

Brotherly Love

1933

Inspired by the song *Brotherly Love* from Road Show

Music and Lyrics by Stephen Sondheim

The seven-story in east Manhattan was surrounded by taller buildings with windows trimmed in Christmas lights. I doubt anyone would notice us at 4 a.m. on a weekday morning. Two men, one in an overcoat cradling another guy wrapped in quilts, hunched in despair like the lovers in the last act of *Romeo and Juliet*. Our story was tragic but not one of romance.

Mama always said I should look after my younger brother. Wilson was the charming rogue, the ne'er do well, the fuckup, but always the apple of her eye. She loved his boldness. His sparkle. His glide. So much so that she'd tricked herself into thinking he was carefree rather than someone completely lacking in empathy.

The snow was falling lightly when I entered a phone booth on Central Park West to call him. I let the phone ring three times. Hung up. And rang three more. That was our signal. Charles, the desk clerk, didn't stir when I entered the small lobby. He'd been the guardian of this building on West 74th since I was a schoolboy. He seemed old even then.

I tiptoed to the elevator, pushed the button for the fourth floor, and watched the doors close. If anything would wake the neighbors at this hour, it would be the ring of the lift, so I quickly exited and moved to the stairwell climbing to the fifth floor. I rapped lightly at the door and Willy opened right away wearing a t-shirt and shorts. The quilt mama had sewed for the guest bedroom was draped around his shoulders.

"What is it Addy? What the hell is so important?"

I pushed pass him into the narrow hall, my still-wet overshoes squishing on the marble floor. I switched on the overhead light in the living room and sat on the sofa without removing my coat. Decembers were cold in these old buildings with the high ceilings and aging wood-framed windows.

"Why'd you do it?" I asked my brother.

Wilson pulled the quilt ends tighter, padded barefoot to a chair across from me and flopped down. "I don't know what you're talking about." He stifled a yawn and closed his eyes.

"Running that stock scam. Flashing around those certificates like they were worth something."

His eyes fluttered but didn't open. He snuffed another yawn.

"Look at me, Willy. Mama called tonight, crying. She told me all about it."

Our mother was no fragile flower. She'd raised two boys and managed our household without much involvement from her successful CEO husband. I'd witnessed her negotiate a bulk meat sale with a wholesale butcher, and stare down the bully neighbor in apartment 520 who everyone knew beat his wife. But now, nearly eighty, with chronic gout, Mama lived in a home for the elderly.

Wilson finally peered with one eye. "What's the harm? I sold a few dreams to some old people. Most of them haven't had anything to look forward to in years. They all seemed happy when I left."

"Not anymore. The son of one of the residents—a Broadway producer—got wise to your phony gold mine scheme. He's bringing in the police. These are Mama's friends-or used to be—not just marks you can then bounce. Even if you hit the road for a while, Mama can't. She'll get all the blame."

Wilson didn't respond. Still grasping the blanket, he sat up and reached for the bronze cigarette box on the coffee table. His bleary eyes, bare feet, and bunched garb brought back memories of us as kids when we had a close bond linked by blood and true affection. But time had revealed a wide psychological chasm—one wider than our two-year age difference.

"Why did you come here tonight, Addy? You want me to apologize?"

Willy blew smoke rings. His legs draped over the chair's armrest, a lock of hair dangling on his forehead. Boyishly attractive. Charismatic. Family, friends, even some enemies had been caught up in his charm at one time or another. But I was over it. When Mama called last night, she'd already survived a couple of days of confrontations and ostracism. And there was something in her voice I'd never heard before. Shame. It broke my heart and gave me resolve.

"We thought putting the apartment in your name would finally give you some stability."

"We?" Wilson glared. His resentment shimmied across the floor. "You and mama are always meddling in my affairs. And you're always trying to make me beholden to you. You enjoy it don't you?" He stubbed the cigarette into the ashtray.

"Where's the money?"

"It's spoken for. I have a line on a real estate investment."

I looked past Wilson to the French doors of the dining room. The six-room apartment was a symbol of upper middleclass status—Italian marble, lead windows, and wood built-ins.

The side tables held Tiffany lamps and heavy crystal ashtrays. The mantle was still filled with framed photos of our American Dream family. When Papa paid off the mortgage, we celebrated with catered lobster and steak, and I had my first taste of Champagne. But we also learned that day of Wilson's shellfish allergy and he had to be rushed to the hospital. That's the way it always was. Mama, Papa, and me taking care of Willy. Those family dynamics, like these rooms, had pretty much remained the same over thirty years.

I circled the living room. Some of the paintings had been removed—the screws still in the walls. The print Mama adored of some foreign prince, the framed sheet music for *Blue Skies*, Papa's favorite song, signed by Irving Berlin himself. They were gone. Faded squares marking the outlines. I peered into the dining room. The chandelier was missing, and Mama's sideboard was angled away from the wall.

"Are you selling the furnishings?"

Wilson ignored my question. He pulled the quilt tighter and tucked his feet beneath him.

"Don't you have someplace else to be, big brother, like your own home?"

"I mean it Willy. What's going on? What's happened to the paintings. The chandelier?"

"I've sold a few things. I was going to tell you later. I have a buyer for the place," Wilson said reaching for another cigarette. "I'm leaving in a week for Boca Raton."

I slumped onto the couch. Stunned. Staring at the carpet. Mama and Papa had busted their butts to hold onto this place. To keep it in the family. "If you sell the apartment it'll break Mama's heart. To her it's part of the family legacy. She was so hopeful."

"Hope is for the little people. It's only what can be counted that really counts. Didn't we always say that?"

I shook my head. "You were the one who always said that."

"Lighten up, Addy. We used to have lots of good times together. I know you're still looking out for me. That's why you came around isn't it? To warn me about the producer, and the police?"

I wanted Wilson to own up to what he'd done and agree to return the money. But he never would. He'd gone too far this time. He'd disgraced Mama, and the memory of our deceased father. Wilson had wasted his life.

I smiled and spread my arms. "So, you're going away. Come give your brother a hug."

He hesitated a moment before he rose. I pulled him to me and felt the weight of his head on my shoulder. Just like when we were boys.

I reached for the ashtray, felt its cold, hard grooves, and brought it down hard on Willy's head. His body went limp, the quilt dropped from his shoulders, but I held him up. I touched the back of his head, and my fingers came away red.

There'd be even more blood after his fall.

I lifted Wilson over my shoulder and moved to the door. The empty hallway was easy to navigate, and holding onto the railing I managed the flight-and-a-half of stairs to the roof. Many buildings had an alarm on the roof door. This one didn't. I shoved it open, and the frigid air slapped my face.

The snow had changed from light to steady. Most of the windows in the surrounding buildings were dark, but in the city that never sleeps a few were still illuminated. I carried Willy to the rear of the building where the mechanical room faced a brick wall and service alley, and placed Willy on a grate where warm air escaped the building. I squatted to catch my breath.

As kids, we played on this roof. Shadowboxing like Jack Dempsey defending his heavyweight championship or firing our toy six-guns at imaginary rustlers like cowboy hero, Tom Mix. As teens, we leaned on this very wall smoking cigarettes and sipping cognac stolen from Papa's study.

I assessed my coat—wet with blood and melting snow. I'd need to get rid of it, along with the bloody quilt. Bag 'em and stick them in the trash chute. I also had to make sure there was no blood in the hallway or the stairs. My fingerprints would be all over the apartment. That wouldn't be unusual, but I'd be sure to wipe my prints from the roof door and railing.

Mama would be inconsolable about Willy's death. I'd tell her he never sounded so down in the dumps, that he admitted to the stock fraud and was so ashamed he couldn't live with himself. I'd tell her I went to the apartment to take care of him.

My last problem was how to get out of the building unnoticed. The daily newspapers were delivered to the lobby at four-forty-five where Charles would sort and deliver them to each apartment. If I was lucky I could slip out the service door while he was on his rounds.

My watch read four o'clock. I had to act now before the early risers began to stir. I lifted my brother and cradled him in my arms. He felt even heavier than before.

When Willy spoke, my legs buckled, and we collapsed together in a heap.

"What...what did you say?" I asked staring into his blinking eyes. His eyelashes and hair were coated with snow.

“Thanks for looking out for me, Addy,” He whispered, then raised a bare arm to touch his face. “My head hurts. Oh, Jesus, why is it so cold?”

He instinctively gathered the quilt around him. I yanked it away and propped him up. “Come on. Lean on me.”

I drag-walked him to the three-foot roof wall, squatted to secure his legs in my arms, and lifted him to the ledge. He resisted my efforts but was too groggy to fight.

“What kind of game is this Addy?” he asked.

“No game, Brother. Not this time,” I replied and shoved him over the edge.

I wiped the floor, doorknobs and railings with water and soap, then threw the blood-soaked coat and quilt, and wet rags down the trash chute. I took the stairs down to the lobby. I was lucky. Charles wasn’t at the desk. I didn’t look back as I exited the service entrance.

Traffic was light and it was still snowing when I detoured into the park. Ten minutes later I stopped at home to feed the cat then, for the second time in three hours, I walked to Willy’s apartment.

Charles sat at the front desk. It was just after six o’clock and I acted out a pantomime about concern for my brother. Strangely, I felt absolutely no remorse about what I’d done.

I called the police from Willy’s apartment to report him missing, and when a couple of patrolmen arrived, they searched the apartment and the stairwell. One of them suggested they might look on the roof, and twenty minutes later returned with the news that Willy had been found in the alley where he’d apparently jumped from the rear of the building. Charles had identified him. I declined the cop’s invitation to look at the body.

By eight-thirty, the police were everywhere. The apartment door was open, and neighbors gathered in the hall for a peek at the goings on. I was tired and sat on the couch with my head in my hands. One of the cops had made a pot of coffee and offered me a cup. “No. Thanks,” I said.

An increase in activity at the door made me look up. A NYPD detective had arrived on scene, and he was in conversation with Charles and one of the patrolmen. I caught him staring at me from the front door. A few minutes later he walked over and flipped open a notebook.

“Mr. Mizner, I’m Detective Hollis,” he said sitting where Willy had been hours ago. He looked at the side table, then placed his hat there. I was glad I’d remembered to take the ashtray

with me. Hollis wasn't much older than me. Taller, thinner, maybe mid-thirties. His hat and overcoat were a good quality, and he wore crepe-soled brogues—the policeman's friend.

"Nice apartment," he said looking around.

"It's been in our family thirty-five years," I said.

"You don't live here?"

"No. But, I'm not far away. On 66th, just off the park. This is my brother's place now."

The detective jotted in his notebook. "Our officer found your brother in the alley just after seven a.m. It appeared he'd fallen from the roof an hour or two before. Oddly, no one saw or heard anything." The detective paused to look at me. I returned the stare. "When it's snowing like this, the city can be very quiet. Snow muffles the chaos."

Papa had introduced us to many patrolmen over the years—New York's finest, he called them. Most were working-class guys who started on foot patrol and retired still walking the beat. This guy was different. He dressed well and talked like he read poetry instead of police reports.

"Look, I have to see my mother. Tell her what's happened. She shouldn't hear about this on the radio or from one of the neighbors."

"She's at Chapins, in Queens, I understand. The Old folks home."

"A residence for elderly women," I corrected him.

The detective read my tone. "I see. Well, I need you to stay around. I have questions for you."

"I told the two officers who came this morning everything I know. I don't have anything to add."

"There are always things witnesses remember later."

He noticed my flinch at the word 'witness'.

"We're interviewing the neighbors on this floor, but we've already spoken with the building janitor. And the desk clerk," Hollis continued. "He says he's known you and your brother since you were young boys."

I nodded. I needed to play it cool with this policeman. Willy and I had known men like him. Willy called them misses. As in hit or miss. You'd hit on the guys you could con, but some men couldn't be flattered, tempted, or strung along. Hollis was one of them. But I had no choice.

"Charles has become a bit of a busybody in his old age."

Hollis studied me, then stood. You can call your mother. Or, I can send a patrol car to her, uh, residence and one of our officers can speak with Mrs. Mizner. But, like I said, I need you here."

I glared at Hollis.

The detective conferred with someone from the medical examiner's office while I phoned Mama. As soon as I heard her voice, mine choked. When I got out the story I wanted her to believe, she began to scream. And when the phone suddenly disconnected I crumpled to the floor. It was a few minutes before I regained my composure. When I did, Detective Hollis was staring.

"I still need to ask you those questions," he said gazing down at me. "Let's talk in your brother's room."

He headed for the middle bedroom. I pulled myself up and followed. The detective stood at the dresser holding a framed photograph of me and Wilson when we were thirteen and eleven. "The Mizner brothers. The golden boy Wilson, and the level-headed Addison," he said with a bit of derision. "A few of the neighbors said you two were inseparable as boys. The janitor says he had to shoo you two off the roof all the time.

"So?"

"So, is it true you and your brother haven't been so cozy since your mother moved out?"

"We haven't seen each other very much the last couple of years."

"But you came over this morning because he called you and sounded suicidal?"

"No. I never said that. I didn't really think he'd kill himself, but I'd never heard him sound so depressed. I offered to come over."

"How long did it take for you to arrive?"

"Maybe a half-hour. I got dressed. And I walked over."

"From 66th Street?"

"That's right."

"Did your brother say why he felt depressed?"

I sat on the bed staring at the floor and forming my lie. I didn't want Hollis to know about the stock scam at Mom's residence. But maybe he already knew. "He'd had a business deal go bad." A lie built on an element of truth was always more effective.

"That's happened quite a bit I understand." Now Hollis was sorting through the clothes hangers. "Lots of bad luck, I hear."

"He's had a few enterprises go south."

"Enterprises? I've heard they were more like shady deals."

"That's why he was feeling so down. He'd seen the error of his ways."

"Mr. Mizner, I received some news before I came here this morning. Your brother was assaulted before he fell to his death. Bashed on the head with a blunt object. So, we're dealing with a homicide not a suicide."

I felt blood rush to my face. *Damn. I thought the impact of a seven-story fall would cover up the head wound.*

Hollis watched my surprised reaction for a few seconds then continued his perusal of the contents of Wilson's closet. Suddenly, he spun to face me. "Mizner, where's your overcoat?"

"My overcoat?"

"Yes. You didn't walk out in the snow without a coat did you?"

"Uh. No. I guess it's in the hallway. There's a hat stand..."

"Let's go take a look," Hollis said heading out the door.

"Here it is." I removed the worsted wool coat from the rack and handed it to the detective. "See, it's still a bit wet."

"Charles says this is Wilson's coat. He says your mother gave each of you boys an overcoat three Christmases ago. Yours in black, and your brother's in dark blue. He thought it odd when he saw you wearing it this morning."

"Well, Charles is wrong. He's the desk clerk, and not privy to everything that goes on in our family."

"Then where is Wilson's overcoat? It's not in the closet."

I shifted from one foot to the other and looked toward the front door. Two uniformed officers stood guard. Their thumbs tucked in their belts. They eyed me like they already knew I was guilty.

"Why don't you sit down, Mr. Mizner," Hollis ordered.

I took the couch again, and Hollis returned to the armchair.

"Did you know your brother had purchased train tickets to Boca Raton? He was leaving next week."

"No," I lied. "I didn't know."

"Did you know he was selling the apartment?"

"Who told you that? Oh, let me guess. The desk clerk."

“Charles says Wilson has had a half-dozen potential buyers in and out of here for the last month.”

I held the Detective’s eyes as they slowly shifted from me to his notebook. He was calculating my responses, sizing me up. He wouldn’t say another word until I did.

“Look, I don’t know where Willy’s coat is. Maybe someone stole it. With strangers coming in and out of the apartment, who know what’s missing. Several valuable paintings that were in this room are gone.” I gestured toward the discolored walls. “Along with other things.”

“Hmm,” Hollis sounded. “You mean like the match to this?” He picked up a crystal ashtray from the side table.

I’m positive the Detective saw me swallow before I answered. “I don’t recall that it was part of a pair.”

Hollis again paused the interrogation. He scribbled in his notebook then laid it aside and stared at me. I felt sweat gather at the nape of my neck. This man thought he was so smart, but so was I. He had no evidence that I killed Wilson. He couldn’t place me in the apartment when Wilson died, and he didn’t have a motive. I was agitated, but still in control. I never raised my voice and I never let my gaze waver from the detective’s eyes. I’d successfully negotiated scores of business deals, and this guy wasn’t so different from others I’d convinced to buy my story.

“Here’s what I think, Detective. My brother was feeling despondent. Maybe he was low on cash, regretting having to sell the apartment. Ashamed even. He couldn’t sleep and he was overwhelmed with fear that he was a failure. He went up to the roof, and in a rash moment he jumped.”

“What about the wound on his head?”

“Maybe he lost his footing on the roof and bumped his head. It was snowing. And the other officer said he was barefooted. If you don’t have any other questions for me I need to see my mother. She isn’t strong anymore and this could kill her. Wilson was...”

“Her favorite?”

I stood. “I’m leaving, Detective Hollis, unless you plan to arrest me. May I have my overcoat?”

Hollis signaled one of the officers who handed over the blue coat. The two policemen at the door reluctantly parted their bodies to let me by.

Charles registered surprise when he saw me come out of the elevator, and avoided my eyes as I passed by the front desk.

“Goodday, Mr. Mizner,” he said as I opened the front door.

“You talk too much, Charles,” I replied.

I wished I’d worn gloves as I turned up the collar on Wilson’s coat and headed south. When I got home I’d shave and change clothes, then hail a taxi for the ride to Queens. But first, another quick errand.

The city always did a wonderful job of decorating for the Holidays. In the daytime, the Christmas trees were unremarkable but in the evening, with the colored lights sparkling and snow falling like it had been last night, they were magical.

I stepped into Central Park where several inches of pristine snow covered the grass. A woman walked her dog on the slushy path, and a few people hurried along on their way to wherever. Nobody seemed interested when I paused at the first decorated tree. I moved around the bench and crouched in front of the display of metal cubes painted to look like festive gifts. I reached behind the pink box groping until my fingers touched the freezing cold ashtray. I shoved it into the same pocket it had rested in the night before. I’d dump it near Mama’s place, instead of two block from where I lived.

I turned back to the path and hurried to my apartment. Before I turned the key in the lock, I heard Cleveland’s meow. I stepped inside. Then stopped. Hollis and the two cops who had guarded Willy’s apartment stood in my vestibule. I shoved both hands into my pockets.

“Found your coat,” Hollis said. He signaled one of the officers who held up two paper bags. The ones that should have been ashes by now. “Lucky for us, Percy was running late for work this morning. He hadn’t had time to fire up the incinerator.”

The detective gave me a cocky smile. “What’s in your pocket?”

The End

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