

THE JOHN GARDNER MEMORIAL PRIZE FOR FICTION



WINNER

A BROTHER, SOME SEX, AND AN OPTIC NERVE

Mona Houghton

The automatic sliding glass doors open and you spot your older brother sitting in his car at the curb. With his hands he pounds the steering wheel rhythmically, pretending it is some kind of drum, and his head moves with the beat. From an overhead speaker a pre-recorded voice repeats itself: “The white zone is for loading and unloading of passengers only. No parking.” You breathe in the smog and the airplane engine exhaust and it smells like home.

When you were in college and came home for holidays your brother used to pick you up at the bus terminal in downtown Hollywood. One time you brought home some mushrooms that your roommate sold you—she called them “shrooms”—and you and Mike each ate some the next morning and spent the day out behind your mother’s house, in an empty lot, looking at sow bugs, examining eucalyptus leaves, smelling dirt—again a boy and a girl. You don’t have any drugs with you today. You are here because of an optic nerve, your mother’s.

As you approach the car you can hear Jimi Hendrix’s guitar screaming and you stop for a moment and watch your brother, gray at the temples, as he rocks out, looking insane to anyone who doesn’t know him, and then you knock on the window. He turns, his eyes on yours, keeps up with the music for a bar or two, then reaches over and releases the lock.

You pull the door open and the music washes over you. You yell, “Cool dude.”

He turns down the radio. “Say what?” he says.

“I said cool dude.”

“Damn right,” he says.

He gets out and you meet him at the back of the car and hug each other. He is a lot bigger than you are and for a moment you let yourself sink into his big-man, big-brother protection.

As he lifts the suitcase into the trunk, you lean forward and grab a handful of his hair.

You haven't seen Mike since you and your husband moved to Lincoln, Nebraska, four months ago. You and your husband are almost exactly the same size.

"So did L.A. look like a shit sandwich from up there?" Mike asks as he slides back in behind the wheel.

You pause before getting into the car. The palm trees, that hazy blue sky. Winter is a sobering event in Nebraska; here there is always the future; there are no boundaries.

Green surrounds the small house tucked into a corner of Laurel Canyon, high in the Hollywood Hills. Up until September you and Greg lived here and so when you walk in, it doesn't feel exactly right to see Mike's books in the bookshelf, and his socks on your old couch, and it smells different, kind of antiseptic, reminiscent of your grandparents' bathroom, and you wonder if your brother has taken to using Absorbine Junior, or some other liniment. The house is small, five, six hundred square feet at the most, but because of the windows it seems bigger. Eucalyptus trees, a grove of them, climb up the hill behind the house, and the ash tree in the patio, its thick trunk and huge canopy, seems like part of the living room, some huge sculpture.

Your brother puts the suitcase on the couch. "I made some room for you in the closet." He goes into the kitchen, which is connected to the room you are in by a counter, and starts to mix up a pitcher of white grapefruit juice. "So how's the mad scientist?"

You tell him about Greg's latest grant, funding to study the genetic links between scoliosis and epilepsy. Greg teaches at the University of Nebraska.

Mike pours two inches of vodka into a glass and tops it off with the grapefruit juice. "Want one?"

You hang up your skirt and blouse and leave your jeans and t-shirts and tennis shoes in the suitcase and put that on the floor near the guest bed, which is a mattress on the floor in

the alcove off the living room. You moved into this house right after graduating from college. At first you liked being alone, but then after a while sometimes you got lonelier than you thought possible and on those days you'd wrap your arms around the ash tree and press your ear up against the trunk and listen to it creak inside as the wind pushed its way through the branches way up high above you. Back then you wanted to believe the tree was talking, speaking sense.

Right now you and Mike go outside and sit in her shade, in low slung beach chairs. Once or twice a year Mike used to come and stay with you. He'd be between jobs, between apartments, between girlfriends, and end up in the alcove for weeks—once he slept in there for a month.

After snow boots and long underwear the late afternoon sun feels good on your legs. Mike talks about your mother and what the doctors expect to find tomorrow. Last week when he called you, told you what they had discovered inside your mother's head, you looked up eye and optic nerve in one of Greg's old biology books. You read about the compound eye, the camera eye. You read about some experiment where a scientist cut the optic nerve and eye muscles on a newt, then rotated the eye 180 degrees, and afterwards the newt moved its head in the opposite direction of stimulation. You had to wait until Greg finished teaching his class that day to find out what it all really meant.

Mike tells you why things ended between him and his old girlfriend. "I had an affair, she had an affair, I had another affair." It's a story Mike has told you more than once.

Then he talks about his new girlfriend (they met three weeks ago; she works in the office of the neurosurgeon who will be operating on your mother tomorrow). They celebrated her twenty-first birthday last week and she might be the one and they haven't been to bed yet. He's moving slowly this time, he says, because he wants it to work. When you start to tease him he insists that this is love. He tells you her hard little-girl tits turn him on like no others.

“Right Mike,” you say, and breathe evenly, refusing to be drawn in. But later, after his third drink and your first, when he will ask you about married life, you will describe happiness in terms of your own breasts. You will be careful to go into vivid detail about their softness, and how you like to look down and see Greg’s lips on them, and exactly how the nipples perk up as you watch Greg’s tongue dance and tease, and how that makes a want in you that makes you think you’ve never wanted before. Mike will laugh and feel uncomfortable. You will feel uncomfortable too, embarrassed almost, but you will go on and on anyway, hoping your brother gets the point.

Your mother looks vulnerable in the hospital bed. She doesn’t even try to smile when you and Mike walk into the room. You go to her, kiss her and pull the sheets that are soft from thousands of washings up close to her chin and you whisper into her ear, “I love you.” She says, “Kiss my eyes,” and as you press your lips against her cool skin a picture comes into your head of her doing the twist. She is earnest, trying hard to have fun. By then your father has been dead for three years and she has finally grieved all she can grieve.

Your brother stands on the other side of the bed. He’s holding one of those sports bottles, the quart-sized ones with a straw coming up out of the lid. It is Day-Glo green and has a picture of a pole vaulter on it. Before leaving the house he filled it with ice and vodka and grapefruit juice and has been sucking on it ever since. He holds the bottle down and slips the straw into your mother’s mouth. She takes a long pull.

You say, “Do you think this is smart?”

“Can’t be any worse than what they plan to pump her full of tomorrow.”

Mother says, “Really, Alice, it’s the least of my worries.”

You believe the tumor is benign and the doctor won’t accidentally sever the optic nerve, and so you disagree. But since your mother knows her head is riddled with cancer, knows doctors always make mistakes, there is no telling her that to drink

vodka might not be good, might not be healthy.

On the way home Mike stops at Chef Ming's on the corner of Crescent Heights and Santa Monica Boulevard and picks up some takeout. At the house, while you zap the Chinese chicken in the microwave, Mike makes a phone call. "Hi Amber," he says and you know immediately that he is talking to his twenty-one-year-old girlfriend. The microwave bleats and Mike turns his back and starts to speak softly into the receiver. You spoon chunks of chicken and pieces of broccoli onto a plate and step outside. There is no moon and the stars are bright and the sweet smell of night blooming jasmine fills your head and you wonder about moving to Lincoln, Nebraska—into the heartland. Five years ago you couldn't have imagined yourself living in a three bedroom brick house on a block in a middle class neighborhood in the middle of the country. You never imagined yourself married to a geneticist. You thought the west coast, you thought Los Angeles, was Mecca. And now, your forty-fifth birthday a month away, you think maybe you belonged in Nebraska all along, that there is something real for you in a world covered in snow, in a white field and a meadow lark singing his song.

You go to bed early, page through a magazine. The phone rings and you hope it is Greg but then you can hear Mike, the low register of his voice. As you fall asleep you suspect Amber called and you wonder what she and your brother say to each other. Way late in the night you wake up to a high-pitched sound that you quickly identify as the voice of a woman, probably a young woman, climbing up towards an orgasm. As she hits the top your brother starts to sing along with her. And then suddenly it is quiet again, and you find yourself wanting Greg to be there in the bed with you. You hug the pillow to yourself and that old loneliness seeps in and you wonder if those feelings have been here inside the walls, behind the sheetrock, waiting for you.

In the morning you walk out onto the patio and a young woman, in one of Mike's shirts, is sitting in a beach chair.

Her hair, so long, almost touches the ground. You look at her chest—her hard little-girl tits.

She says, “You must be Alice.”

“And you . . .” but you don’t finish the sentence because it suddenly crosses your mind that maybe this isn’t Amber.

She stands up and extends her hand. “Amber,” she says. Her legs are brown and smooth.

You shake hands and Mike comes out onto the patio with two cups of coffee.

He swaggers. “Hi, Alice.”

“Morning,” you say and you lean up against the ash tree.

After giving Amber one of the cups of coffee he turns and offers the other to you. He winks and smiles and when you say you’ll get your own he insists that you take his. You want to ask Mike if Amber is the one.

“Amber’s bringing a friend over with her tonight,” Mike tells you. “He’s the radiologist in her office.” Mike is driving through the parking structure at the hospital.

Amber’s quiet demeanor startled you and you wonder why Mike doesn’t pick on someone his own size for a change. Amber should be in Nebraska, on a college campus, falling in love with some boy who started shaving two years ago.

Mike says, “Isn’t she something?”

You nod. And it is the truth.

“You’re speechless, huh?”

“Speechless,” you say. You are thinking about the inside of your mother’s head, about the neurosurgeon probing in there—easing past sections of the brain, hearing and speaking, pausing at memory, sixty-three encapsulated years—then heading on toward the tumor, small, no bigger than the end of your finger, that sits there on the optic nerve, two millimeters in front of the optic chiasm.

When you and Mike finally stumble into the right waiting room and find a nurse who knows your mother, she says your mother is still on the table. Your mother should have been in

recovery by now, so the comment makes your stomach turn over, and the nurse knows nothing, has no explanation for the delay, nothing except a “Maybe the doctor started late.”

Mike likes this excuse. He throws an old *Time* magazine at you and says, “Chill out,” and drifts back over to the nurses’ station.

But as it turns out the doctor did not start late. “Your mother,” the doctor says, “should have had this done months ago.” He goes on, “The nerve is atrophied.” At the end he says, “It is unfortunate that she let her fear get in the way.”

This conference with the doctor sobers your brother up (the two of you had lunch at the bar across the street). The tumor, glistening, the color of a ripe plum, is at this very moment on its way to pathology. The doctor assures you that it is benign; he is certain the pathologist will confirm this.

Complete blindness in one eye, partial blindness in the other. You and Mike come to the conclusion that she will adapt. But when you step into the intensive care unit and find your mother struggling to come out from under the anesthetic, her head wrapped, her arms secured to the sides of the bed, you can’t imagine her ever going back to anything like her normal life—walks at the beach, bridge, the occasional trip to Costa Rica. You watch Mike and he pales. You haven’t seen this happen since he was in fourth grade and the principal humiliated him in front of the whole grammar school for having stolen a tray of milk.

You go to him. “Hey, Mike, it’s okay.”

He steps back, laughs, goes over to a phone on a desk in the middle of the room. You can hear him as he leaves a message on Amber’s answering machine, something about calling back later and reminding her to bring her doctor friend along for dinner.

While he is on the phone your mother slips up through the fog and talks nonsense, something about being in a neighbor’s house, taking a bath, using the towels, and then being arrested on her way out the door. Your father’s name bubbles into the narrative.

You and Mike don't get away from the hospital until 7:30. By then Mike has called Amber four times. She left work at five, and her phone machine picks up at the apartment. This more than frustrates your brother.

On the way home he stops at a Japanese restaurant. The sake with a beer chaser hits the spot and you feel the anxious day bleed out of you. You drink one on one with Mike—and within an hour more raw fish slips down your throat than you thought possible.

Somehow Mike manages to drive up through the hills to the house. You are far too drunk to have accomplished this. He goes straight to the phone machine. You're hoping Greg has called, but the only message is from Eddie, who wants Mike to crew on a friend's sailboat this Saturday. "Dammit," Mike says, and goes into the kitchen and mixes up a batch of grapefruit juice.

You and your brother sit outside in the beach chairs, under a sliver moon, and drink some more. He's pulled the phone out there and punches in Amber's number every once in a while.

The booze has mellowed you out and you find yourself talking to Mike about your plan to try to get pregnant, to take an extended leave from your job at the university medical clinic and start a family.

When he questions you, you say, "Yeah, yeah we do want to."

Mike sees kids as the padlock on the chain. "Capitalism has you then," he says.

You make a stumbling argument to support your decision, trying hard to express these new feelings about intimacy and faith and belief in the future.

Mike won't engage, accuses you of buying into the party line, then tries Amber again and you say, "No thanks," when he pushes himself up out of the chair and goes in to fix himself another drink. You reach for the phone and then realize it is almost midnight in Nebraska, that he has probably been asleep for an hour, maybe two.

With your head straight back you can make out Orion in

the southern sky. You hear Mike, ice rattling against glass. He slips a fresh drink into your hand as he sits back down next to you, and you're glad to have the burn of alcohol at the back of your throat again.

"Check this out," Mike says.

You look over and see a gun in your brother's hand—huge and black.

You say, "What the hell?"

".44 Magnum," he says. "I just got it the other day."

He has always had guns, but this? You say, "It's a fucking cannon."

He drops it in your lap and you jump.

He says, "Go on, pick it up."

You feel like you are ten years old again, and Mike is bullying you, calling you a sissy-girl without saying the words. You aren't afraid of the gun and so you reach down into your lap and wrap your fingers around the butt. Heavy and well balanced, it sits in your hand like it belongs there. This surprises you.

"Ruger Blackhawk," your brother says. "It'd blow someone's head right off their shoulders."

"Great," you say.

He says, "Go on. Shoot it off."

You aim out into the night and say, "Bang."

He says, "I'm serious."

And you say, "Are you nuts? We're in the city limits here."

He says, "Fuck it," and grabs the gun. He takes aim, pointing it at the ash tree.

As you yell, "No," a huge explosion fills up all the night around you, and you see fire coming out the end of the barrel and gun-powder smells sear the inside of your nose.

"You are crazy, Mike." You jump up. He doesn't move. He is still in the beach chair, the revolver pointed out in front of him. Your ears are ringing and you realize how drunk you really are. You go to the tree, run your fingers over the trunk until you find the place where the bullet entered. The hole is ragged, and warm. There is no evidence of the bullet having come out the

other side and so it must be inside, wedged somewhere in the bruised pulp.

You hear Mike stand and then he says, “Come on.” He has his keys in one hand and the gun in the other.

Mike staggers down the path toward the car. You follow, trying to talk Mike into coming back to the house, but he wants to take you somewhere where you can fire the gun off too. You tell him you don’t care about it, but he is determined. “We’ll be there in five minutes,” he promises and you find yourself sitting in the passenger seat as Mike, for the second time that day, backs out of the driveway.

He didn’t lie. In five minutes your brother drives into the park up at the top of Laurel Canyon, off of Mulholland Drive. You and Greg had a picnic here one afternoon last summer, five acres, some of it in grass, most of it in native brush. You notice an old Pontiac in the lot, but it is dark and isolated here. Mike explains the vehicle away—“Probably abandoned.” You see the lights of the city way down below and now the idea of firing off the gun doesn’t seem impossible. You actually want to hold it in your hand again.

You feel like an outlaw as you walk, side by side with your brother, across the grass, past the jungle gym and the swing set and out into the middle of the park. You can smell sage and Orion has moved east. When Mike presses the gun into your hands suddenly you don’t need any more encouragement. You hold it out in front of you and blast off one fiery shot and you are amazed at the kick, at the way the power travels back up your arm and into your body. The very sense of this thrills you, and even as it shames you, you let go with another explosion.

You whoop and say, “We’d better get out of here,” and start dancing back toward the car. Mike follows you. Like a movie cowboy you pop one off into the air. The kick drills you back into the ground.

As you come up the rise to the parking lot Mike grabs the gun out of your hand. He shoots it straight up into the air too. At the same moment the light in that old Pontiac comes

on, and you see a young man standing at the car, holding the door open. A woman is beside him; she has a blanket wrapped around her. They are frozen there, caught in the flash. In that instant you know you have terrified the two of them, and you feel terrible for it. Your brother starts to laugh, and shoots the gun again. You yell to the couple, “We’re just fooling around,” and you take hold of Mike’s sleeve and pull him toward his car. Mike pushes you away and is about to pull the trigger again, but you run back into him and somehow your legs get tangled up with his and the two of you fall to the ground. The gun flies out of his hand and skids across the asphalt.

Mike hollers, “What the fuck?”

“Let’s just get out of here.” But you feel Mike’s shoes pressing into your stomach, the toe digging into your solar plexus and then you are gagging for air. Finally, when you sit up you see Mike next to you, still on the ground too. The man from the Pontiac stands nearby, one white tennis shoe on top of the gun.

The woman calls out from the car, “Joseph?”

“We don’t want to hurt anyone,” you yell. To the man you say, “I’m sorry.” You sound weak and senseless.

“Don’t worry,” he yells over his shoulder.

“Look,” you say as you try to stand up, “I’m Alice. . . .”

“Keep your butt on the ground.”

“Okay. Okay, and this is my brother, Mike.”

“Nice manners.”

“Hey, man,” says Mike, “we didn’t mean to interrupt.”

He yells, “Interrupt?” The woman comes up beside him.

You say, “Shut up, Mike.”

The man says, “Go back to the car.”

The woman says, “Come with me.” She puts an arm around the man’s waist. “Come on.” The man doesn’t move. She is a small woman with lots of dark hair around her face. She looks at you, at Mike. “They’re just a couple of dumb drunks.”

It dawns on you that there are no more bullets in the gun, that all six shots have been fired. You double check, thinking

through the sequence again, and then you start to laugh at your own fear.

“Nothing’s funny here,” the man says.

This time when you push yourself up, you don’t stop when the man yells. Instead you tell him to relax, that the gun is empty.

“Not by my count,” the man says. He moves fast, pushing the woman behind him, bending and picking up the gun. He doesn’t handle the gun with any comfort.

Mike is on his knees. You help him up. “Let’s go home.”

But Mike digs into his pocket. He wants to keep going. “I’ve got some more bullets here if you want.”

“Are you nuts?” the woman says.

You say, “He is.” You turn to Mike and see that he’s holding his hand out, palm up, with three shiny new bullets lined up in it. He has never known when to stop.

“Take ‘em,” he says. “Go on, Joe, try the gun out. Pull the trigger. It’ll get her hot all over again.” Your brother wolf whistles, a high, piercing sound. “Believe me. I know.” Now he is really scaring the woman. He whistles again, and you look at him and think of Amber (now she seems like some kind of show he performed for you) and re-see over the grinning raw face beside you, the pale way his skin went when he saw his mother earlier.

“Leave the nice people alone,” you say.

“Nobody’s nice,” Mike says. His voice goes cold. “Remember that, little sister.” He puts the bullets back into his pants pocket. “Now, why don’t you give me the gun.”

The man takes a hold of the barrel and throws the gun as hard as he can. You can see it, its darkness blacker than the night, spinning like a boomerang, and then you can hear it as it crashes into the dry brush down in the ravine beside the parking lot.

“Fuck you,” the man says. He’s scared. He grabs the woman by the arm and the two of them run back to the Pontiac.

Your brother chases after them, taking only a couple of steps and making frightening sounds. He laughs and looks at you to join him; the sound is shrill and only makes you feel sad.

But Mike is still laughing when the man revs the Pontiac as it passes by.

Your brother goes to the trunk of the car, opens it and gets a flashlight out of the tool kit. "Let's see if we can find that goddamn gun," he says.

You don't move to help him. Instead you walk back into the park, over to the jungle gym. You wrap your hands around the cold pipe and pull yourself up and climb to the top. You stand there, your knees braced against the last rung, and look out into the night.