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My Brother Eli

Never let it be said that my kid brother Eli failed to give me anything: he gave me five ex-sisters-in-law and seven (I think I have the number right) nephews and nieces, three of whom I met for the first time at his funeral. (My wife and I are childless.) At a memorial service I attended a few months afterward, a number of professors and writers and, yes, even the mayor of the City of Chicago talked about the struggles, sensitivity, and soulfulness of a man bearing Eli's name but who, tell you the truth, I wasn't able to recognize in any of these tributes.

My brother Eli is, make that was, the famous novelist, winner of all the literary prizes, national and international, a guy who scooped up most of the world's rewards (by which I mean money, women eager to sleep with him, praise from every quarter, international celebrity) without ever seeming particularly happy about any of them.

Eli took his life at the age of seventy-nine. You read about it, I'm sure. The official word was that he killed himself because he was diagnosed with Alzheimer's, but I'm not so sure something else wasn't behind my brother's putting a Beretta in his mouth and pulling the trigger. All the obituaries mentioned the Beretta, a nice detail that my brother himself would have appreciated. Eli always wore Borsolino hats; I wonder if he bought the Beretta in the same neighborhood in Rome where he bought his expensive hats, which, befitting the rake he became, he always wore at a rakish angle.

There were three of us: I was the firstborn, our sister Arlene came two years later, and then Eli (whose real name was Eliezer Schwartz) four years after that. Our old man worked for a man named Schinberg in the produce market on Fulton Street. An immigrant, unable to read English, he came to this country at sixteen from Bialystok, and, contrary to the standard American

success story, never really made it. I don't think he ever felt at home here. He was stubborn, argumentative, a difficult character in almost every way, the old man. I call him "the old man" because I can't remember him young. He left for work at 3:00 A.M., took two different streetcars to Fulton Street, returned at 4:00 P.M., ate, and went to bed early. None of his children was sorry not to have seen more of him. He died at work, our father, outdoors, unloading cases of Texas apples from the back of a truck on a blustery February morning when he was forty-nine years old. Unlike the case with Eli, at the old man's funeral no one knew what to say on his behalf.

Our mother was the hero of the family. She was from Kiev. I don't ever remember her other than without makeup, grey hair pulled back in a bun. She worked a sixteen-hour day: cooking and washing and cleaning for her family, then after supper taking out her Singer sewing machine, which she set up on the kitchen table, doing piecework for Hart, Shaffner & Marx, the men's clothier, then on Franklin Street. In the few minutes she had for herself, she read novels in Yiddish. She died, worn-out, at fifty-four. Eli once told me that he thought our mother never loved him. I told him I didn't know when she would have found time, which wasn't the answer he wanted to hear.

The six years' difference in Eli's and my age was enough to keep us from ever establishing any real closeness. And then we led such different lives. I went to work in high school for Ben Belinsky, the used auto-parts king, on Western Avenue, near Augusta Boulevard, and never left. I worked for a few years out in the yard, with the Polacks and the colored guys, and then Mr. Belinsky, who was childless, took a shine to me. He was tough but straight, no crap about him, and he gave me a sense of what was honorable conduct, even in a competitive business like auto parts. If you worked hard for him—and I did—he took care of you.

He must have seen something in me. He had me to his home for dinner on Jewish holidays. When I was eighteen, he brought me inside, into the office, and began to teach me the business. "Where you make your dough is in buying," he used to tell me. "Any *schmageggi* can move the goods if the price is right."

When I graduated from Marshall High School, I thought about going to college, maybe studying accounting.

"What do you need to study accounting?" Mr. Belinsky said. "You don't become an accountant, Louis. You hire an accountant. Forget about accounting. Stick with me. You won't be sorry."

And I wasn't. At twenty I was making more money than my old man. In my middle twenties, Mr. Belinsky told me that, if I wanted it, really wanted it, someday his business would be mine. I wanted it, all right. None of this was ever put on paper, you understand. It didn't have to be. He was solid, Ben, though I never called him that. I always called him Mr. Belinsky, even when I was in my thirties and he was in his early eighties, still coming down five days a week, working half a day on Saturday. Not long before he died, I arrived one morning and saw a new neon sign across the front of the place reading Belinsky & Son, Auto Parts.

"That Son on the sign, Louis," he said, "that's you." I excused myself, went into the bathroom, and wept.

When Eli was in high school, I arranged for him to work in the yard at Belinsky Auto Parts. You could see right off his heart wasn't in it. Heavy lifting wasn't in my kid brother's line. He didn't like to get dirty. He was dreamy. He'd bring a book to work, which he read on breaks and which didn't at all please Mr. Belinsky.

What Eli didn't get in affection from our mother, he got from our sister Arlene. Eli was what you might call a sister's boy. Everything a person could do for another person without money, Arlene did for Eli: ironed his shirts, helped him buy his clothes, cooked special treats for him, slipped him an extra buck or two when she had it. Arlene and Eli looked a little alike. They both had our mother's fine features. I resembled more the old man, I have his large feet, thick wrists, big chest, black hair.

Arlene didn't have an easy life. Something in her eyes, in the way she carried herself, suggested vulnerability. She had two bad marriages, no children. Her second husband, a car salesman named Ralph Singer, used to beat her up. I didn't know about it until one day she turns up at our house for Passover with a black eye. I called Singer, asked him to come to my office the following Monday. When he showed up, I handed him an envelope with five grand in it, told him I wanted him to return home and get his things out of my sister's apartment, and that I never wanted him to bother my sister again. To show him I was sincere, right there in my office I broke his fuckin' nose.

Eli probably had no bigger fan than Arlene, who, later in life, used to keep scrapbooks filled with the reviews of his novels and the interviews he gave and everything else she found in the papers about him, which was quite a lot. I may not be the most careful reader of my brother's novels, but I did try my best to follow his career and his life, even if always from a distance. And I noticed a pattern over the decades, which was that Eli seemed to betray everyone who ever loved him. He never betrayed me, not really, but then maybe that was because I got off the love train for my brother fairly early.

What I sensed from the beginning was that Eli was in business for himself, and in a way that didn't make family love any easier. Maybe our father was unfeeling and our mother was certainly preoccupied. But in my mother's case at least we all knew that she would do everything she could for us, that as best she was able she was in our corner. Of course it wasn't like today, when if you don't tell your kid you love him every twenty minutes you could go to jail for child abuse. I always felt close to my sister, close to her and sorry for her both. But for Eli, as I say, I ran out of love fairly soon. I suppose I sensed that he didn't have much feeling for me, either.

When he graduated from Marshall, Eli came to tell me that he had a partial scholarship to Columbia University in New York, but he would need my help to pay his way. If I told you how little he needed, you'd laugh, because the sum today would sound trifling. Yet in those days, it wasn't; it seemed like a fairly big ticket. Still, a brother is a brother, and I said sure, why not, and every month I sent him a check to cover part of his tuition and his living expenses. I never expected a regular thank-you note. But I did make a small mental note in later years, when Eli was making big money, that it never occurred to him to offer to pay me any of that money back, or to say thanks for helping him out when he needed it. Maybe I was supposed to feel privileged to have contributed to the education of the great novelist, though I note that none of Eli's three biographers ever mentioned how this poor kid from the West Side of Chicago found the money to go off to school in New York.

Because so much is known about my brother's life, I don't have to connect all the dots about how he fell in with the New York writers he met when he lived there, how he met his first wife, his

trips to Europe, things of that nature. But I first knew something was up when Eli published his second novel—I was still reading everything he wrote in those days—the book called *The Packard's Running Board*. I'm the so-called hero of that book, in which I'm called Eugene Siegel, and to Mr. Belinsky he gave the name Fred Armitage and made him a Gentile.

I don't read a lot of fiction. I tried, especially when my kid brother was gaining a reputation for turning the stuff out, but I never found the payoff was there, if you know what I mean. I like to read books about Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Harry Truman, and about the periods in history I've lived through myself, like the Depression and World War II. Eli's first novel, about a young guy growing up in a neighborhood where no one understood his sensitivity, was tough for me to get through at all. I had to drag my eyes across every page, thinking who could possibly give a damn about all this. So the hero of the book is sensitive and the people he's forced to live among aren't. I didn't see the big deal.

In *The Packard's Running Board*, the character Eugene—me, that is—is on fire with ambition and wanting to impress his boss, who runs a large auto-parts store. (Eli, far as I can see, never did invent a hell of a lot.) So his boss, Mr. Armitage, who is an anti-Semite amused at his employee's eagerness to get ahead, assigns him the job of finding a running board, driver's side, for a 1942 Packard. Eugene goes scurrying all over the city, trying every scrap yard in the county, but no luck. Then one day he spots a '42 Packard parked on the street in Oak Park and waits outside to see who owns it. The owner turns out to be one of those old dames with blue-rinse white hair. Eugene follows her home to a mansion in River Forest. He hangs around the neighborhood. He finds out that the old broad's name is Emily Thornborough, and that she's the widow of a successful architect. Although the car is old—the novel is set sometime in the late 1950s—the woman loves it, treats it like a baby, or so Eugene discovers by asking the mechanic at a nearby garage where she takes it in for servicing.

To make a long story short, Eugene realizes that he is going to have to steal the goddamn running board. And the rest of the book is about the complications of his finally doing it. A lot of comic hijinks follow: he nearly gets caught, he has the problem of how to get the unwieldy running board back into Chicago on

public transportation. When he finally brings it to his boss, the man is unimpressed and says something like "You boys will do anything to get ahead"—"you boys," we are meant to understand, are Jews—and he fires Eugene on the spot, calling him a thief. End of story.

I took this book to represent Eli's opinion of me, his older brother, who was dedicated to the idea of getting ahead and willing to do anything to do so. Eugene is me, down to the gap between my front teeth, the hair covering the knuckles on my large hands, the way my face sweats when I'm under pressure. In the novel, I'm resourceful but also a major schmuck—and, when you get right down to it, a crook, too. For me the book wasn't exactly what you'd call easy reading.

I don't know why, but I never confronted Eli with his portrait of his older brother. I wonder if I wouldn't have done better to call him on it right then and there. I suppose I could have said, "Eli, where do you get off making me out to be such an obnoxious putz in your book? Is this what you really think of me? Explain this—and now." I was young enough in those days to put the hint—and maybe more than a hint—of menace in my voice. Maybe if I had done this I might have saved a number of other people Eli later put into his books a lot of grief.

Eli's first marriage was at City Hall in Jersey City, New Jersey. My sister and I heard of it after the fact. He married a girl named Elise Lensky, whose family were big in the socialist movement. Jews went in for this left-wing stuff more in New York than in Chicago. Here we're happy just to make a living and get some kind of fix on reality. Our hands are full trying to cope with the world as it is. We don't waste a lot of time on the world as it ought to be.

Around this time, Eli himself turned socialist, with a big interest in Leon Trotsky. I learned this from his wife, who called me one day to tell me that she was pregnant, in her sixth month, and that Eli and a pal had gone off to tour all the Communist countries of Eastern Europe to view at firsthand how Trotsky's teachings had been perverted under Stalin. She had medical and other expenses, and Eli had told her to get in touch with me if she ran out of the money he had left with her. The money was gone, and now she had nowhere else to turn. I sent her a grand, by Western Union.

I have no idea why Eli needed to leave a pregnant wife the way he did, but when he returned two months later, he called to thank me for coming through with the money. He said that he had a new book in the works that his publisher thought might make some serious dough, and that he would repay me as soon as he could. I can't remember how I found out that he and his wife had had a son named David; probably through Arlene, who kept in better touch with Eli than I did. But less than a year later, he broke up his marriage to the Lensky girl.

Five or so years must have passed before I next saw my brother. The book his publishers had thought would make some money for him apparently did well, and it also evidently increased his reputation, putting him, as Arlene said, in the front rank of contemporary writers. He had a new wife, a painter of abstract art whose name was Felicia, and he had taken to wearing expensive, somewhat gaudy clothes: suits with tight trousers, shirts with bold stripes, loud ties, pointy shoes. He was losing his hair, which may have explained why he was increasingly being photographed wearing a hat. He was in town to pick up a literary prize and give a talk at Roosevelt University.

I went with Arlene to hear the talk. The auditorium was filled. Eli was introduced as a writer who had changed the nature of modern writing. The talk was about an Irishman named James Joyce, who was evidently a great man for my brother. I couldn't make out a lot of it, but I did get that Eli admired this Joyce because he let nothing stand in his way of his writing, not the welfare of his family, nothing, even, I couldn't help note, continually borrowing from a brother, Stanislaus, I think the guy's name was, whom he never repaid.

Eli came up to Arlene and me at the reception after the talk. He embraced Arlene, put out his hand to me.

"How goes it, Lou?"

"Not too bad, Eli," I said, "but not so good as it seems to be going for you. This is a nice crowd you drew tonight."

"I provide artificial pearls for real swine," he said, looking around the room. He was wearing some sort of sharkskin suit, light grey, with high pockets in the trousers, a belt of matching material, and a silky green tie with a thick knot under a spread collar. I couldn't remember if he always had this drugstore wise guy air about him. Or had it come with his success?

"How's auto parts?" he asked me.

"It's a living," I said, adding, "and a hell of a lot easier now that no one's asking for old running boards."

"Who'd have thought my big brother read my books?" he said with a smile. "Lou, you please me more than you can know. You astonish me, in fact."

I was about to tell him my opinion about that particular book but then thought better of it. He was my brother, after all, and I'm not good at telling people off. I tend to go too far, and I really didn't want to break things off with Eli, not yet anyhow.

The young woman who had introduced Eli, a Professor Shansky—Jewish, *zaftig*, in her mid-thirties—came up, excused herself for taking Eli off, but the president of the university and some of its larger donors were expecting him for a small dinner party. Eli smiled at her in a way that implied if not possible past intimacies certainly future ones to come. He was then married to his second wife.

"I better run," he said. He kissed Arlene on both cheeks and gripped my upper right arm. "Stay well, both of you. I'll be in touch."

"You know, Lou," Arlene said to me on the way home, "he's not really our brother anymore. He belongs to the world now. He's a famous man, our little Eli."

"I suppose that's so," I said. "But I wish I liked him a little more."

"What's not to like?" Arlene said. "He's our brother."

"My guess is that he doesn't harbor many brotherly feelings about either of us, though probably more toward you than me. Eli's going to take what he wants and do what he wants, with very little obligation felt on his side. Eli's one of life's takers."

"I wonder, Lou, if you aren't being too hard on him. He's not like the rest of us, you know. Eli's an artist."

"I see where your brother's got his ass in a sling," Al Hirsch said, smiling the kind of smile lawyers do when they discover fresh news of greed or other human depravity of the kind off which they make their living.

"What for?" I asked.

"As you probably know, he's going through his third divorce, and it seems that he left falsified tax documents around the

marital apartment, to make it look as if he's been earning a lot less money than he's actually been earning. It's an old trick, and an extremely dumb one, if I may say so."

As a matter of fact, I didn't know that Eli was going through another divorce. I'd met his third wife twice. Her name was Sharon Lefkowitz, and she was a striking-looking woman, dark good looks, terrific figure, all-year-round suntan. Formidable, a tiger of a woman, is how I'd describe her. Unlike Eli's first two wives, she was no socialist or artist, but the daughter of a Chicago dentist known for his cleverness at real-estate deals. She didn't figure to be a girl who would take divorce lightly. She must have scared Eli good with her demands for him to hoke up fake tax documents. But now that he's done it, my poor schmuck little brother had apparently really put his head in the tiger's mouth.

"Who's my brother's attorney?"

"A moron named Morty Silverman. He has an office on Washington off LaSalle. A flamboyant guy who's known to bang his female clients and who's never really made his nut."

I remember Morty Silverman from the old neighborhood. His father had a dry cleaner's on Roosevelt Road. Morty was a little guy, dressed flashy, wore porkpie hats. Funny that Eli would use Morty Silverman when serious things were at stake. It showed a kind of loyalty, I guess.

"I thought your kid brother's supposed to be a genius," Al said.

"A limited genius," I said. "He's mostly a genius at telling other people what's wrong with the way they live. Not so smart, though, when it comes to his own life."

Eli had moved back to Chicago a few years before. In an interview he gave to the *New York Times*, which Arlene had sent to me, he said that he no longer needed to live in New York, its rhythms weren't his, he needed Chicago where the grit of reality was in the air. Well, from what Al Hirsch said, Eli must by now have had a mouth full of this grit.

Arlene, always the family peacemaker, gave a dinner to which she invited me, my wife Gerry, Eli and a new ladyfriend of his, a professor of some kind at the University of Chicago. She also invited another couple, named Wertheimer, who lived in her building. They were both shrinks, Arlene said, foreign-born, a little nutty, but nice. They were fans of Eli's novels and wanted to meet him.

Eli arrived after the rest of us. His ladyfriend, he explained, couldn't make it. "Illness in the family" is all he offered in the way of an excuse. We sat in Arlene's living room, the six of us. Eli seemed harried, tired; his face was pouchier than I remembered. He had dark circles under his eyes. He was wearing a tan suit with an emphatic Gleneagle plaid. He had a silk handkerchief in his jacket pocket, purple to match his wide necktie.

Before Eli had arrived, the Wertheimers asked me a number of questions about my brother. The Wertheimers were Jews who had escaped Germany and spoke with strong accents, Henrietta Wertheimer's stronger than her husband Karl's. Henrietta said that one of her special interests was in the childhood of artists, and she wanted to know what I could tell her about my brother's upbringing, particularly anything that might have contributed to his impressive career. The truth was, I couldn't think of a damn thing. A shame our father wasn't in the room, I thought; his gruff presence would have given the Wertheimers a lot to think about in connection with what Karl Wertheimer called "the developmental aspect of the artist's early years." I could have told them that Eli's father never gave him or any of his children the time of day, and he thought his mother didn't love him. Let them chew on that for a while. But I said very little, except that my brother's talent had not shown up early, at least that I was aware. He just seemed a very bright kid.

"You were an adherent of the doctrines of Wilhelm Reich, no?" Henrietta Wertheimer asked Eli. "Are you still?"

Eli laughed. "That was a long while ago," he said. "My brother Lou here, who is in used-auto parts, probably never heard of an orgone box, but I had my very own such appliance. Kept it in a large closet in an apartment I lived in on West 106th Street in the late 1940s. Spent hours in it brooding in the hope of increasing my sexual energy, but mostly I sat there thinking of ways to advance the plots in my novels."

"Reich was of course a fascist," said Karl Wertheimer.

"I gather he was," Eli said, "but not so great a totalitarian as your man Sigmundo the Freud." I didn't know what the hell Eli was talking about, but you had to be a dope not to recognize that he didn't like the Wertheimers.

"Well, totalitarian, I don't know," Karl Wertheimer said. "Freud was in possession of the most powerful ideas of the age, and I

think it unfair to consider him more than judicious in guarding them from those who might dilute or otherwise corrupt them."

"*Powerful ideas?*" You mean like the unrelenting desire of children to sleep with their parents? Lou," Eli said, turning to me, "funny but I can't ever recall your mentioning your ardent desire to mount up on Ma. Or am I wrong about this?" I didn't answer.

Things didn't get better at dinner, for which Arlene had obviously gone to a lot of trouble. Between the vegetable soup and the salad, Karl Wertheimer asked if anyone at the table had read Shakespeare in German. I felt like saying that I couldn't make him out so easy in English—except the play *Julius Caesar*, which they made us read in high school—but I clammed up. Dr. Wertheimer then went on to say that there is a school of thought that held that Shakespeare, in the Schiller or Schlegel or some other kraut's translation, was even better in German. I was watching Eli, who, up till now, I thought was trying, if not very hard, not to wreck his sister's dinner party completely.

"You know," Eli said, "I think I've had just about enough of this German-Jewish bullshit."

You'd think that after making a remark like that he'd toss his napkin on the table, get out of his chair, and ask for his hat and coat. But Eli did nothing of the kind. He just sat there. Which meant that the Wertheimers had to get up and leave. They did so without much fuss, I'll give them that.

"Perhaps this meeting was a mistake, Arlene," Karl Wertheimer said. "I hope you will forgive us if we depart early." On the way out, Henrietta Wertheimer mumbled something about how nice it was nice to meet my wife Gerry and me. I shook Karl Wertheimer's small soft hand.

Eli sat there, finishing his soup. When they left the room, Arlene followed them to the door, offering God knows what excuse for her brother's behavior,

"I've heard it said," Eli noted, "that if you dislike a person, it always helps to imagine that person as German. And if you really dislike him, it's best of all to imagine him as a German woman. I'll say this for Henrietta Wertheimer, under this arrangement she doesn't force the imagination into a lot of extra exercise."

"You were pretty tough on those people," I said.

"Lou," he said, "I've come to an age and stage in life where I no longer feel it incumbent upon me to listen to crap, and if there

are greater purveyors of crap than intellectuals, then it is people with pretensions to knowledge of the soul, like Arlene's good German neighbors."

"A little hard on Arlene, though, wouldn't you say, Eli?" my wife said. "I mean these people were her guests."

"I don't worry about Arlene," he said. "Arlene'll understand."

When Arlene returned, I was a little surprised to discover that she didn't say a word to Eli about his treatment of the Wertheimers. She just served the rest of the meal as if nothing unusual had happened, and we talked about the old days on the West Side and, of course, about Eli.

"Is your new ladyfriend all right?" Arlene asked him.

"She's fine," Eli said. "We had an argument. She wants me to marry her. Her name's Karen Wilkinson, by the way. She's an astronomer at the University of Chicago. Not having had very good luck with wives in the humanities—and in the case of Sharon, my last wife, in the inhumanities—I thought I'd shop the sciences for a while."

"And you're not interested in remarrying?" Gerry asked him, with an unmistaken note of wonder in her voice.

"God, no. I'm already a three-time loser. And besides, it's 1974, and, as I'm sure you've noticed, it isn't such a hot time for marrying. Sex is hanging everywhere, like salamis in a delicatessen. The country's gone nuts. Everything's up for grabs. A man would have to be insane to marry today."

On the drive home, my wife said that she didn't understand why any woman would want to marry her brother-in-law, since he was so obviously a bad risk, certain to bring unhappiness to any wife, not to mention his being a certifiably lousy father.

"And I would have killed your brother if he ever did anything like what he did to the Wertheimers to any guests of mine," Gerry said. "I don't get Arlene's being so calm about it."

"Arlene is devoted to Eli. She's sure he's a genius. She accepts his own idea of himself as a great man."

"And you, what do you think?"

"I think something's wrong with him. He may be talented, like everyone says, but I think he's got a screw loose. Something's missing in him."

"Maybe he's beginning to believe all the things that are written about him," Gerry said.

"Maybe, except I think Eli believed them even before they were written."

Three weeks later we learned through Arlene, our usual source, that, despite all his talk about society and sex and salami and the rest of it, Eli had married his astronomer. I had another sister-in-law, my fourth.

As I said earlier, I didn't have much luck reading my brother's novels. I tried, but it was no-go. They weren't about a world I knew, nor did I find myself caring very much about how things worked out in them. Near as I could make out, they seemed to be mostly about Jewish intellectuals who thought that life had dealt them a bad hand and that reality was hard for them to locate. Gerry read them, and while she wasn't crazy about them either, she felt forcing her eyes across the pages to finish them was part of her duty as a sister-in-law. Occasionally, she would call my attention to a passage or section, where she thought I might know if Eli was writing about something or someone from the old neighborhood. She was usually right about this.

In the most recent book of my brother's, called *Kaiserman's Kiss of Death*, Gerry pointed out some rough passages about a character he called Leo Kaiserman, a failed lawyer, a little guy in a pork-pie hat. He's unethical in every way possible. This Kaiserman is also sex-crazed, not to be trusted around any skirt. He uses the same methods of seducing every woman he confronts. He quotes poetry to them and also a Russian named Berdaev. When Kaiserman at one point goes into the hospital, Eli has him flash himself in front of nurses. Kaiserman is Morty Silverman, there can't be any doubt about it, and my brother has made his old pal out to be a real creep.

Why would Eli do this? Maybe he was paying Morty back for the stupid advice he gave him about faking his tax forms. This seemed a pretty stiff payback. I wondered if Morty himself would read it—I was fairly sure he would—and how he would react?

Gerry told me that Eli had done much worse with Elise, his first wife. In a novel with the title *Skolnik*, which I never got around to reading, he painted her as betraying him with another man and running off with him and their three-year-old son. This isn't the way I heard the story. I was told that Eli had left Elise because he said that an artist can't be tied down to a family, with a baby carriage in the hallway and the rest of it. I don't know the real

story. What is true is that Eli made his first wife out to be a real *nafke*. What must she have thought of it? What would be the effect on their child in real life, who by now must be in his twenties? I recall being pissed off when my brother had written about me, and I felt all the more strongly that I should've kicked his ass and put a stop to this kind of thing right then and there.

What amazed me is that no one seemed much to mind Eli's behavior. His fame spread. Gerry was always calling my attention to some item about him in the Chicago papers. He gave a lot of interviews, Eli did, but he always seemed to do so reluctantly, almost as if he were being forced into it. I noticed, too, that whenever he won a prize, many of them involving fairly heavy cash, he would accept it with a slight grudgingness. "I am very pleased to have been awarded this prize, if only . . ." "I'm grateful to be the recipient of this prize, though I have to say that while it pleases me greatly it also makes me dubious of . . ." There was something phony about the whole deal, but it seemed to be working. I can't speak about the importance of my brother's writing, but he was a real public-relations genius.

Maybe Eli thought I was insufficiently impressed by him, or thought that, unlike the rest of the world, I didn't praise him enough, tell him how proud I was of him every other day, but then Gerry and I didn't see much of him, even though we were now living in the same city, we on Lake Shore Drive, Eli and his new wife in Hyde Park.

One day we get an invitation from the Mayor's Office for an event at which Eli was going to be presented with a medal from the City of Chicago. There was a dinner involved and an award ceremony at Navy Pier. It was black tie. What the hell, I said to Gerry, let's see how the other half lives.

"Which half is that?" she said.

This turned out to be not so dumb a question. At the reception before the dinner, every *tuchas lecher* in town was on display. One of the first sights I saw after entering the hall was the gossip columnist Irv Kupcinet hug a small guy named Walter Jacobson, used to be a batboy for the Cubs, who now does the local evening news. While hugging each other, I notice each of them is looking over the shoulder of the other to see if there isn't someone more important in the room. A strange little guy named Studs Terkel, who has a radio interview show on the classical music station, is

racing around pressing the flesh of everyone in the place. I don't know much about him, but I remember Eli once calling him "a crackerbarrel Stalinist" and his laughing at the pleasure the phrase gave him. Gerry once asked me if I ever noticed that Eli seemed to laugh a lot but rarely smiled.

Lots of women from the Gold Coast, the high-maintenance kind, were there with their tired-looking husbands, who'd probably be happier if left to stay home to watch the Bulls-Lakers game. I recognized a number of aldermen who, they don't steal enough as it is, can always be counted on to show up for a free meal. Mike Ditka, the former coach of the Bears with his thick features, was talking to the mayor. Gerry spotted Jesse Jackson leaning in close to talk to a striking black woman who does the evening news on Channel 9.

Then Eli walked in with his wife, who, after four years of marriage to my brother, already looked exhausted. There was something dark and haunted in her eyes. She seemed thinner than I remembered when I first met her. In her red gown and high heels, she was a few inches taller than Eli. Eli was wearing a tux with an especially wide sateen collar, a shirt with lots of big ruffles, and a red cummerbund and an enormous red bow tie, of the kind which, if, when you shook his hand, it flashed "Kiss Me," you wouldn't be in the least surprised. He looked like a Jewish trombone player in the old Xavier Cougat orchestra. His wispy now completely white hair was combed over and patted down to cover his baldness. He got the family talent, wherever in the hell it came from originally, but I got our old man's thick hair, which maybe was the better deal.

The dinner was first class: large platters of seafood to start, choice of prime rib or salmon, lots of wine, cherries jubilee to end. When the dishes were cleared, the mayor, who wasn't known for fancy language, rose to say that culture has always been important to the City of Chicago, and then he reeled off a number of names of writers who had lived here, and he said that Eli was continuing in their line. In honoring Eli, he said, a man who had been born and grew up in Chicago and was now its greatest writer, the city was honoring one of its own, and he was proud to bestow the city's medal for literature on him, which he then did.

Eli stood at the podium, the heavy medal dangling from his

neck on a red-white-and-blue ribbon, the large red bow tie just above it. He looked clownish. He waited for the applause to end. He grinned. I looked over at Karen, his wife, who was sitting across from me. She was staring down at the tablecloth.

"Well," Eli began, "this is quite an honor. I want to thank the mayor for his kind words. I want to thank Lois Weisberg and others in the city's office of culture. My big brother's here tonight, so I have to be careful what I say. He's a tough guy, and, should I step out of line, he's sure to let me have it. Isn't that so, Lou?

"The relation of writers to power is a subject with a long and often squalid history," he continued. "I can't help wondering if, in accepting this handsome medal and eating this luscious food, I've not become part of that history. Literature is supposed to represent truth, and, as such, to tell truth to power, if only because everyone else is frightened to do so." Here Eli looked over to the mayor. "How're you doing, kiddo?" he said.

"Yes," he went on, "truth speaks to power, but the question is does power ever really listen? Or does it instead merely pretend to listen and honor it with occasions such as this evening's gala? In Communist countries they take writers very seriously—so seriously that they often kill them. Here in the United States, in the City of Chicago specifically, they offer them a choice of roast beef or salmon. Don't get me wrong, I'll take the salmon over a firing squad any day. Still, it would be nice to be taken seriously, too."

And then Eli just stopped. That was it. Done. Finished. At first people didn't know what to do. Everyone looked at the mayor, who, after an interval of maybe ten seconds, began to applaud, which allowed everyone else in the room to do so, though the clapping was polite at best. I looked over at Eli's wife, who, returning my look, rolled her eyes back in her head, as if to say, "Here's your brother, you figure him out."

"So," Eli, now back at our table, leaned over and said to me, "how did I do?"

"I'd have to say that you didn't exactly knock 'em dead, kid."

"That's OK," he said, "the main thing is that I knocked 'em."

Gerry took a cab home, she had an early morning appointment the next day, and I stuck around a little longer. When I was getting ready to leave, Eli asked me if I would mind taking his

wife home. He had some business to attend to after the party. I said of course, why not?

I had been around my sister-in-law maybe four times, and never alone. I wasn't sure what we'd have to talk about, but it turned out that it didn't matter much because she did most of the talking.

"You know, Louis," she said, as I pulled out of the garage at Navy Pier, "Eli and I are splitting up. He's an impossible person, which you must already know."

"I've had some strong hints," I said.

"He needs to flirt with all kinds of women. His fame as writer gives him some strange aphrodisiac quality for them, or so I suppose. They like to sleep with a famous writer. What I find hard to understand is that he, Eli, doesn't seem to have all that much interest in what really, you know, goes on in bed. He's a very impatient lover, Eli. Forgive my not saying this more politely, but your brother doesn't know a clitoris from a kneecap."

I nearly drove over the median into onrushing Outer Drive traffic.

"It was a serious mistake on my part ever to start up with your brother. He humiliates me in public. He ignores me in private. I'm sure that someday he'll put me in one of his novels as a witch and whore and add a few bad hygienic habits at no extra charge. I don't care. I don't need money from him. To be free from him is gift enough. I'll be very happy no longer to be Mrs. Eli Black, the fourth. I'm sure there'll be a few more Mrs. Eli Blacks, all with numbers after their names, like ennobling suffixes."

When I let her out of the car in front of her and Eli's apartment at the Cloisters, before opening the door, she said, "Your brother thinks that because he's an artist he can do what he wants, hurt people whenever he likes. Everything is justified by his books. As an astronomer, I don't think Eli knows how small, how truly insignificant, he really is. Maybe someday he'll find out. Goodbye, Louis." She shook my hand as she left the car, and I never saw her again.

Maybe it was a year after this that Gerry and I went to a United Jewish Fund dinner and found ourselves seated at the same table with a young guy named Rick Feldrow. He was a lawyer who also wrote novels; all of them were made into movies, and damn good

movies, too. He was a small guy, bald, but he looked firm, like he must've spent some time on treadmills. When we were introduced, he said he'd heard that I was Eli Black's brother. When I told him I was, he opened up to me in a way that took me a little by surprise.

"I can't tell you how much I admire your brother's writing," he said. "He's my personal hero, make that my household god."

"Why's that?" I asked.

"Because he writes like an angel. Because he understands what is really going on in the country. Because his novels will live forever."

"How's it you're so sure of all this?"

"Well," he said, "I can't of course be sure. But right now, of everyone who's scribbling away, he looks like the top contender to be read fifty or a hundred years from now."

"Have you met my brother?"

"Never," he said. "I'd still be daunted to meet him. When I was young, I used to imagine that Eli Black was my father, that I had inherited his talent, that he would guide me through the rocky places in life. My own father, who was a physician, never had much time for me, and when he did, he was hypercritical."

"Sorry to hear that," I said. "But I don't think you'd have had much luck with my brother Eli as a father either."

"Really?" he said "Why's that?"

I felt a light kick under the table from Gerry. "It's complicated," I said, and turned to the woman sitting on my left.

Eli and I were never in anything like regular touch. Six, eight months might go by without either of us calling the other. Sometimes we'd meet at the funeral of a cousin—Eli had a touch of family sentimentality—though not that often. But one day he calls and says that he has to meet me on urgent business. How's tomorrow for lunch? he wants to know.

We met at the Standard Club. Eli was waiting in the foyer, dressed in one of his racy suits, this one black-and-white checks, wearing a shirt with thick red stripes, white collar and cuffs, and a yellow necktie. As we walked to our table in the main dining room, I sensed people staring at us—at my brother, for Eli's picture was fairly often in the papers and he qualified around town as a celebrity.

After the waiter took our order, Eli, looking around the room, smiled and said, "Wouldn't the old man be amused to see us having lunch in this joint? We've both come a long way from Roosevelt Road and Kedzie."

"You a lot way farther than me," I said. "But what's on your mind?"

"I need a loan of a quarter of a million dollars," he said.

"That's a pretty serious number. For what, may I ask?"

"You may. I'm in deep water with a man named Sid Gusio on a bad deal I made in an investment in nursing homes."

"Where do you come to know a thug like Gusio?" I asked.

"I met him at the Riviera Club, where I play racquetball," Eli said. "A very amiable fellow, or so he at first seems."

Sid Gusio was the Chicago Syndicate's man in charge of gambling and prostitution, and, as that job description implies, not a man to fool with. Eli had no more business with a man like Gusio than a mouse walking into the den of a lion.

"He's a dangerous character, Eli."

"Tell me about it," Eli said. "He was, he said, putting me onto a good thing. For a hundred grand investment in a nursing-home complex being built in Oak Lawn, I'd get triple my investment back within two years, or so he claimed. Only now he tells me that they vastly underestimated costs. I need to come up with another two-hundred-and-fifty grand to protect my original investment. Except that Gusio made it evident that I didn't have much choice in the matter. It wasn't, he made it fairly plain, an entirely voluntary matter. I couldn't just walk away and lose my original investment of a hundred thousand, though at this point this is what I wouldn't so much mind doing. But walking away, I strongly suspect, isn't really an option."

I couldn't help thinking, Eli, my schmuck brother, gets his pecker in a wringer every time he ventures away from his desk, Eli, who wouldn't know reality if it bit him in the ass, the man who writes books telling everyone else they're living badly, Eli going up against Sid Gusio was no contest.

"What makes you sure he won't come back to you for still more money?"

"Nothing," Eli said. I could sense his fear. Also his embarrassment. Always so goddamn knowing about everything, Eli was reduced to coming to his big brother for help.

"You don't have any of this money yourself?" I asked.

"I have a high nut, Lou, lots of ex-wives, kids, school bills, you don't know the half of it."

"Christ, Eli, every time I open the paper someone's giving you a new prize. You must get ten or twenty grand a shot for talks. And what about the dough your books bring in? How broke can you be?"

"Look, Lou, without going into details, all I can tell you is that I don't have the money and no prospects of getting it except from you."

I had already made up my mind to lend Eli the money, but, for some reason, I didn't want to make it easy for him. I hate to admit it, but I found myself enjoying this.

"Suppose I loan you the money," I said. "What're you offering in collateral? The Pulitzer Prize?"

"How about I give you the continuing royalties for my first three novels?" he said, quite serious.

"An I.O.U. will do, with a schedule of repayment," I said. "But Eli, maybe you'll take a little free literary advice. Don't ever put Sid Gusio into one of your novels. Unless you want a couple of knee-replacement operations."

One day at the office, my secretary tells me that David Black is on the phone. I don't recall knowing any David Black, but I pick up the phone anyway.

"Hello, Uncle Lou," a voice says, "I'm your brother Eli's son, and I'm in Chicago for a couple of days and I wonder if we could maybe meet."

Then it clicked in. David was Eli's son by his first marriage. I remember him only as a child. He must be in his thirties by now. He lived in northern California, Santa Rosa, if I remembered correctly.

"Where are you?" I asked. "Staying with your dad?"

"No," he said, "it turns out that my father's out of town. I'm here on business, staying at the Continental Hotel on Michigan Avenue. I don't really know Chicago at all. But is it possible we could meet for lunch or a drink?"

"Sure, kid," I said. "It'd be fine."

We arranged to meet the next day at a bar in the Drake Hotel called the Coq d'Or, which served good sandwiches and which, if

you arrived after the lunch rush, provided a certain amount of privacy, though I wasn't sure what this boy and I had to talk about.

The first thing I discovered was that my nephew was no kid. He was balding, slightly paunchy, with his father's nose and slightly flared nostrils. He was taller than Eli and darker. Something a little soft about him, vulnerable, but something, too, that made my heart go out to him. It was probably his having grown up without a father.

"Thanks for meeting me," he said, putting out his hand.

We took a table against the far wall, ordered beers and hamburgers, and I asked him what brought him to Chicago.

"I'm here for a conference," he said. "I'm a civil engineer and work for the California highway system. The conference is about state highway funding. Dull stuff to most people, I suppose, but important in my line of work."

"Have you seen your father recently?"

"I called him before coming to town, but he told me that he was going to be in London."

"Are you in regular touch with him?"

"Irregular touch would be closer to it. Sometimes a year or two will go by without our meeting. Usually I call him on his birthday."

Eli had divorced David's mother when he was three years old. She took him to California and remarried a few years later. Eli hadn't much money in those days and saw his son probably no more than once a year, if that. When he remarried and had other children, he saw him even less.

"I learned to get on without my father," David said. "When I was a teenager, I sort of followed his career in the newspapers. At school nobody knew that my father was the famous writer, which was fine by me. My stepfather, who died two years ago, was a decent man. My mother had two other children with him, but he always treated me fairly. I have no complaints."

David told me that he had three children of his own. Eli had not yet seen the youngest, a boy who was four years old. I thought how much my own wife missed having grandchildren.

"I suppose the one grudge I hold against my father is the way he portrayed my mother in one of his novels, where he makes her out to be so vengeful and little more than an obstacle to his own

career. I've always wanted to say something to him about the meanness of that but I've never had the guts. When it comes to his writing, he can be very touchy, my father."

"I haven't had much luck reading your dad's novels," I said.

"Maybe it's because they don't have plots. I'm just an engineer, what do I know, but my father's books seem to be mostly about men like him, Jewish intellectuals who feel the world has screwed them in some deep yet not entirely clear way. His main points, near as I can make out, is that nobody understands the modern artist and just about everyone is an anti-Semite. But his books seem to charm lots of people. I don't think there's a prize left he hasn't won. And he's been translated in all kinds of languages."

David went on to talk about his wife, who is a graphic artist, and his children and how he came to study engineering. When he asked me about my own family and business, he listened carefully as I told him about my life. He seemed a solid kid, my nephew, and I wished I could do something for him, something to make up for all the things that my brother didn't do. Eli's and Arlene's and my father wasn't much, but at least he was on the premises, and he sure as hell didn't attack our mother in public. Thank God for small blessings.

Out on the street in front of the Drake, David and I exchanged business cards, and he said he hoped I would visit him and my grand-nephews and niece if I should ever find myself in Santa Rosa. "It's the wine country, you know, Sonoma Valley," he said. I told him I'd try to stay in touch, but life being what it is, I was fairly sure that we probably wouldn't meet again.

A few weeks later, I called my brother to tell him about my meeting with his son and what a fine young man I thought he is. "You're lucky to have such a kid," I said. "It's none of my business, but you probably ought to see him more than you do."

"You're right, Lou," Eli said. "It isn't any of your business. Look, I don't expect you to understand this, but all the energy I have goes into my books—all of it. There isn't anything left for anything else."

"Whaddaya writing, the Bible?" I said. "They're only novels, Eli. We're talking about human beings here, a son and grandchildren."

"What the hell do you know about the life of an artist?" he said and hung up on me.

My sister Arlene had had a bout with breast cancer, and now, four years later, she called one night in tears to tell us that the cancer had returned, metastasized to the brain. It was inoperable. Arlene's two marriages, like my own marriage, produced no children. She hadn't gone to college and worked for many years as the bookkeeper at Zimmerman's Liquors in the Loop. I helped her out a bit financially when her building went condo and she wanted to buy her apartment; I also gave her some investment advice that worked out well. But she had no one in the world except Gerry and me, who loved her, and Eli. She was given between six to eight months to live.

Arlene was the most generous-spirited person I ever knew. She had no meanness, no anger, no envy—at least none that I ever saw. When I went with her to see Al Hersh to discuss her will, she decided to divide everything she had between Eli's grandchildren. I learned then that she had a list of their birthdays and every year sent each one of them a card with a $50 bill in it. She made me promise not to tell Eli about the return of her cancer. "He hates death," she said. "He can't stand hearing about it. I'll tell him when the time gets nearer."

Arlene had also arranged another dinner with her neighbors the Wertheimers. She had a bad conscience about the way the previous one had turned out, and she hoped that we would come again. Of course we said yes. She told us, too, that she hadn't told the Wertheimers about the return of her cancer, and we were instructed not to mention it.

The going was much easier without Eli there. We talked about the Wertheimers' and Arlene's neighbors, about the American infatuation with sports, about their foreigners' view of American politics. "Too much virtue in American politics," Karl Wertheimer said. "I prefer a straighter kind of political engagement. I mean one in which one votes one's interests and beliefs and doesn't think people who vote otherwise are monsters or idiots."

Arlene is a good cook, and the dinner was excellent. It was only at dessert—a pineapple upside-down cake—and coffee that

Henrietta Wertheimer asked if we minded talking about Eli. No one seemed to object.

"Your brother, you know, is a peculiar but not entirely unknown type," she said. "Nothing, it seems, makes him happy. Not his successes, not his wives and children, not all the world's lavish praise of his work. Psychotherapy doesn't really have a label for such a condition. He isn't a depressive, nothing so simple as that. Yet, one could tell from a single meeting with him, and from the many seemingly grudging interviews he has given to the press, that the world—how to say this?—the world disappoints him. It isn't, somehow, good enough for him."

"I note from a recent interview," Karl Wertheimer joined in, "that your brother has begun a dalliance with the doctrines of Rudolf Steiner. Perhaps you know of this man Steiner?"

None of us did.

"A quack not even of the first order," he continued. "In his doctrine, spirits are aloft, souls join in the empyrean, all sorts of other—how do you Americans say?—fun and games. But what I find interesting in all this is your brother's need for a higher doctrine, for a system of ideas, no matter how foolish. He was a Trotskyist, I understand, as a young man, then there is the Wilhelm Reich period, which we talked about earlier, now there is Rudolf Steiner. Perhaps, who knows, in the end he will die, your brother, as a Catholic."

I didn't know how to respond. The Wertheimers knew a lot more about the intellectual side of Eli than I did. But what I took from their account of my brother's adventures among the quacks was his basic unreality. He grew up on the same streets I did. We had the same parents. How could two people be so different?

"What do you make of all my brother-in-law's marriages?" Gerry asked.

"A number of possible ways of viewing this," Henrietta Wertheimer said. "Perhaps they express a yearning for the settled life that he thinks he wants but does not really want. Perhaps he operates, your brother-in-law, under a theory of muses, like the painter Picasso or the choreographer Balanchine, who had different wives and mistresses for different phases of their respective careers. This, too, is possible."

"What seems clear to me," Karl Wertheimer joined in, "is that Eli Black believes in the myth of the artist. This is a myth that

holds that everything must be sacrificed for art. It may not be a foolish myth if one is, say, Michelangelo or Beethoven. But if one is less than that then the myth of the artist is very destructive, sadly so for the people who become too closely involved with him."

When it finally came time to tell Eli about the return of Arlene's cancer, he did come to visit. He had by this time moved to Washington, planning, he said, to write a political novel, though he never did. (Instead, Gerry tells me, he wrote a novel attacking his fourth wife for not understanding the condition of the artist and for her unconscious anti-Semitism.) He stayed at Arlene's apartment over a long weekend. I never found out what they spent their time talking about, but I'd bet it wasn't about death. When I tried to talk to Eli about hospice and other arrangements for Arlene, he seemed very uncomfortable. Nobody likes death, but Eli seemed to take death personally. He didn't quite see why death should one day have to happen to him, too. He seemed to feel there was something unfair about it, at least in his case.

Now that he was near seventy, he did what he could to fight it. When he came over for dinner at our apartment, he told Gerry beforehand that he no longer ate meat. He spent a lot of time in gyms. He took up yoga. He became thin, which only made him look older. A picture of him published in the *Chicago Tribune Magazine* shows his skin sagging, his hooded eyes looking wrinkled like a lizard's, his nose larger, wearing one of his crazy suits (blue-grey with red stripes outlined faintly in yellow), a pink shirt, a bandana around what appeared to be his goiterish neck. He looked, Gerry said, like an ancient Jewish parrot.

I also noted a strong strain of sentimentality in my brother. Although Eli didn't come to Arlene's funeral—he said it would have been too much for him—once she was dead he spoke of her as if she were a saint. "She was the only person who ever truly loved me," he told me, "who took me exactly as I am, no questions asked." He even had kind words for our father. He was super critical of other writers, but if one of them died, he spoke more kindly about him. To earn Eli's respect, apparently you have to die first. That seemed to me a very steep price to have to pay.

Eli had repaid my quarter of a million loan, right on schedule. His life seemed, at least as far as I could tell, on a firmer basis. He was married to the same woman, the dean of a university in Washington, where he now lived, for eight or so years. He published a new novel. As a writer, he was respected more than ever, or so Gerry reported from reading the reviews of this latest book. I was headed toward eighty; my brother was seventy-three.

And then I hear that Eli had left his wife to marry a graduate student at Georgetown University, a woman not yet thirty. Which means she was more than forty years younger than he was. Something in my brother evidently can't stand peace and quiet. I knew nothing about the girl, but I could imagine what her parents must have felt when she told them she was going to marry a man older than they were. I shouldn't be surprised if Eli, in his vanity, felt his sexual attraction was still there, he was still in the game, still a player. Gerry jokingly wondered if her brother-in-law and his new bride were registered at Marshall Fields. I felt sorry for the girl.

I felt even sorrier when, a year or so later, Eli's son David called to tell me that his father and his young wife had had a Down's syndrome child, a boy they named Frederick. What the hell was Eli thinking! No doubt jacked up on Viagra, was he going to show the world he was still virile? Hadn't he already proved he was a misery as a father? Why prove it again? Gerry thought that a child probably wasn't Eli's idea but his young wife's. She said that it sounded like the notion of a young woman to want the child of the much older husband, something to have after he had gone. A part of me felt sorry for Eli. I found it hard to imagine the life he led with a young wife, with whom he couldn't have all that much in common, and now a retarded son.

Eli never called to tell me that he had remarried or that he had had a child, and this time the lapse in our relations ran four or so years. I sold my business. Gerry and I now lived half the year in a condo we purchased in Boca Raton. Our health had held up fairly well, though I had begun to have arthritis in my elbows and ankles, about which there isn't much to be done but grin and bear it. I try to find pleasure in each day. The truth is that I feel myself damn lucky: I'd always made a good living, I wasn't dependent on anyone my whole life, and I still enjoy my wife's company.

I'd pretty much lost touch with Eli's son David—his other kids

I can't say I really ever knew to begin with—when one day I decided to call David to see how things were going with him.

"Things aren't too bad, Uncle Lou," he said. "I've had a promotion. My kids are in good shape. We bought a larger house. Can't complain."

"How's your father?"

And then David told me that his father was suffering from dementia.

"How bad?" I asked.

"I guess it tends to be day to day—that is, some days he's better than others. I went out to visit him in Washington. He sleeps a lot. He knows who everyone is, but his sense of time is way out of whack. He sometimes thinks people who died years ago are still alive. Maybe you ought to try to see him before things get a lot worse."

The next day I called Eli's young wife and asked when it might be convenient to see my brother. Anytime I wished, she said. When I asked how he was, she said, "Some days he's pretty good. Today happens to be one of his bad days."

I took a cab from Reagan Airport to Eli's house, on Hoban Road. His wife greeted me at the door, saying that her husband was sleeping. She was not a beautiful woman, my new sister-in-law, but she had an intelligent face. When I addressed her as Mrs. Black, she said, "Call me, Sandy, please."

She made coffee, which we drank sitting in the large kitchen. Her son, she said, was off at something called Playschool. She wanted to know if I knew anything about Down's syndrome kids.

"They have their own charms, you know," she said. "Frederick is very dear."

"How is my brother with him?"

"Before his illness, he was marvelous with him, though at first he was shocked, and blamed himself, his being so old, for the child's not being normal."

Eli now entered the kitchen. He was in slippers, pajama bottoms, an undershirt with a V-neck. He looked tired; his skin sagged badly; his left eye was almost closed. If you hadn't known him and someone told you he was ninety, you'd have believed it.

"Lou," he said. "What a nice surprise! Did Arlene come along? Arlene always loved me, you know. She was my first and best friend."

I thought to tell him that Arlene had died more than a decade

ago, but then figured that it would only agitate him to do so and so said nothing.

"No, Eli," I said. "Arlene couldn't make it this trip. Why don't you join us for some coffee?"

"A good idea, Louie, sure, why not?" He never called me Louie before; nobody ever called me Louie.

"We have a son, Louie. Frederick the Great, I call him. Cute kid. You'll like him. So tell me, Louie, how's the old man? Still working for Schinberg on Fulton Street?"

"He's fine, Eli. He still doesn't say much. What do you suppose he's thinking? You're the novelist. You probably know."

"He's thinking what I am doing in this damn country? He's thinking, who needs this goddamn English language? He's thinking life is full of dirty tricks. It really is full of dirty tricks, Louie, an endless variety of them, I'm here to tell you. But then you probably noticed on your own."

"Hard not to notice, Eli."

"Take me," he said. "Take me, Louie. Somewhere along the way I slipped off the track. Could never get back on. Not good. Wrote the books, though. That must stand for something with someone or other. Only one life to live, I'm afraid, and it's getting obvious that I'm not going to be allowed to live mine as a blond." He put a hand to the few fluffy white hairs that remained on his head.

"Think I'll take a pass on that coffee," he said. "Wake me when Frederick gets home, Sandy. There's lots of things I have to tell him. Next time bring Arlene, Louie. She's my true friend, always was, always will be." And then he shuffled out of the room, my kid brother, and I never saw him again.

I don't know how Eli got the gun, the Beretta, he killed himself with. And of course I don't know what the exact motives for his suicide were. It may be that he was terrified of slipping any further down into the dark hole of his dementia. Maybe he found he lived his life so badly that he wanted to end it. When I remember how much he feared death, I shudder at the picture of him getting up the courage to put the gun in his mouth and then pulling the trigger. He slipped off the track and couldn't get back on, he told me that morning in his house on Hoban Road. What in the hell did he mean? I'll never understand him, my kid brother, Eli.