

JANE ST. CLAIR

TALKING BERKELEY DOWN

As usual my brother calls me in the middle of the night with suicidal tendencies.

"I just can't take it anymore," he says. "I'm going to get fired from here. I'm looking at my medicine right this minute. I know which combination will do it. I'm going to do it this time. Friday I'm going to do it for real. Tell Mom I love her."

"How do you know which combination for sure?"

"From the Hemlock Society book."

"They might have it wrong. You might get it wrong. You just sound tired, that's all."

"I am. I'm tired. No one likes me here. I'm just too different from other people, my reactions are too bizarre and I'm tired of trying to fit in. No one likes me, that's all. No one likes me. I can't make it in Wisconsin."

"I like you. You just sound tired. Why don't you take some time off? Call them and tell them you have the flu. Everybody's got the flu these days."

"Then they'll fire me for sure."

"But you just said you're going to get fired anyway."

"You just don't understand."

I do understand, I thought. He and I are about to have another conversation absent logic, absent reason. A geometry made from chaos, a system of theorems no sane person could discern.

"Look," I say to Berkeley. "Have you ever driven up to Green Bay? That's not far. Why don't you take a couple of days off and go up to Green Bay? Mess around."

"I can't. I already owe \$22,000 on MasterCard."

"Then what the hell difference can it make? You told me you were going to kill yourself on Friday. Friday, for real, no backsies. You still have five days left before Friday and you may as well screw MasterCard and your job and go

up to Green Bay."

"What's in Green Bay?"

"I don't know. The Packers. Maybe a museum about the Packers."

"I'm not into the Packers. Your ideas take energy and I'm tired."

But I am tired too, indeed almost as tired of Berkeley's manic depression as he is. It has been seven long years since his first nervous breakdown during senior year in college. Back then Berkeley made some bad scores on his Graduate Record Exams, his girlfriend told him to walk, and our father was dying slowly of lung cancer. The pressure built up inside Berkeley like a crimped hose, and he exploded quietly, quietly . . . and then just as quietly, he mixed a bottle of our mother's Valium into vodka and tomato juice. The tomato juice was typical of Berkeley's upscale style. A Bloody Mary suicide: nice touch. When he was little, Berkeley asked Santa Claus for a silk paisley smoking jacket.

That night my parents and I sat in the waiting room outside the Emergency Center at Cook County Hospital in Chicago, where Berkeley in an unconscious state had been driven in the back of the highest paid taxi in town.

We three sat in the hospital waiting room, steeped in the antiseptic and Pine-Sol smells of the hospital, and we drank sedimented coffee out of Styrofoam cups and didn't say anything to each other. My parents didn't try to ask me to explain why a team of doctors were using a mechanical pump to rid Berkeley of poisons floating in a Bloody Mary and I wasn't sure I could explain it to them anyway. When Letterman finally signed off, we sat there in silence, not talking about Berkeley or Dad's cancer or the pain we were in or nothing.

A doctor came in late the next morning, and told us we could take Berkeley home now. My mother thanked him but she didn't ask for the name of a psychiatrist. The doctor didn't ask anything either; he just made general remarks like priests do when they preside over funerals of people they've never met, such remarks like "Your son seems like a very nice young man."

We putzed around with hospital accountant-types, and then my parents, my brother and I walked out of the hospital and into our car. In our four-way silence, we looked to Berkeley to say the first words and he did. He always did carry the family.

"I could use some food," he said.

"Me too," said Mother with a kind of giddy enthusiasm and relief that the subject was roses.

"You know, we're in a great neighborhood for delis," Berkeley said. "I know a great deli where they make great pastrami sandwiches. It's right around