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## Side By Side

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## Side By Side

Robert MacInnis

The two brothers sat side by side. It was symbolic in a sort of way that only family would understand. They never would stand together. They never agreed on anything. So it was appropriate that they sat, slouched and confined by the walls of the vehicle as if made to be in such close proximity with one another.

Scott and Abram.

Abram and Scott.

The millennium falcon flew out side the passenger window in the shape of a hand, the wind blowing the hair of the attached head in such a way that gave Abram a come-over.

Scott wore his way-too-expensive sunglasses like a novelty and his hat, ripped at the bill to show a certain weathered character, as if he had *been* somewhere—the hat was proof. His clothes were the type he would set aside for a day of hard work, making sure to bring a change of nicer, more appropriate, clothes up with him so the night life would never finger him as a working class patron. *Heaven Forbid.*

Abram is angry. Sometimes he's not clear why. Anger seems to swell within him because of spite and fear of being a little brother his whole life, but he loses his reasons, his forensic note cards drop onto the floor, out of reach. Scott was always better at arguing anyway. He was smarter, but dumber at the same time. He'd always do great in any classes he took, but never went to them so he almost failed. He was the wittiest guy Abram knew, but the most irrational too.

Abram had vocalized things about the tension between the two and words would be slaughtered upon entry of Scott's hemisphere, never missing a chance to argue anything and

everything. Scott never changed, not wavering for anyone, except behind close doors where he might cry to himself, raising his hands to an uncertain vision of heaven, "Why am I here!?"

The thought made Abram laugh inside. He'd pay money to see his bigger-than-life brother cower down before invisible air, worship-ing the wallpaper, or the mantelpiece, or maybe a chandelier—whatever happened to be in front of him at the time that would play a vision of God.

Abram hated the idea of an omnipotent being that got inside his head. He didn't want anything up in there. "If anyone put their hand inside my brain, they'd be lucky to pull it out again," he'd said to his mother once. 6 months and two days ago to be exact. He remembered that day; because it was last time he'd ever spoken to her before . . . before *it* finished devouring her innards.

It was a common thing to make the analogy between his brain and some sort of foul, medieval torture device...like maybe an iron maiden, the body being made into a sieve. The brain, when consumed by self-loathing, is easily made into a condemned household, a poverty stricken sty that no one but the most romantic of tenants could possibly understand. That day that he sat talking to his mother it was in a hospital. A place he never liked to be. It reminded him of the two things he hated the most—ugliness and mortality. His mother wasn't ugly, though it was the worst Abram had ever seen her. She had always been beautiful in that reassuring, motherly way. It seemed to Abram that the relationship between a mother and a son, like that of a father and a daughter, was something special. There was an air of openness that he could never get from his father.

"I know that the two of you fight." She was talking about Scott and he . . . *again*. "We'll work it out, don't worry about it Mom." "Don't give me that. You know as well as I that you two never stop playing king of the fuckin' hill all of the time." His mother swore. Abram wasn't sure if he liked that.

"Life is not a zero-sum game." His mother went on.

"A what?" Abram looked at her as people, doctors, nurses, patients, whoever, passed by outside the door.

"There doesn't always have to be a winner and a loser. Everybody can win, you just have to stop believing in this 'winner take all' crap."

Abram resorted to the look that he would have used in Kindergarten when he didn't get his way. "But he always wins." He pictured himself stamping around the room, his shoelaces untied, acting like a small child.

"He only wins because you think he's winning something. Deal with it." Abram knew that his mother's situation made her more honest than usual, a quality he much liked about her.

\* \* \*

Today was a different day, because Abram had never spent that much time with his brother. He wondered what it would be like to be a Siamese twin. *Abram and Scott, attached at the hip.* That wouldn't last too long. That's not because of medical reasons, but because one day, one of them would fall off and kill the other. Sleeping one night in bed, one would hold a pillow over the other's face or maybe try to beat the other to death with a blunt object.

Abram thought about that day with his mother. He was *still* always losing. *Losin*g. He always lost. The two brothers sat there listening to the radio, letting whatever bad, techno-based, pop song the DJ said was "today's hottest music," come into their head involuntarily. They had been driving for some time now . . . "Almost two hours now . . . wow." Abram thought to himself, while his brother fidgeted biting his nails while driving the Brown Ford Taurus northward. Abram was glad they were going north, even if it was to see family.

"Whatcha reading." Scott was making an effort. Abram knew this because his brother loathed books, completely loathed them.

"It's for a class."

"What is it?"

"You've never heard of it."

"*What is it?*" Scott also never liked to be undermined by someone else not including him on whatever they happen to be doing.

"It's called *How to Avoid Conversation with your brother.*"

Scott grabbed the book, Abram still holding on to it, and lifted it up slightly so he could see the title. "Robinson Crusoe. Is that so hard?"

The car got quiet again. Even with the radio on blaring, the car was quiet. It was that contrasting music that made it a sort of irony—kind of like when you see a fight scene in a movie and they play classical music in the background to give it an almost comical quality.

Abram went back to his book, feeling somehow spited. Communication in the past months had been difficult between the two, probably because of the immediate injection of reality of losing someone important. Neither of them liked reality.

"So what's it about." "A guy stranded on an island who uses utilitarianism and white supremacy to prevail over nature and the native savages." "Oh, yeah? Sounds right up your alley." Scott paused. "You know, you being white and all."

Abram went back to his book, smugly. *He'd won again.* He thought bitterly about his brother. *He always wins.*

All of the times the two had shared any space, some sort of conflict had been there. Abram could still remember his Mother, before Cancer and pills and hospitals and obituaries and death. He missed her. His mother was like the ingredients in those chocolate chip cookies, his father was the nuts he could never stand. Abrams grandmother would mean well when she made those cookies, but she'd always forget that he hated nuts—the taste, the texture, the crunch in his mouth. If only he could pick those out.

He could see a lot of his father in his brother. That bothered him, because it was like his father was there right now. Domineering. Always having to be right.

"It's not a zero-sum game," Abram blurted out. He surprised himself with the words.

"What?" Scott was more surprised by the silence being broken.

"You don't always have to win, you know."

"I don't think that I do." Abram hated his brother for these moments of clarity and maturity. He'd play the Dalai Llama for the rest of the fucking conversation and Abram would lose again.

"Yes you do. You always get the last word, the better argument, the right answer."

"Have you been thinking about this for a while...you seem bitter." As a cartoon character, Abram would have steam coming out of his ears.

"Never mind." Abram resolved to silence. Unexpectedly, Scott responded in kind, not saying a word. Thank God. *I'll try again next time*, Abram thought. I figure I owe her that much.