brothers

26 STORIES OF LOVE AND RIVALRY

Edited by
Andrew Blauner

Foreword by Frank McCourt

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For my keepers and my brothers

foreword

Frank McCourt

There are pictures to prove that the four McCourt brothers assembled on the 5th of September, 1996, at Ireland House, Fifth Avenue, for the launch of *Angela's Ashes,* a memoir of our collective miserable childhood in Ireland. There we are, gray and/or white, sliding into the high-maintenance stage of life. There we are, Frank, Malachy, Mike, Alphie in descending order of age and ascending order of common sense. We're with our nearest and dearest, we're in suits and ties, we radiate the well-scrubbed look butter wouldn't melt. After I had read an excerpt from the book each of the brothers says something and we sing "Barefoot Days," a kind of family anthem.

You'd never guess from these pictures that we hadn't all been together at once in the same room since Christmas, 1966. You'd never guess how careful we were to avoid a repeat of that night of hard words that hurt and flying fists that never found their target. A student of racial stereotypes might have said, "Ah, the Irish. They're at it again with the drinking and brawling. Excuse me, is this a private fight or can anyone get into it?"

Only Malachy escaped that fateful evening. He had dropped in earlier with his wife, Diane, and her parents, John and Berenice. They said how nice everything was: the tree topped with a sweet little white angel; the cat wandering around with his little red Christmas bow on his neck; the aroma of a standing three-rib roast beef wafting from the kitchen; my wife, Alberta, dispensing drinks and appetizers; my mother arriving with a Swiss friend, Violet. "Very nice,"

said John and Berenice to Malachy. “Such a pleasure to see people enjoying Christmas and each other.” They were sorry that they had to go to another Christmas dinner. Wished they could have stayed with us, so comfortable, warm, relaxed. Maybe next year.

They left as the Clancy brothers were arriving, the brothers at the height of their fame—Paddy, Tom, Liam. My brother Mike came in with his wife, Donna, and Alphie trailed behind them, alone. It was, Hi, lovely tree, brought you something, have a drink. It was, Hi, God that smells good, I’m starved, yeah, I’d sure love a drink.

I look back on that night and realize that most of our guests had already imbibed on empty stomachs and that might explain the little brotherly brush fires. Certain guests were already snapping at each other (Hunger? Thirst? Christmas?) and my brothers and I began taking sides. Alphie erupted, “I hate all this family fighting, the four of us always fighting. There’s always one fighting the other three or two fighting the other two and I’m sick of it, sick of it.” It was admirable the way he sorted out the mathematics of the thing and to prove it he brought his fist down on a shelf of precious cargo—Scotch, Irish, vodka, gin—which went crashing to the floor and when I said, “For Christ’s sake, Alphie,” brother Mike sprang to his defense, told me to get off Alphie’s back. I invited him outside, where we were about to go at it when a car filled with jeering Christmas revelers so enraged us we chased it down the street till it went through a red light and we lost it and forgot what we were fighting about and returned to the apartment singing “Silent Night.”

My wife, Alberta, barked at me that I had no business leaving the party like that when she was having so much trouble with one of the guests rolling around the floor there in some kind of fit. Brother Mike joked that the guest was

probably hungry and I took him seriously and knelt on the floor offering her a roast beef sandwich. Tom Clancy said, “What the hell are you doing giving a roast beef sandwich to someone in the throes of an epileptic fit?” and his brother, Paddy, said, “When did you become an expert on epileptic fits?” and that led to another sibling battle, Clancy style, with Liam strumming away on his guitar and singing “The Leaving of Liverpool.”

There was a yelp from the living room and Mike said, “You gotta see this.” What I had to see was my mother’s friend, Violet, on her back under a fallen Christmas tree, cursing the cat who was in a corner pawing and chewing on the little white angel, which he had captured by somehow knocking over the tree. Mike lifted the tree and I helped Violet back to the couch beside my mother, where Violet said, “Ve don’t do this kind of thing in Switzerland. Ve sit under the tree and sing Christmas carols,” and my mother said, “We sing Christmas carols, too, and then beat the shit out of each other.”

People were already leaving the party, expressing their dismay over our uncouth behavior, all of us, the whole McCourt family, and that other gang, the Clancys. People were saying, Well, I never, and promising never to return and that was okay with me because the apartment looked like a war zone. How was I to know that when Michael left, shaking his head, we four brothers would drift so far apart geographically and every other way that we wouldn’t be in the same room again for another thirty years?

Writing about my brothers is a dangerous occupation, dancing through a minefield. They talk about me: I know they do. Alphie was right. Two of us will talk about the other two and three will talk about one. When we learn that Mike drove his car into a wall in San Francisco we say, “What the hell is he thinking of, driving his car into a wall?” Or if we

hear Alphie didn’t drive his car into a wall anywhere we might say, “What the hell is he thinking of, not driving his car into a wall?”

It doesn’t matter what you do or don’t do: there will be talk.

In the matter of drink I have to be careful. I could avoid the topic altogether but it’s there, like Catholicism and dandruff, and all I want to do is rise up and tell the world I have three brothers who don’t touch a drop. I’m saying this and living dangerously, because one or more of said brothers will bark in high dudgeon, “What the hell. We’ve done other things in life besides not drink,” and I whimper because when they don the mantle of dudgeon they can be fearsome.

I touch a drop myself, a little wine with dinner, as they say, not because I love the stuff but because it gives work, keeps people employed, enables decent men and women to buy shoes and birthday gifts for their loved ones. My brothers take a dim view of my philanthropic nature, of course, and ask why I can’t bestow money directly, and I can only reply that their sobriety has rendered them clear-headed beyond my understanding.

Malachy and Alphie have lived for decades on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, Mensa plateau, and the neighborhood does things to you. (Disclaimer: I’ve moved to the Upper West Side myself and await the moment of enlightenment.) My brothers Malachy and Alphie might have a greater appetite for tofu than Mike and I. They’ve been advocating yoga for years and are drawn spiritually more to the foot of the Himalayas than to the altars of Rome. I’m more of a Rome man myself. I don’t know where Mike stands; though I have a feeling he doesn’t give a fiddler’s fart.

My brother Alphie may be the only Irishman ever to have opened a Mexican restaurant in Manhattan, Los Panchos. That was a time when the Upper West Side was still pioneer territory and panting for the refried beans and enchiladas. Oh, Alphie had a grand time with his Mexican restaurant and he, his own boss, could saunter up the block to see Lynn, his wife, and their baby girl, Alison. When a magazine gave the restaurant a review that was between enthusiastic and rave Alphie didn't know what hit him. Yuppies stormed the place and brought their mothers. Under the awning in the back lovers quaffed their Coronas and plighted their troth. Alphie was riding high and why not? He could have been a solicitor in Dublin but he escaped. All he had to do was pass a few exams and appear before the board which would determine if he was respectable enough and intelligent enough to enter the exalted world of Irish law. But what Alphie quickly realized was, yes, it isn't what you know it's who you know and there's a streak of integrity in my brother that erupts in a kiss-my-arse attitude.

If my brother Michael doesn't hold the record for having served more drinks than anyone in the world then he must be close to it. He polished his craft at various New York bars till he was invited to work at Chez Jay in Los Angeles, a hangout for stars and those who like to gaze. Next stop, San Francisco, Perry's on Union Street, a New York-style bar, trendy, with-it, swinging, none of which could describe Mike, who, if he had a mind to, could turn wine into vinegar with one withering look. Many a customer squirmed under the withering look, people who would ask for those exotic drinks that consume a bartender's time and patience. Mike would tell them the candy store was around the corner. If Herb Caen needed something for his column all he had to do was visit Mike and there was enough material for four columns. After a few years there isn't much you can tell a bartender. He hears all the jokes, all the opinions on politics, religion,

sex, the stock market. And he grows weary. Mike was asked where he'd like to be on the last day of the century. "Home," he said. He'd like to have a nice dinner with wife and family, and what more can a man ask?

When my mother had me she must have been dissatisfied, because a year, a month, and a day later she had Malachy. He was gorgeous—and there were pictures to prove it: reddish blond hair, blue eyes, pink cheeks, pearls for teeth, a personality that would charm Joseph Stalin. When he came to America in 1952 he was like the rest of us: he didn't know what to do with himself. But there were smart people around who spotted the power of that personality and when you combine it with the Irish charm (sorry, Malachy, this is for public consumption) what else can you do but open a bar with Malachy's name on the canopy and Malachy at the door or behind the bar greeting, charming, singing? What else? Producers prowl the bars of New York and spot Malachy and in a minute he's on national TV with Jack Paar, Dick Cavett, Merv Griffin, Mike Douglas, Johnny Carson. They're mad for him the way he brightens the screen and every room he enters. Man, the party doesn't start till Malachy roars in, singing. A dinner table is a dull place without his *bon mots,* his songs. He's made a dozen movies, acted in plays, read short stories at Symphony Space in New York, written a book, *A Monk Swimming,* available at all fine bookstores. He's been a father five times and there's no end to the grandchildren popping into the world.

There's no end to anything in this family, especially when we're all talking about each other, two about two, three about one.

Or one about three, which is what I've done here.

Since that long-ago Christmas there have been marriages and re-marriages and children and grandchildren. Brother

Mike moved to San Francisco where he runs the Washington Square Bar and Grill. Alphie is married, has one child, has written a memoir. Malachy had five children who, in turn, have given him five grandchildren. He has also written a memoir. Frank has one daughter and three grandchildren and has written a memoir, *Angela's Ashes,* which was turned into a movie. The brothers are all in their golden years and doing very nicely, thank you.

So, that is a glimpse into the lives of one set of brothers. When you read something like this you might recall what Tolstoy said, "All happy families are happy in the same way. All unhappy families are unhappy in different ways." You may agree or disagree but, as you voyage through this book, you have to admit that every family, and every set of brothers are unique.

civil war

Benjamin Cheever and Fred Cheever

I don’t see Fred all that often, because he lives in Denver and I live outside of Gotham. But whose fault is that? Since outside of Gotham is where our generation of Cheevers was raised. Conveniently, he was planning to visit, when I got this assignment to write an essay about brothers. He would sleep under my roof, eat my wife’s cooking, and help celebrate my mother’s nintieth birthday. I could see Fred’s back swimming into the crosshairs. I figured we’d fight. He’d fly back to Denver. I’d get even.

If writers had a flag, it would be the one John Paul Jones fought under: a rattlesnake and the legend, “Don’t tread on me.”

But—and don’t you hate having your expectations dashed?—we got along famously. He brought two gorgeous and immensely talented children, and a splendid wife. My boys were both home, and so we had the mingling of the cousins. I was certain he’d notice my immoderate coffee consumption and scorn me for it. Instead, we drank a gallon together every morning and then ran five miles. His wife, Mary, ran too. Each daughter came one day. Elizabeth, the eldest, had the effrontery to beat me in the final sprint. But then I’m a wonderful guy. Or did I already tell you that? In any case, we all enjoyed ourselves. And each other.

When they left, I missed them. I didn’t have nearly enough vitriol to power the essay. So I phoned Fred and asked if he’d be willing to write half of it. “A sort of call and response,” I said. “Sure,” he said.

We tossed our essay back and forth. We danced a pavane. Then sending me that last version, he wrote, "*I sucker-punch you at the bottom of page five in this version. You are welcome to call a foul and delete it.*"

I left it. Remember this when you come to the last line. I'd be interested to know what you think. If I'm a crybaby, making too much of the slights suffered during my childhood, then Fred, my younger brother, is right to point it out. And certainly our childhood was happier than I let on. But also much sadder.

We Cheevers have a tendency to get nasty with one another. Often we're kidding. Like about the crosshairs. (I don't actually own a high-powered rifle with a scope.) But also there is real animus. Partly it's because our accomplished father, John Cheever, won the National Book Award, the Pulitzer Prize for fiction, the William Dean Howells Medal, which my mother has on display in the library of the house he owned and died in. Fame is a corrosive. Especially if it's not your fame. Although I'm sixty, many people still see me as John Cheever's child. I've given readings from my own book, and had women rush up to me afterwards to say, "I just love your father's writing." This might have been all right, if my father had adored me to the exclusion of others and admired my writing above the work of others. But he didn't and he didn't.

Fred will write in Italics, because he was born in Italy, and Italians are like that. *Per presentare la bella figura.*

For thirty years I have lived at least two full time zones away from the house in which I grew up. My brother lives a ten-minute drive away. I am a lawyer and, for a while now, a law professor. Our parents knew less about law than they did about Romanian car repair. My brother writes books, as did his parents before him.

I live in a city where everyone exercises all the time and people invest more money in spandex than in diamonds or books. My brother, Ben, lives on the very edge of the City of Mammon, where the unbridled, conspicuous consumption of everything scarce—from sea urchin bladders to platinum collar bars—is a civic duty. It's also a place where people actually buy hardcover books, even if only to set them on their coffee tables. My brother seems largely immune from the call of the material god. However, he does have shiny cars that talk to him ("go left, go right at the next . . .") and handheld electronic gadgets that would have gotten him burned at the stake in 17th-century Europe.

My brother is a coward because he chose to spend his life with people to whom his parents meant something. My brother is brave because he chose to live with people who read books, some by his parents. I was brave because I went places where my father's name could do me no good. I am a coward because I seek out places where my father's books aren't often read.

We have a word "fratricide" (although not a distinct criminal offense). You don't do extra jail time just because the person you kill was your brother. It's not classified as a hate crime. According to Justice Department statistics, it is rare. You are much more likely to be killed by your parents or your children. You are many times more likely to kill your spouse. In some dark moments, there is something liberating in the idea of killing your siblings. It's like cutting the fishing line snagged on an underwater rock. Brothers don't kill each other more often because brothers leave.

Not all salmon return to their native stream to spawn. It's obvious once you think about it. If it were otherwise, all the salmon on the planet would be spawning in the first river in which salmon evolved. Salmon leave. What's interesting is that we don't want to believe salmon leave. We want eternal

cycles. We want the salmon always to return to Redfish Lake. We want the swallows always to return to Capistrano. We want the cobbler's children to be cobblers in the same shop. We want Chelsea Clinton to be president.

My brother Fred has a talent for statistics: fratricide may be rare, but it has a long and distinguished history. Cain and Abel are the first brothers. Cain murders Abel. Which seems to have been forgotten. In Civil War epics they save it for the knock-out blow, after the nation torn asunder, after the 600,000 dead. "Brother fought against brother," they announce as if this were the rough equivalent of Oedipus and his foxy mom. As if it were something unnatural like—I don't know—a dog with a plastic bag cleaning up after his owner. Whereas I always wonder why you'd want to murder a man who wasn't your brother.

When people in my family talk about brothers and sisters, they usually talk about parents. There are reasons that this is so. It also appears to be so in every other family I know. Adult children are like islands in a coral atoll, anchored to the sea bed in their unchanging relationship to each other as consequence of another relationship with a once brooding volcanic island now sunk beneath the waves, or moved to Florida. I am sure there are families in which relationships forged among siblings evolve to the point that parents no longer matter. I have just never met any of those people.

For most people, it seems, a lifetime isn't long enough to stop talking about your parents. And, of course, when we talk about our parents, we talk about love.

And when we talk about love, we talk about need. My brother, Fred, wasn't born until I was eight, and so my earliest wishes were for the painful death of my older sister. And boy did I ever wish on a star for that happy eventuality.

But when Fred did arrive, the little nipper came along nicely in my disregard.

We lived in Rome and I was in love with my mother. I didn't speak Italian and so I wasn't allowed outside alone on the streets. So I moped around inside the palazzo we'd rented, while my own mother took this naked stranger into bed with her. She breast-fed him. I saw it happening. Not the sort of image to excite brotherly love.

But maybe you all don't feel that way about your brothers. Maybe I need to put my life into context. Sometimes, of course, I remember my childhood as a splendid magical time. "Trailing clouds of glory," I came "from heaven that was my home." And sometimes childhood was splendid. Often not.

I didn't speak Italian either. At the time I lived in Italy, I didn't speak at all. I still don't speak Italian, although I am stuck with Federico. When asked (repeatedly) why they named me Federico, my parents would reply that there is no "K" in Italian and hence no Frederick. Okay, the Italians may not use K much, but they are a cosmopolitan people with the Germans just across the border. A perfunctory glance at any Italian keyboard (there are a number of versions) will reveal the presence of "K": so much for parental accuracy. My parents also told me they lost my birth certificate. I am still wondering about that.

I had two different childhoods. Three actually. The two I lived and the one I remember. The one I remember teeters back and forth between a very heaven and a very hell. In the heavenly childhood, Muzzy and Dazzy were always in love. Muzzy left a postcard under my pillow at night that had a penny scotch-taped to it and the words, "Good morning, good boy." That happened. I was five. I remember.

When awaken in the hellish childhood, my bed is wet. And while in first grade at the Todd Elementary School, I suffered from what, years later, a psychiatrist told me was called “a shy bladder.” So we’d all be marched into the bathroom in the morning and everybody else would pee and I’d pretend to pee. Then I’d spend a couple of hours hopping around. Then I’d pee in my pants and spend a damp afternoon failing to learn how to read.

No one can rival my bed-wetting stories. Perhaps there really is something to this genetics stuff. Ben and I share certain other physical traits. When you see those murals of human development (“the ascent of man”) with the monkey on the left and the “modern” guy on the right, we resemble the figure just right of center: slumped shoulders, exaggerated brows, hair in the wrong places. In some versions we get a club, which is a comfort. I can imagine potty training wasn’t a high priority for Neanderthals. Do we drink so much coffee now to show that we can?

My brother and sister have always maintained that my parents loved me best. I have assumed this was their way of saying that they didn’t get enough parental love. There were two possible culprits for this tragic state of affairs: my parents or me (the parental love hog).

The “love hog” hypothesis was easier for my siblings to deal with. If I—always inclined to overeat—had somehow sucked all the available parental love out of the family, then any deficiency in the amount of love they received could be blamed on me. The hypothesis is implausible, but since the only people who were interested (my brother and sister) had some reason in believing it, implausibility was no impediment.

I know people who may actually have been love hogs, or at least they show signs of having received an overabundance of parental love. They were convinced by

the time they were thirteen that they deserved to be president, commissioner of baseball (why does everyone want to be commissioner of baseball?), and Mick Jagger's eventual replacement. When I tell these people that their academic labors are unlikely to lead to success, they know I cannot be telling the truth. They know that my recitation of their apparent limitations must be part of a monstrous conspiracy. Their mother and father knew best and told them they were perfect. For better or worse, I am not one of these people. Generally, I only trust people who criticize me.

Talk about unconditional parental love makes me edgy. I don't know if it's the shiny tricycle I never had or whether its existence seems a delusion.

Much as I hate to agree with my dastardly brother, I've always known that he wasn't the fabled love hog. Certainly Fred was brandished in front of me as an example of every sort of achievement, and my mother's house is festooned with pictures of himself and his children. While there seem to be no pictures of my own comely children.

Distance having made my mother's heart grow fonder.

It's much easier to have passionate feelings about people who aren't around. It takes much less time and involves fewer presents. People who aren't around rarely fail to meet expectations. They rarely dash your hopes. They have dramatically fewer opportunities to lie to you. Casablanca *is really a movie about two people who discover (over just two days) that their legendary passion will not survive their being together. "We'll always have Paris, we lost it for a while (when you showed up). . . ."*

My father took the need for distance a step further. He was always falling in love with strangers. Women and—more surprisingly—men. He liked novelty in his relationships. He was a storyteller, and he was fond of people, when he'd just

started to make up the story about them, before they'd tangled the plot line with their petty concerns and multiple failings.

Blake Bailey prefaces his excellent new biography of my father, with this quote from William Maxwell, a friend and editor: ". . . it is too much to ask that people who spend very much time in a world of their own, as all writers do, should immediately and invariably grasp what is going on in this one."

The world's very sentimental these days about storytellers. Frank Capra was a great storyteller. But so was Adolph Hitler. Remember that his Reich was going to last 1,000 years? Storytellers make us care about the world. They make the world dramatic. They distort it. Since my father was a storyteller, I was rarely an ordinary child. Sometimes I was a disaster, sometimes—although rarely—I was a success. It was always interesting.

I find myself in the middle of the thing that storytellers do. My brother, Ben, is, by any standard, an accomplished and successful person. During our short visit he took me to the farmers market where he had to judiciously divide his conversational time between the mayor, prominent international historians, and beautiful women. James Bond could not have done better. He actually has New York Marathon Medals hanging off every surface in his kitchen (he runs the thing every year): talk about festooned. He even owns a Vespa. He has two wonderful children and a magnificent and understanding wife. He has an encyclopedic knowledge of modern fiction and modern film. He has many published books to his name; he writes about truth and love. I, on the other hand, write about section 1604(i) of the National Forest Management Act of 1976. The image of himself as a love-starved urchin serves some

purpose. I will have to leave it to you, our reader, to figure out what that purpose is.

When I was the favorite, my father would tell me how disappointed he was in my brother. “Disappointed” isn’t the word he used. “Worried” is the word he used. “I’m worried about your brother,” he’d confide. “He hasn’t got any friends.”

My brother had difficulty learning to ride a bicycle. And every year for my brother’s birthday my father would buy him a bicycle. These were kept on the front porch. Year after year the new bicycles stacked up. “How can somebody who has never mastered a bicycle learn how to drive a car?” my father asked me as my brother came of age.

Fred learned how to drive a car. He has many friends. And now—at fifty—he rides his bicycle to his job as law professor in Denver. No training wheels. So my father’s worries were unfounded. But I enjoyed sitting among the virgin bicycles on the porch of the family house with my father and fretting about my brother’s failings and inadequacies. Which is fine, as far as it goes.

But my father used also to sit on the front porch of his house with my brother and fret about *my* inadequacies. Fred had a poor sense of balance. But I was stupid. Actually, they didn’t call me stupid. What they called me was “a slow learner.” I was “possessed of a mediocre intelligence.” Fred was smart.

And they had a case against me. I spent two years in the second grade. I had a dreadful time learning how to read. I did finish high school, and even graduated college. I got jobs. I got promotions. I married a brilliant woman. But at my parents’ house Bengie is still slow.

“When Bengie learns something he really learns it,” they used to say. And also, “Bengie is so religious,” which I guess

was their way of explaining why it was I looked so long at everything before making up my mind. And for a slow learner, religion is just the ticket. While a scholar needs to master many books, a religious man reads only one.

And I'm still stupid at my parents' home. When—in her eighties—my mother met some new friends of mine, they told her, "We like Ben so much. He's funny and so smart," Mummy paused. "Smart?" she said. "I wouldn't say smart."

So the honors were carefully doled out. I could ride a bicycle. Fred could read. And so you can imagine how pedaling through life, I haven't always wished the very best for my brilliant brother.

Our parents (and many parents of their generation) were willing to share their perception of their children's faults with anyone who would listen, including their children. I still can't throw a baseball accurately. Catch one? Never mind. I cry in bad movies (and not because they are bad). I bicycle hundreds of miles, but I cannot throw my leg over the seat in the jaunty way my father admired and could pull off until a few months before he died. I am really not that smart. I am dyslexic and struggled a great deal before word processing software made me bionic (or Byronic (but nothing in between)).

The thirty-odd binders of my father's journals aren't full of despair about his inadequate children. Nor are they full of expressions of love for me (the few examples have been identified and catalogued by my siblings). Mostly, we children don't appear at all. Dad didn't imagine us taking over the cobbler's shop after he died. He didn't imagine there would be a cobbler's shop after he died.

So, we Cheever children competed with each other for a share of that modest part of our parents' attention that might be devoted to us. Our parents didn't require us to

compete, there just wasn't enough—as we saw it—to go around. We saw our failings as the reason they didn't make more of us, act like parents on TV, celebrate us, love us unconditionally. But that was our perception, not theirs.

Their position may have been reasonable. Depression, world war, and the impending threat of thermonuclear obliteration granted them a realistic sense of their own impermanence. The hard-drinking, chain-smoking generation-with-false-teeth were aware of their mortality. It gave them a taste for living they could never satisfy. Not for nothing did they pioneer chemical consciousness. The bourbon, gin, and Nembutal they consumed in America's suburbs in 1967 would have flattened everyone in Haight Ashbury. Children were a duty (and a joy), but there were limits. There were other needs to meet in the gathering darkness.

Parents of my generation, on the other hand, pledge ourselves to "unconditional love." We read books, go to seminars, and watch DVDs about childrearing—examine color graphics from fetal development to teen brain scans. "Parenting" has become both a verb and a competitive sport. There have been parents like this in the past, but they were rare. Douglas MacArthur's mother followed him to West Point and rented an apartment outside the gate. Yes, we say, and her son became Supreme Commander of half the world with those great sunglasses. We lavish praise, and love and exotic enriching activities. The unshakable sense of self-worth we impart to our children seems to make it impossible for them to make their beds. But then, I feel quite sure Douglas MacArthur couldn't sort laundry (the khakis, the whites, the gold braid . . .).

We seem incapable of imagining our own mortality. We eat a "rainbow of foods" (defined and deconstructed every six months) and engage in a structured exercise regime

because we are going to live forever. We explain away each new sign of decrepitude (it could have happened to a twenty-year-old!). In a hundred years, if they lose their lovers, apartments, or jobs, we will welcome our children back home. We will keep their bedrooms dusted. We will always love them.

So what is left for us as our parents fade or die or move to Florida and our children begin to reject the concern we lavish? Is there a relationship with our siblings we can salvage? Is it worth the trouble?

My father, when particularly exasperated with my inadequacy at sports or penchant for tears, would instruct: "Remember. You are a Cheever." It seemed ridiculous, even at the time. A few years ago, I was delighted when Antonio Banderas offered a variation in Spy Kids *("Remember. You are a Cortes"). His version made my father's even more absurd. No one ever suggested the Cheevers conquered Tenochtitlan or outsmarted the Texas Rangers.*

Only recently, it occurred to me that my father's instruction might have been part commiseration. Being a Cheever might be as much predicament as distinction, as much like athlete's foot as like the Nobel Prize.

Predicament or distinction, Cheever-ness is something I apparently cannot escape. My brother's existence reminds me I am still anchored to the sea bed, locked in relation to my family, alive and dead, whether I like it or not. But my brother's existence also reminds me that this is a predicament we share.

Brothers are people who share problems, not out of choice, but out of shared experience. When Henry V declared his sorry company at Agincourt "we band of brothers," he did so because they shared a problem, the far larger and more formidable French army. This problem (and

the blood Henry assured them they would shed) made each of them brothers “be he ne’er so vile.”

So Ben and I are brothers through blood (with beetling brows and hairy bodies), we are brothers through memory (because we can both remember almost all the words to “Little Deuce Coupe”), and we are brothers because there are problems we share.

My father, our father, had an excellent eye. Which means—of necessity—he had an eye for flaws. “What can you do with a man like that?” the narrator asks of the horrid brother in “Goodbye, My Brother,” the story with which my father led off the collection that won the Pulitzer Prize. Have I mentioned the Pulitzer Prize? “How do you dissuade his eye in a crowd from seeking out the cheek with acne, the infirm hand. . . .” and I could go on and on, “the lonely boy with the piping giggle and a tendency to burst into tears. . . .”

John Cheever wrote fiction, but he saw me with a critic’s eye. Fred may have been praised wildly in absentia, but he didn’t escape.

So we had that. We’ve both stepped off in Pickett’s charge, taking bullets for the old Dominion. We both learned the lesson of battle: we learned to crouch, we learned how to make ourselves small. In fact we both walk with a pronounced stoop. People sometimes say I’m self-deprecating, but it wasn’t selfdeprecation I was after. It was self-preservation.

When my first novel came out, I wrote a scathing review of it. I guess this was an attempt to channel my father, and perhaps disarm imaginary critics. When the book was published in England, I went there and the *Guardian* (I think it was the *Guardian*) agreed to run my nasty review of myself.

I wrote cheerfully of how after my first marriage had broken up, I'd returned home and been welcomed back.

"I thought of my return as joyous, something approaching the triumphal. In his journals I later learned that my father's feelings were not unmixed. He wrote: 'On Saturday morning our son, after a week in a spiritual retreat where he got fucked, has left his wife and returned home, for it seems only a few hours.' "

That's where I stopped the quote from the journals. Helpful editors at the *Guardian* looked *The Journals* up and lengthened the excerpt.

"When it became clear that I was staying for more than a few hours, he wrote, 'My son is here. I think that we do not know one another; I think it is our destiny that we never will. I observe in a comical way, that he does not flush the toilet. He observes that I snore. Another son returns tomorrow. I feel that I know him better, but wait and see.' And then, a little ruefully, 'Some part of loving one's children is to part with them.' "

And so, if in the course of my life as a writer, any writer ever wants to take a poke at me, they can call in Big John Cheever to lend a hand.

And it's done. But mostly strangers feel that I grew up in a magic kingdom. It was a magic kingdom all right. Watching from the stands—as readers do—we appeared to be in an enviable position. We looked like actors, but we were often props. He'd shake the carpet and we'd all fall to earth. Which was a long way down. And then—if you look in the journals you'll see this—we'd be forgotten. We were busy finding his car keys, trying to catch a ball, starting our own lives, while he whisked above the rooftops.

"Children" he'd say, "you want children in this scene?" and he'd swoop down and snatch one of us up.

There was the trauma of being his prop, the frequent falls, getting the dirt out of your nose. But we did pick up a sense of humor. And while the world outside his stories is a good deal less vivid, it has its compensations. There’s work to do. You can make up your own stories. And—to quote from Mel Brooks—“There are ladies here.” And there are friends, good friends and there are brothers.

Aw, it wasn’t really so bad. But then brothers don’t have to agree on everything.