aaach! Jason stops his crazy thoughts like a driver slamming on the brakes. The hell with it! If I want this thing with my gorgeous Violet to work, I've just gotta go for it. Take it to the next level. Grace and humility? Try *chutzpah* and luck. Old-fashioned courage. That's what I need—the balls to go for it.

He leans over the table and unwraps the greasy napkins and puts the sandwich back on its plate. Then he pulls the plate in front of him. Looks like a half pound of meat, he thinks, and with a strange sense of relief he reaches for the jar of hot mustard, his thoughts absorbed now by what he knows of the difference between corned beef and pastrami, how pastrami should be from the forequarter of the animal, the deckle, from which we get brisket. But both corned beef and pastrami can come from the hindquarter, where we get the bottom round, which is, in fact, the most common cut in today's kosher beef market. But whether it's forequarter, hindquarter, bottom round, or brisket—both kinds of beef are cured. The distinction: pastrami is *dry*-cured in a paste of seasoned salt, then smoked, then steamed.

Yes, it's a subtle difference, he thinks, and, slowly, with something approaching reverence, he takes a large, deliberate bite.