

I Am His Brother

Sometimes I hold my breath, wondering with clenched fists and this mark of Cain, when I will kill my brother.

I spent so much of my childhood trying to understand our different fates and waiting for the predestined urge to betray him to finally take hold of me. I nearly resented him too, watching him chase butterflies and climb trees and laugh with his head thrown back and his mouth wide open, like he was trying to swallow the world. He had the right to, if he truly wanted it. He could do anything with a life so short while I had an eternity ahead of me.

An eternity to replay the memories of him when there's nothing left. Like some keepsake as I wander the earth, knowing redemption does not come to those who must play the sinner.

It was one of those afternoons I spent baking in the sunlight while he ran after daffodil fluff in the shade that I told him I would make it quick.

He stopped, but his past joy lingered in the air as he met my narrowed eyes with a devout gaze.

“Okay, sure,” he said with a resolute nod. “Want to play with me now?”

I had only been a boy when I said yes, when I agreed.

If he knew what was coming and didn't mind my company then I wouldn't mind his, and that is how he became my brother. Not God's subject, or Mom's second son, or Dad's perfect boy. He became my brother on long walks, when he held back overgrowing tree branches to let me pass, his grin mirroring mine—bright and dim in both the sunlight and the shade. At dinner time, when he took my hand every night to say grace. In the long afternoons, when he taught me how to float on my back with the freezing lake water below and the hot sun above.

Liquid blue crystals parted at his long-armed strokes, splashing into the air when he sent waves my way. He always gave me the rocks he would find at the bottom after he dived, and he always waited for me at the shore, shouting I was too slow.

“Just go then!” I would holler back, knowing I wasn't as fast a swimmer as him. He would refuse, though, and wait me out. The sun was going down, and some unspoken agreement passed between us that we would no longer travel alone.

He was my brother when we walked this path together—perhaps not in the beginning, and absolutely not for the end.

But I stopped thinking about our end. At some point, I just enjoyed this life for the time before eternity—as punishing and endless as it would be. Even I knew in all my naivety and youth that a forever life was a curse and not a blessing, which is why I clung to my innocence. And for a moment, I clung to Abel too.

So, I wasn't prepared for it—when I had to say goodbye to my brother. To Mom and Dad, and all the others. I would be ruining us soon and I always knew that, but when it was tomorrow, I had not known until tomorrow was today.

He was all grown up, and so was I, but I watched that happen which was why it hurt to know I would be taking it all away. He had his livestock and I had my garden. But on the morning of, he came to me, took my hand, and led me to the animals.

“Take that to God,” he said, pointing to the baby of the flock—a firstborn, with his eyes still closed, seeking out the mother.

“No, that’s yours,” I muttered, lifting a basket from my garden. “This is mine.”

“No, no, look,” he points to another—another firstborn tucked into his brother’s side. “There’s *two*.” His usually infectious smile held a gleam, his expression full of anticipation for my agreement. “We can both give one each.”

But I knew the story. I bore the mark. I showed him one of those nights he was my brother, when we used the moonlight to guide us back home, both of us still dripping lake water. My hand was full of colorful stones, and inches above my palm was the permanent punishment of a lifetime I was about to fulfill once more. “I was given this life,” I told him, end of story—for both him *and* me in a way.

And besides, both brothers shouldn’t have been sacrifices when only one had to be offered to God. We both knew that.

When the hours passed and the judgment was decreed, I poured my handful of gifts on the soft earth, mulling over which was the most precise, the most cutting, the sharpest of the selection. But again, now that the time had come—no matter how long I agonized over this—I knew I was unprepared. I couldn’t lift the stone above my head and down on his—not with the gaze of the devout watching me and urging me to do what God thought was best.

Abel came to me, palms-up, and his forearm, opposite of mine, sloppily painted in the mark that I bore first—but now, no longer alone. With a gasp, I hissed, “*you shouldn’t!* The mark is bad.”

My brother gave me an exasperated look. “Then why do you have it?”

“Because I must. I am a descendent, I am bad.”

“Well, I am just like you so then I am bad too.”

My expression softened and my chest collapsed on a breath as I glanced up at the daylight for guidance. I was trying to find the answer in the old tale for a moment. It was time for a brother to be ruined by another’s hand. For jealousy and insincerity and anger to take the reins and steer us to a downfall. I couldn’t sacrifice him though. Because again, why should both brothers suffer? It shouldn’t be him, so I aimed for myself suddenly. I could not kill my brother, but I could die for him.

In the past, he hadn’t deserved his death. It was Cain who was born in the light with that anger coursing through his veins and that itch to crawl out of his unsettled place beneath authority.

It should have always been him facing this punishment.

Him and I.

My brother grabbed my wrist, a warning in his loyal eyes. Grief felt like a growing wound between us both suddenly. Like he shared my ache in acknowledging what we both were and the fates we originally had to accept. This was God’s Grace, God’s Will, God’s Plan—but does God know I love my brother? Does it matter?

“I’ll make it quick,” I promised my brother, but he did not let go. I narrowed my eyes while his stayed open and wide. That gaze of the devout, and I hadn’t realized until now that perhaps he was very loyal and faithful, but it was not God he beseeched and made promises to.

It was to me.

Perhaps loving is a kind of worship too.

“I *forgive* you,” he said, a jumble of words being thrown out like a plea, and they were not for our God to answer to.

The words found their mark, but I only shook my head, feeling like we were both just boys still, now playing with power we did not have. “You shouldn’t. I *kill* you.” My voice broke at the old truth.

“Not in this lifetime.”

“But I-” I hesitate, unable to bring myself to take the world he is offering. “I did *nothing* to earn it.”

“And I suffered nothing to give it, but here it is,” he said with a swallow, a nervous smile on his face coming to pull out mine. “How about...we earn it together,” my brother suggests with a shrug. His false mark is beginning to melt away in the sun, but he only follows my gaze, grabs more mud from below us, and re-paints it.

I cannot help my incredulous grin, and he mirrors it, like joy can be shared and not coveted.

I nodded finally, I had only a man when I said yes, when I agreed.

He replaces the stone in my hand with his own, and when I squeeze his fingers in mine, I can finally exhale the breath I have been holding.