

BROTHERS'
HAND

MICHAEL J. SAHNO

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“A brother may not be a friend, but a friend will always be a brother.”

— BENJAMIN FRANKLIN

PART
ONE

CHAPTER ONE

JOHNNY CARUSO THREW outrageous parties.

In the heart of Carverville, New York, six miles southwest of Elmira, stood a towering statue of Nathaniel Hawthorne. Regal and somber, his stony face looked down on an expanse of Bruford Park dotted with the blazing maples and sycamores of early October. Beyond, where the playground used to be, four blocks from the corner of Chestnut and Applewood, Macy's Market squatted like some meager testimonial to a bygone era. And by the market, at the end of Carriage Road, Johnny Caruso's house was alight with music and voices.

Inside, at the far end of the living room, among a clutter of empty glasses, beer bottles, and half-eaten bowls of chips, Jerome Brothers stood listening to the blue-eyed brunette in the leather jacket. Scarcely able to hear her above the metal roar of the stereo, he was painfully aware of the nearness of her body—although his twenty-eight years to her sixteen made her seem miles, lifetimes, away. But he continued to listen, smiling a little over his glasses as she prattled on about other parties, fights at the high school, and the Christmas shopping she'd already begun. She shifted without transition from topic to topic, as if she'd learned English from TV ads. To Jerome, her voice registered somewhere between a goat's bleating and a donkey's braying.

"Like, what a total dork!" she said. "Can you believe that?"

He shrugged. He had no idea who she meant. "What's that?"

"*Ronnie!* Jerry, man, aren't you even listening to me?"

"Mmhmmm," he said. "Go ahead."

“So *anyway...*” On and on she went.

He drifted off again, making an effort to look attentive. These parties are sometimes a blessing and sometimes a curse. Guess I know which one this is...

He sipped his orange juice, wondering as he glanced around the room if there were anyone else there not drinking, or, for that matter, anyone else over the age of twenty-one. It seemed unlikely. Johnny Caruso's crowd was mostly high school kids—with a few freshmen and sophomores from Elmira College—but they were the most interesting and lively bunch Jerome knew. He thought of telling the girl how he'd lost touch with the old crowd when he'd gone to school in Pennsylvania to study political science. How he'd found most of his peers, there and afterward, intolerably boring. How before the age of thirty they were marrying and settling down, spending their earnings on condos and convertibles. He'd been to two parties with old friends, and both evenings had consisted of a tedious babble of Individual Retirement Accounts, tax shelters and CDs—*not* compact discs. They'd become self-absorbed, superficial: so practical, so financially solvent. So old.

This group, for all their wretched music and adolescent chatter, was alive. Even their cynicism was somehow innocent. At least they didn't talk about their kids, or their insurance policies.

The leather-jacket brunette prattled on, oblivious to the fact that she never quite commanded his attention. Gradually he became aware that, although her red miniskirt and dark hair stood in stark relief against the Carusos' off-white wall, a kind of blue halo glowed around her that had not been there before, as if she had some kind of magical aura, or had become radioactive. He blinked hard several times, and each blink revealed the blue silhouette of her body and of the corners of the room on the insides of his eyelids, blue neon lights in a coal-black sky.

A rush of adrenaline made him sit down, suddenly breathless.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m not sure.”

“You’re not gonna puke, are you?”

“No,” he said, “I’m not drunk—something in my drink....”

His stomach spasmed violently.

And then Johnny Caruso stood over him, curly blond hair in his eyes, grinning like some bizarre toothpaste ad. “Hey, dude!” he said, menacingly cheerful. “Just kickin’ in, huh?”

Jerome blinked. The room blinked back, wavy. “What the hell did you put in my drink?”

“*Blue Dragon*, man.” He gestured like a used-car salesman, proud of the merchandise. “Don’t worry, man. It’s good shit. *Real* clean. You’re in for a good long ride. Wow, I’m surprised you got off so soon. It’s only been like an hour since I dropped it in there.”

Jerome was reeling. Blue and translucent green planets pulsed at the corners of his eyes, floating out of sight when he tried to focus.

Johnny laughed. “Check him out, man! He’s buggin’!”

The leather-jacket brunette gave Johnny a shove. “You’re an asshole. You don’t just *put* that stuff in somebody’s drink without telling him. Jesus!”

“Aw, come on, lighten up. He’ll have a blast.” He laughed, a little too loudly. “Right, Jer?”

“I can’t believe you dosed me.” He began to perspire. “Little bastard.”

Johnny laughed again. “Fuckin’ lightweight! That’ll teach you to drink orange juice at my party.” He grinned with fiendish pride.

“Jonathan,” Johnny’s mother’s voice floated up from the basement, “what’s going on up there?” She stayed downstairs every time he had a party, oblivious—or pretending to be—to the chaos above.

“Nothin’, Louise. Just havin’ a few laughs,” he called back. Then, “Chill out, guys, I think she’s comin’ up soon.”

The guys swallowed their smoke quickly, blowing it out onto the porch, lighting cigarettes in rapid succession to cover the sickly-sweet smell.

Jerome stood and headed for the porch. "I need some air," he said thickly. He sounded to himself like a record being played at a slow speed.

"Are you okay?" the brunette repeated, as if she had just arrived on the scene. Jerome did not answer.

"Hey, man, just enjoy the ride!" Johnny Caruso called.

Jerome headed out the door, polishing his glasses with the front of his denim shirt. The leather-jacket brunette's heels clicked behind him. He breathed the crisp autumn air, and the autumn seemed to breathe back, enveloping him in memories of his childhood: the first pew in church, his parents beside him prim and unmoving as mannequins. The choir sang a hymn, something vast and resonant. It rang from the marble, filling him with music and stained-glass visions. He sang with them in his mind, feeling as tall and proud as the priest. His scalp tingled with emotion. His heart lifted out of him, a sunlight serenade.

The leather-jacket brunette stood beside him now, quiet, as if somehow sharing in this moment she could not possibly touch. Nearly dusk, light gleamed on the railroad ties down the hill below the house. A light breeze blew, picking up the dry leaves and tossing them, swirling, across sidewalks and lawns. Above them, a sliver of moon hung in the sky like a fingernail clipping.

Just then Mrs. Caruso came out to feed the cat. "Herrrrre, Maxine. Kittykittykitty. Oh!" She stopped. "Jerome and—Sandra, is it?"

The leather-jacket brunette made a slight curtsy, absurdly polite. "Yes, ma'am. How are you?" Her voice trembled.

Mrs. Caruso seemed to sigh a bit. "I'm all right. And how are you, Mr. Brothers? You look a bit woozy."

“I’m okay,” he lied. “I just needed some air is all.” He almost laughed. It sounded like he’d said “aerosol.”

“Maxine!” crowed Mrs. Caruso. “Where is that damn cat? Excuse me,” she said in apology for the curse. From above came a faint meow, and the three of them looked up. Jerome nearly burst into laughter at the sight of the big grey tabby in the maple tree beside them, way out of reach near the end of a small limb and almost invisible except for her face, bug-eyed and insistent. The tree perched on a grassy ledge at the back of the yard that led down to railroad tracks.

Mrs. Caruso folded her arms. “Well, I’ll be darned. She’s gotten herself stuck up there again.” She turned abruptly toward the house. “John-NY!” she called.

Jerome and the leather-jacket brunette exchanged looks.

“Oh, I’m *sure* he can’t hear me over that noise he calls music.” She chuckled, as if embarrassed that she might have insulted them, too, in condemning her son’s taste.

Jerome snapped from his reverie with a sudden and profound urge to climb the tree. “That’s okay, Mrs. Caruso. I’ll do it.”

He felt completely lucid again, omniscient, although the yard around him expanded and shrank, breathing with an almost palpable life of its own. The task seemed important, predestined, as if he were the hero in some fifties movie—the stranger who pulls the young girl from the burning house, the substitute teacher who single-handedly rescues the class from kidnappers. Filled with excitement and determination, he imagined himself in the newspaper, holding the cat and smiling coolly while jealous firemen looked on in dismay. Preposterous, of course. He tried to shake the thought off, the way a wet dog shakes off rain.

“Oh, that isn’t necessary,” Mrs. Caruso said. “Besides —”

“No trouble at all,” he said. He had not been up in a tree in so many years that the novelty, the hint of peril, offered sufficient incentive. “I’ll climb the tree and get the cat,” he told himself

simply. "Climb tree, get cat. Tree, cat." It was absurdly obvious, as plain as the moon above. There was no stopping him.

"Oh my God," breathed the leather-jacket brunette.

"What's wrong, dear? Do you think he's too heavy for the branches?"

She hesitated. "Not exactly, no," she said. "It's just that he's a bit *old* for this sort of thing, you know?"

Mrs. Caruso nodded. "Well, that's all right, dear. I'm sure he'll be just fine." With that, she threw her scarf over her shoulder and went inside. The leather-jacket brunette followed.

The neighborhood spread before Jerome like a panoramic camera-shot from some old movie. For a moment his mind went blank. A caterpillar perched near him on a branch, inches from his face, huge, black and orange. He touched it, aware only of a slightly bristly feel as it tensed and fell, curling in midair, to the grass below. Cat, he thought, cat and caterpillar. The connection seemed obvious, profound, but its significance immediately flew away, lost in the cosmos with the Tao of strange sensations and active-contemplative perception, a universe of Isness and Suchness and Inner Light.

And suddenly he slipped, his left foot scraping away the piece of bark on the branch. Conscious only of the wheeling, tilting world of colors around him, mingling with the low sad note of the oncoming train, he fell earthward. He rolled down the short ledge, right beside the railroad ties, one arm slung across the metal track.

In a flash, the train bored down upon him like an unstoppable monster, and though he pulled his arm back at the last moment, the monster had him. He felt only a brief tug and undeniable pressure and then he was rolling away across the grass screaming. No pain came at first but the sense of loss struck immediately, its fury magnified a thousand times by the drug pulsing through him.

He woke from the dreamy cloud of acid but it came back, kaleidoscopic, wheeling on him. Ghoulish hallucinations, devil-faces,

and myriads of barbed arrows bombarded from all directions. The sky heaved and churned, made him vomit bitterly with all of his strength. Blood poured from the end of his arm, spouting over him as he lay back, gasping. He closed his eyes tightly, green and purple and vermilion pinwheels spinning wildly behind his eyelids, and the sound of the train died away. He sobbed, his pulse booming like a cannon in some faraway valley.

WANT MORE?

Welcome

I'm truly grateful to you for taking the time to read this novel. It is among the great accomplishments of my life.

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- Mike