

Michael W. Cox

Brothers

My father was rough on us. He would badger us, smack us, shout. He wanted us to be men—or at least, to behave like men. We should be good athletes, for one thing. We should be able to fight, to defend ourselves, for another. We should be friendly, sure, but if the situation called for it, we should be ready to deliver the quick smack or smack down. I understand now, of course, why he trained us to be this way—he had things to hide. Things he didn't want anyone to know. He didn't want people reading him through his sons. And so my oldest brother, who took our father's lessons most to heart, would come home with a black eye here, a broken arm there, and, once he hit driving age, quite a number of dents and scrapes on the family car. The next in line for our father's lessons—my middle brother, Dirk—on the other hand, ended up soft, despite the man's most fervent efforts.

Dirk was my gay brother. Probably we were all gay at one time or another—many boys are, if you ask—but Dirk was the one who made it a choice when he reached his late teens. He and I fought often before that, each of us trying to decide something about himself, one attempting to be what our father dictated, the other picking up on something more private and unsaid. By the time I hit puberty I had inched ahead of Dirk in height. I was growing fast, in fact, and working out, muscles sprouting on my biceps and gut, along my calves and thighs. Overnight the few girls in the neighborhood began to turn their eyes on me more than Dirk. I had become boyfriend material, but Dirk, nearly three years my senior, continued to be just a friend to the girls, someone to laugh with and complain to about what a shitty town we lived in, with nothing for anyone our age to do but sneak beer and steal cigarettes from our parents' supply.

You had to prove yourself early where we lived. You had to let others know where you stood, what kind of man you would be. So on nights the summer I was twelve—after a day of baseball and swimming, of hiking in the hills—I would sit on the steps of a neighbor's house with two girls, Kaye and Tanya. Both about a year older, they would take turns kissing me, a kind of game. Kaye was big, Nordic, and years later would become serious with me on my living room couch, my father dead by this point, my mother upstairs asleep. We watched old movies, late, and she knew a good deal more than I. But at age twelve, Tanya was the one, petite, precocious, and swift. She liked a good kiss, to get them and to give them, soft, electric. Cars would drive by on those late nights, we perfectly visible from the street. Occasionally one would honk and a boy might shout a line of

encouragement. The next day the neighbor lady, elderly, would call my mother to complain, and really, I understood—kids “necking,” as she put it, just feet away from her bedroom window late at night, a clear disturbance of the peace.

Dirk had to go underground to do the things he did, hidden away in basements, in crawl spaces no one knew, furtive, ashamed, usually, but driven by the same need that drove me—that drove all us boys, even if we did find different ways to express it. He had a blond friend and one more sandy, boys I barely knew and stayed away from when they came around, always looking like they were up to something. But one friend of Dirk’s, Alby, was a different story indeed.

Alby was a source of conflict between us, because he’d been Dirk’s friend up until about that point, and then a shift slowly occurred till he was my friend, not Dirk’s anymore. Like me, Alby had become interested in girls. Seriously interested. Talking about girls and sneaking out in the night to meet them and steal a kiss or two was a lot better than the things Dirk had Alby up to, like reading our father’s gay pornography—tucked deeply inside Dad’s closet where only someone with Dirk’s tenacity was able to find it—or having Alby dress up like a girl in a dark wig, full make-up, a tight dress, and mesh hose. Come here, Dirk had said to me one day the summer before, and I stepped into our parents’ bedroom to witness Alby’s transformation. There he stood, beside my mother’s bed, looking a little something like her in her wig. I turned around and went back to my bedroom and shut the door. I flipped through four-color pages of *House of Mystery*, the *Rose and the Thorn*, the *Phantom Stranger*. I had enough comics in my room to ride out any perversity. An hour after such an episode, I’d put on my shoes and grab my basketball, head off to the court to shoot ball in the blazing sun.

And then in the evening our father arriving home at sunset after having worked the field, our garden, a couple of acres. Dirty hands, smudgy face.

“What you been doing all day?” he’d ask.

“Shot some ball,” I’d say, and he’d nod.

“Anyone out there?” he’d ask, meaning did anyone come out to the court to shoot, and I’d shake my head, usually, as often as not. (Most days it was about 95 degrees out on the asphalt, sun skating off the rim.)

“What about your brother?” he’d ask, and I’d edge somewhere around the truth.

“He and Alby were hanging out,” I’d say, and he’d look at me, trying to discern the meaning of my phrase. I’d flip a page of my comic book and look down at Adam Strange in a red suit, finned cap and jet pack, gliding along the surface of some alien world with his beautiful

girlfriend Alanna—dark hair, red lips, beautiful shape.

Like our mother, Dirk liked to draw and he liked to paint. Still lifes. Flowers, fish. He worked clay, too, sometimes. I had no feel for it.

Several of our fights were memorable. One that began in the backyard with my judo-flipping Dirk ended with him straddled atop me, spanking my behind for the entire neighborhood to witness, Alby trying not to laugh. Another had taken place one day when Dirk smeared a bologna sandwich in my face, bits of it clinging till Alby begged me to wash away the Wonder Bread and mustard epoxy as I stood irate and fuming in the center of our living room. “There’s a piece of crust right on the end of your nose, man,” he said. “It’s really not helping your looks.”

My brother had walked away after delivering this humiliation, and all I could think was how much I wanted to smash his skull, one good punch. I could picture it, my striking Dirk in the stomach to double him over, then smashing down, hard, on his soft spot, a move I had studied in diagrams in the back of my favorite comic. We boys talked about such things among ourselves, one friend buying a sack of rice so he could thrust his rigid hand, fingers first, repeatedly into the grain, to toughen himself for fights. Another boy using a black magic marker to draw the outline of a human body on his basement wall, small circles demarking the points at which to strike a blow.

At the end of that summer was the best fight between me and Dirk—the longest, the most sustained, the most complete—the three of us (me, Alby, Dirk) down in the dining room trying to figure out how to spend the rest of a humid evening. It was dark out—crickets, bullfrogs, lightning bugs. A warm night and Dirk wanted to round up a bunch of kids—us, Kaye and Tanya, Lisa and Chuck from across the river—to get out in the yard and play flashlight tag. Everybody hid, was how the game worked, and the one who was it had to stand by base and wait to click his flashlight in a single spot when he thought he heard someone move. We had played the game for many summers but it was getting old, and Alby and I were beyond it, I believed, and I sneered. Besides, Dirk was almost sixteen and ridiculously old for a kids’ game like that. I told him as much and he took a swing at me, and what ensued was for me just a blur, but according to Alby the next day was the most thorough ass-whipping of anyone he’d ever seen.

Long years of baseball and basketball, a full summer of weight training had sharpened my physique and reflexes, my peripheral vision, while Dirk had spent his years crouched before an easel, casting a quiet eye at the white page, brush or charcoal set to begin. He could only duck and cover; I was a threshing machine, a butcher’s mallet landing blows, many of which according to Alby had a pleasing, fleshy sound.

I remember Dirk's eyes, afraid, and then my father shouting down the stairwell, his heavy footfalls on the uncarpeted stairs. And then he stepped into the dining room, ordered us to stop, though there was no need—we had already separated, fists clenched, panting like boxers between rounds.

Alby sat on the small couch we had at the edge of that room, not having moved, eyes wide, and Dad surveyed the scene and then sent Dirk to his room. The second he was gone, the tears began, I could not help them, had not cried in years, and Dad looked at me, and I was crying for no good reason I could name. "You didn't even try to defend yourself, did you?" he said dismissively, my tears his evidence for my defeat. "Well?" he said, but I couldn't speak. Alby tried to explain, but Dad shut him up and sent him home. I watched him walk out the door, head bowed, heard him walking through our yard. Then Dad left me alone downstairs, telling me to clean up the mess—broken plates, overturned furniture, paintings knocked off the wall.

The next day Alby ran down the fight for me. I had scored a clear victory; it wasn't even close. I had no idea I had won, assuming that my father, who hadn't even seen the fight, was correct in his judgment of my defeat. I was glad Alby was there to see it, though if he hadn't been there to begin with, of course, there'd've been no fight. We were fighting over him, fighting for the prize; it's just that one of us didn't want him dressed up in a dark wig once the fighting was done. Dirk and I didn't fight again after that. If anything, we kept our distance, something we would do for many years.

It was just as well—our interests had separated almost entirely by the time I entered high school. I was serious about school and about sports, and he was serious about art and music, things that didn't really lead anywhere, as far as I was concerned. He spent all his time listening to Big Brother and the Holding Company, *Abby Road*, *Ziggy Stardust*. He started burning incense in his bedroom at night and making tie-dyed T-shirts in the day. He stopped fussing with his hair—straightening it—and let it go and it turned into a curly afro, broad and beautiful. No barber knew what to do with it, so he learned how to cut it himself. He started hanging out with other boys who knew they were gay and they kept to themselves, a few budding fag-hags around for decoration, to fool their parents into thinking they were straight. I don't know when he started smoking dope, but it never for him was much of a problem. Our oldest brother Sam, married already, with a child, was barely a part of the picture by then.

My friends were all straight, as far as I knew. Tanya got a boyfriend and had a couple of pregnancy scares, but a quick trip to a Virginia clinic took care of those. Kaye took up with a black boy, her own house in disarray, her father, a bigamist, gone, her mother in

need of an institution. Kaye watched over her little brother and sister, shipped them around to relatives, tended to her mother. At sixteen, I didn't know what to say. Pregnant by her boyfriend, she had to leave town for almost a year, and when she came back, I fell in love with her and took her out on winter nights to see the stars, the sky, so dark and so clear. Alby got engaged and went off to college, studying to be an engineer so he could marry and support a family when he returned home.

By the end of his senior year, Dirk had almost disappeared from my view. Stayed in his room, mostly, a friend by, maybe, my mother asking my father what Dirk was doing up there, and then my parents packed him off for a year to an art academy in Nashville, a small college in trouble, financially speaking, though hillbillies that we were, we barely understood. For some reason the students there were mostly Northerners, and they were merciless with the Southern boys and girls, who withered before their swift words and clipped accents. My brother was fragile, always. All of us boys were, never knowing when a smack to the mouth might bring an end to our sentence, the phrase "shut up" uttered just as often as our names, one blurry string of comeuppance. Dirk flunked out and came back home, jobless. When our father got sick my senior year, Dirk did the dirty work of emptying his bed pan and washing his nightclothes and sheets. I would walk right past that room, on my way to school, my brother murmuring to our father, he delirious with fever and pain, morphine dreams. Then the dark walk to the bus stop, my mind on shutdown and my friends like ghosts in the gray morning light.

What can possibly be said that hasn't already been said about brothers? Robert Coover writes of Noah's brother who helps to build the ark but is denied admittance to the boat once the rain storms begin. John Cheever writes of an old New England family very much interested in maintaining its image of itself as people of good breeding and culture, but with a heretic brother who sees no worth in keeping up the facade. Near the story's end, the older brother clubs the younger with a heavy root that has washed up on the shore, bringing blood to his scalp so thick it blackens his hair. And then in Genesis there is Joseph, first beaten and then sold for profit into slavery. In Coover, the brother drowns. In Cheever, the heretic leaves his family behind—forever, it seems. In the Bible, the brothers are eventually reconciled, but only because of good luck and the enormous grace that guides Joseph's will.

Dirk was the most decent of us boys. The one who spent time with the women in our family. Who helped them keep their homes when they got old. Who laughed with them and sang. I hated this about him—his easy rapport with others. That he was everyone's secret

Kestrel

favorite was my fear. Yet, who was Cain, and who Abel? My mother said she had to keep an eye on him when we were small—Dirk would stand beside my crib and glare. “Your father’s favorite was always the baby,” she said, and so I had displaced Dirk just as he had displaced Sam. She kept the scissors hidden, she said. She wouldn’t leave him unattended in my room.

A small incident: Dirk taking me into the bathroom and sticking a lit firecracker inside an empty jar and then running from the room and holding shut the door, me inside, screaming. The look on his face: sober, meditative. All of eight years of age.

When Dirk died, he was riding in the back of an ambulance on the beltway of a major U.S. city. He was ravaged by A.I.D.S. Somehow by then he was at peace with his upbringing; he remembered our childhood as something of a golden age—he’d told me so on the phone about a week before his death. The ambulance attendant listened to his stories as they crawled through beltway traffic, and then finally my brother said, “I guess this is it.” His eyes rolled back, and that was his end. He was in his thirties. I have outlived him now by many years, and just recently I passed the age my father was when he died. Such a complicated story, points in time flying past. And yet, it is our earliest days I recall with such clarity—our angry beginnings.

We were violent people, sometimes. My oldest brother liked to kick and punch holes in the wall of his first apartment, his young wife and small child cowering in a corner. It was displacement, of course—better the walls than a face or throat. I had a nasty habit when I played Little League Baseball of beaming more batters than average, a smirk on my face when a boy’s parents said something to me after a game, or between innings. My mother beat a rat to death with my Louisville Slugger one day, sliced a snake in half with her butcher knife on another—but both creatures had invaded our home, so she was allowed. My father smacked us and punched us, had us bend over so he could kick us in the seat of the pants. But that wasn’t the worst of it.

No, the worst was years earlier. The back yard, our father teaching us how to throw. Me at five, Dirk at eight, and he could not hold the Whiffle Ball correctly. He threw like a girl, and my father let him know this. “Laugh, son,” he’d say to me. “Laugh at your brother Dirk.” And I would, I would laugh, laugh the way I had been instructed. My brother would cry, of course, which only made my father more persistent. And then later in the evening, my oldest brother Sam would arrive in the yard with a group of boys from the neighborhood and get us, me and Dirk, to play football. He and the older boys would toss us the ball and get down on their knees and dare us to score a goal. They formed a line. All we had to do was touch the

fence a few feet behind them. And at five I could sidestep and glide, but Dirk, he got tripped up every time, he tumbled down. My father on the back porch would laugh. The older boys would laugh. Everybody but Dirk would laugh, reveling in the joke of Dirk's ineptitude, his lack of skill. His inability to play the game. He would pull himself up and look at us. Eight years old, a yard full of boys who would worship sports, our father on the porch, egging us on. Dirk was a decade away from figuring us out, from moving beyond the ridicule and fighting, from having to defend that which had never needed defending. He didn't yet have the words. And so he would turn his back on us—all of us—and walk away, the laughter dying down as we watched him leave, a curly-headed boy who'd had enough, for one day at least, of the game.

He and I reconciled somewhere in my college years. But those early years—those early early years, they were rough. Family pictures from the time show us smiling and happy, grainy, black and white. Once he finished college, Dirk worked for many years as an interior designer for a large department store. Sometimes he would appear in their advertisements, sitting on a couch with the evening newspaper, the model who played his adoring wife resting her chin on his shoulder. He clipped one out, scrawled a note on it, and dropped it in the mail to me one time when I was living in Chicago. "Look at me!" it said. "I have a wife now in a happy, happy home! No kids yet, but we're trying." He had closed it with love, signed his name, and written beside it the words, "your brother."

