

Winner of the Kay Snow Award 2006
Honorable Mention - Non-Fiction

Reunion

Jim, my half-brother, comes for Christmas dinner. I haven't seen him in almost 20 years. I've invited him because he is the last person alive with whom I share a childhood, and there are blank, helpless holes in my memory. He is the only one left who might enlighten me.

Months before, I phoned him, out of the blue. A man, I imagined his roommate, answered and said, "There's no Jim here." That's when I remembered that his friends knew him only as Catfish because of his Fu Manchu moustache.

If he was surprised to hear my voice, it didn't show. We caught each other up on superficial life events. He thanked me for my invitation, but said no, he just couldn't get away. Some weeks later, he called me back and said yes.

He arrives, looking like a version of Nick Nolte who has had a really rough life. Scoliosis has shrunk him several inches from his original six feet. He still has beautiful blue eyes, translucent as were our mother's. His voice has retained that adenoidal, stuffed-up quality, making me remember that my parents had him eat separately from us because he made too much noise when he chewed. His hair is long, quite long. Once a year he cuts it and gives it to the Cancer Society to make wigs for kids.

Jim has three nephews who he's never met. Jesse is 15. He is in full, sulky adolescence and doesn't grace us with his presence for long. Luke is 12 and, as the middle child, needs to be sought after and drawn out. Jim clearly isn't up for the demands of getting to know Luke. Max, 10, is ready to love anyone who walks through the door. He is curious about this brother of mine that he never knew existed.

Jim brings four cards: three for the boys with a \$20 bill each and one for my husband, Tom, and me. "For a Sister and Brother-in-Law Who Mean So Much." There is a \$50 bill inside. He wants to make sure we read the inside of the card; he mentions it several times. Not completely satisfied with Hallmark, he has hand-written, "Always remember that God loves you." My eyes water. When I thank him, he mentions that it's the first time he's ever given me a gift. The fact that he knows that he's never given me anything makes more of an impact on me than the giving of the gift itself.

Jim is a forklift operator in a town a half a day's drive from here. He is staying at a motel for 3 nights, the Super 8. \$50 a night. An expensive trip for him, but I couldn't bring myself to put him up. Too many unknowns.

He manages commendably to fit in with our crowd, which includes us five, plus Tom's son, his niece, and my oldest friend, Melissa. Not an easy situation to walk into just like that, stepping into someone else's life. After dinner, he and I sit by the fire and reminisce. I have an agenda.

I ask him about his earliest memories. He is foggy. We find discrepancies. Our mother had told him that his father (we have different fathers) had beaten her for the four years they were together, but never touched him. Our mother had told me that his father had beaten him, but never touched her. What to believe? At any rate, I tell him, trauma is trauma whether received or witnessed. This seems to be a new idea for him. We pull at different threads. Mostly, we don't have the same sets of recollections.

We talk about what the old house looked like. We talk about his room and its flooring -- black and white linoleum in diamond shapes. I remember an image from a recent dream: a bucket of water spilled and splashed on such a floor and the horrible, sinking feeling that something really bad was about to happen.

Finally I strike. I say that at a séance I was told that my grandfather had molested me. He says, "I don't know about that," and, looking at his watch, jumps up, saying it is time for him to hit the sack. I let it go. I walk him out to his car and we make plans to have breakfast, just us two, the following morning.

I meet him at the restaurant. I prime myself to simply show up, ready for whatever happens. We talk more deeply about the past. Details about his life, his stint in jail for armed robbery when he was strung out on heroin. He shows me a photo, almost 20 years old now. It is of a girl, a pretty girl, supposedly his daughter, although he has never met her. He says that the mother was a married woman and that they had had a month-long affair. He tells me that he still thanked God that he had known such a love in his life. One month. I feel like a glutton, spoiled. He says, "I'm a loner, that's not the way I would have planned it, but that's what I have to work with." A hard reality to live and a hard one to hear.

Come to think of it now, I don't say much about my life or myself. Nor does he ask. That's okay, fine. I hardly notice. We finish our breakfast. He goes to the restroom. I tell him I'll wait outside. I find a patch of sun. It's freezing but sunny. I am enjoying the contrast of sensation, the juxtaposition of heat and cold, satisfaction and longing. I ask myself, do I need to ask any more questions, make any statements? And I think, no, it has all gone well. There is no need for anything more.

He joins me in the patch of sun. Straight away, he mentions the letter I sent him years ago asking if he had ever touched me inappropriately. He stumbles across these words, uncomfortable as hell and unsure of the right terms to use. He says that the letter bothered him for a long time and that he had asked himself over and over again if it were true. He said that he couldn't remember, that he didn't think that he had done that, but if he had he was so very very sorry. He went on, "I know you need to make peace with this. I was just 11 years old, a kid. I couldn't have known what I was doing." He started crying, I started crying, and we hugged, hard.

Afterwards, I wondered if the instant I was alone in the sun letting go of wanting something was the moment he was in the restroom, maybe washing his hands, realizing what needed to be given.