

## Brothers

Joey gazes out of the side window, looking for the turn off for the national park. He wants to be first to announce it. Sunlight bursts intermittently through the gaps in the wall of redwoods that line the mountain road, like a strobe light flashing in his eyes. On his left sits his brother Sam, four years older, and next to Sam is Joanne, Sam's sophomore friend with whom, he announced last week, he is "going steady." Sam and Joanne's hands touch lightly. Occasionally Mrs. Turner glances in the rear-view mirror to make sure the limits of physical decorum aren't being breached on the back seat.

Sam smiles at Joanne and says quietly, "Watch this."

He looks at Joey. It's an ambiguous stare, not overtly hostile, but possessing a hint of menace – the sort of look a child might give an ant before squashing it under his forefinger.

Eventually Joey notices his brother's attention. Sam's eyes stay fixed on Joey's, unblinking. It frightens Joey when Sam looks at him like this. He doesn't know what he's thinking, but suspects it's bad.

"Mom! Sam's looking at me again!"

"Oh Sam, stop it." Their mother is tired of Sam's tormenting his brother. "Tell him, Rich."

"Stop it, Sam," his father says distractedly, as he scans the left side of the road for the turning.

"What? What did I do? Jeez, I was only looking at him."

He leans over to Joey and whispers very quietly, very menacingly, "Little creep."

Joey turns away again and stares out of the window. His eyes sting with the effort to stop the tears welling in his eyes. Eleven-year-olds don't cry in front of their older brothers, no matter how cruel the taunting. He wishes he knew why Sam acts so mean now. Only six months ago, during Easter break, Sam would still play with him, pitching him balls in the yard, playing Frisbee with Joey and their dog, Patch. Now Sam acts as though he hates Joey. He tells him how dumb he is, and what a wimp. They used to have pretend fights, tumbling on the living room floor and dissolving with laughter. Now if Sam ever hits Joey, it's to hurt him. And now there's that staring thing.

Joey doesn't stay upset for long. His natural disposition is cheerful, and soon his mind turns to the picnic ahead. He's excited about the hike too. There was a mountain lion sighted not too far from here, and he'll be keeping a sharp look-out for signs of big cats when they walk the trail. His cherubic face is topped with sun-bleached blond hair. It shines with delight when he finally sees what he's been looking for.

"There!"

Joey points at the brown-painted national park sign. "Sierra Point Park. Trails and Picnic Area," it reads. Mr. Turner slows the car and takes the left into the park entrance. The track is dry and clouds of dust billow around the car.

"Not many cars," says Sam, scanning the parched lot.

It's two weeks after Labor Day and already a lot of the summer traffic has subsided. In another two weeks the park will only open weekends.

A young family is sitting at one of the standard issue wooden picnic benches. The couple has a four-year old son and a baby daughter in a stroller. Mrs. Turner goes over to talk to them and admire the baby while Mr. Turner and the youngsters unload the hamper from the trunk.

The picnic consists of chicken drumsticks, cheeses, salad and a fruit salad for dessert. There is soda for the kids and a small bottle of wine for the parents. Mrs. Turner has put the black olives in a separate container because Joey doesn't like them. Sam takes an olive and flicks it onto Joey's plate.

"Mom!"

"What is it now?"

"Look!" Joey holds the shiny black olive delicately between forefinger and thumb, as though it might explode.

"Sam..."

"What? He's got to learn. God, you're such a kid, Joey." He kicks Joey under the picnic table. Not hard, it's the gesture that hurts Joey.

Joey looks down and pushes a soggy lettuce leaf around the plastic plate. Maybe this is all a game that he hasn't quite worked out the rules to yet. Perhaps soon it will all become clear, and they'll laugh about it, laugh together the way they used to.

Food demolished and picnic items stowed, the family heads for the Visitors' Center and Restrooms. The adults read the informative panels describing the trails and pick up some pamphlets. The children sit on the wooden steps outside, Sam and Joanne together, Joey slightly apart, wanting to join in their whispered conversation but knowing he'll be shooed away if he tries.

The trail heads at right angles to the road and into the redwood forest. Dark, densely covered paths are punctuated by clearings where the bright sun streams through the gaps between the tall sequoias. Succulent pine scent fills the air, its naturalness causing one to wonder what on earth toilet freshener manufacturers are thinking of when they describe their odors as "Pine Fresh."

The family unit divides. Joanne and Sam walk briskly, trying to put some distance between them and the others. They hold hands. Mr. and Mrs. Turner exchange looks and grins. Sam walks slightly ahead of the adults but hangs back from the teenagers. He wants to be there with Joey, but knows his presence will be unwelcome. He looks down at his sneakers and kicks small stones as he walks.

Joey feels his father's hand on his shoulder.

"How's it going, fella?"

"OK, I guess."

"Tall trees, huh?"

"Yeah."

"I guess you'd rather walk with Sam than be stuck back here with us old folks?"

"Well... yeah. I just wish he'd stop being mean to me."

Mr. Turner sighs. "He doesn't mean anything by it. He just wants to do different things than you at the moment."

"Yeah, like make out with Joanne."

Mr. Turner is slightly taken aback, but at the same time impressed by his son's insight. "Look, why don't you run ahead and tell Sam I said it's OK for you to walk with them. It'll be all right."

"Really?"

"Sure. And if he's mean to you, tell him he's grounded for a week."

Sam and Joanne have made a few hundred yards on the others and Joey has to run to catch up with them. He reaches a clearing and stops to look around. A fallen redwood lies parallel to the path. Its trunk is four feet in diameter and half covered by shiny green moss. Joey hears a giggle from the other side of the trunk. He approaches it stealthily and goes onto tip-toes to peer over. The rough bark provides purchase for him to push himself up slightly higher, and just as he gets a glimpse of Sam and Joanne entwined on the leafy forest floor, the rotten wood disintegrates with a sharp crack and he falls to the floor. He laughs.

Sam's voice rises angrily from the other side of the tree. "Jesus Christ, Joey! Just leave us alone will you. Get lost!"

Joey's fun drains away like Coke from a spilled can. On cue, the sun goes behind a cloud and adds a literal note to the metaphorical darkness of his world. Joey squints up at the sky, but doesn't see the sun, or even a cloud.

The bear is seven feet tall and poised on its hind legs, paws raised aloft. Joey sees the claws and sees the needle sharp points they end in. Bared yellow fangs glisten with the saliva that dribbles from the snarling mouth. He whimpers and rolls away just as the massive beast crashes its powerful front limbs on to the ground where he lay. The next few seconds are stretched in Joey's young mind. The events seem long and thin, slicing the memories into his mind. He scrabbles to his feet and runs away from the fallen tree, away from the roaring monster behind him. Joey's small steps are no match for the bear's great stride. It turns leisurely to face Joey, take a couple of bounds towards him, and prods him gently in the back with an outstretched forelimb. The great claws tear through Joey's tee-shirt and rip through the thin skin on his back. He stumbles and lands face down on the stony soil. Pebbles scratch his face and choking dust fills his mouth.

Joey turns his head and sees the bear rise again. But the animal is distracted by another sound, a fainter, more human-sounding roar. Sam runs towards the bear screeching at the top of his voice, his arms flailing wildly. He seems to have gone mad.

"Leave my brother alone, you Goddam' brute!" he screams. Ten feet away from the bear he hurls a rock he is carrying at the beast. It strikes it in the chest and rebounds impotently to the ground. The bear hollers and Sam screams, still running toward it. He stops three feet away from it, his arms still rotating like crazy helicopter blades.

With what looks like a shrug, the great brown beast turns and lopes off into the trees, turning once to give a petulant roar before disappearing into the thick foliage.

Sam runs to Joey and cradles the young boy in his arms. Sam is breathing fast and perspiring heavily. His speech comes in staccato bursts.

"It's OK. He won't hurt you now. I'm with you. I'm sorry Joey. I'm really sorry."

Joey doesn't have to stifle the tears this time. They flow in twin rivers through the dust covering his cheeks. He latches his arms around his brother's neck and for a few moments he forgets the pounding in his chest and the stinging in his back. There is nothing else in the world but the sharing of tears and the affirmation of the brothers' love.