
Opening Extract from...

Big Brother

Written by Lionel Shriver

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BIG BROTHER

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This novel is entirely a work of fiction.
The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are
the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to
actual persons, living or dead, events or localities is
entirely coincidental.

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To Greg—who was unfailingly, improbably glad for anything good that ever happened to me, and in the face of whose drastic, fantastic, astonishing life any fiction pales.

One in Three Would Trade Year of Life for Ideal Body

Daily Telegraph headline, 24 March 2011

I: Up

chapter one

I have to wonder whether any of the true highlights of my fortysome years have had to do with food. I don't mean celebratory dinners, good fellowship; I mean salivation, mastication, and peristalsis. Oddly, for something I do every day, I can't remember many meals in detail, while it is far easier for me to call up favorite movies, faithful friendships, graduations. It follows, then, that film, affinity, and education are more important to me than stuffing my face. Well done, me, you say. But were I honestly to total the time I have lavished on menu planning, grocery shopping, prep and cooking, table setting, and kitchen cleanup for meal upon meal, food, one way or another, has dwarfed my fondness for *Places in the Heart* to an incidental footnote; ditto my fondness for any human being, even those whom I profess to love. I have spent less time thinking about my husband than thinking about lunch. Throw in the time I have also spent ruing indulgence in lemon meringue pies, vowing to skip breakfast tomorrow, and opening the refrigerator/stopping myself from

dispatching the leftover pumpkin custard/then shutting it firmly again, and I seem to have concerned myself with little else but food.

So why, if, by inference, eating has been so embarrassingly central for me, can I not remember an eidetic sequence of stellar meals?

Like most people, I recall childhood favorites most vividly, and like most kids I liked plain things: toast, baking-powder biscuits, saltines. My palate broadened in adulthood, but my character did not. I am white rice. I have always existed to set off more exciting fare. I was a foil as a girl. I am a foil now.

I doubt this mitigates my discomfiture much, but I have some small excuse for having overemphasized the mechanical matter of sustenance. For eleven years, I ran a catering business. You would think, then, that I could at least recall individual victories at Breadbasket, Inc. Well, not exactly. Aside from academics at the university, who are more adventurous, Iowans are conservative eaters, and I can certainly summon a monotonous assembly line of carrot cake, lasagna, and sour-cream cornbread. But the only dishes that I recollect in high relief are the disasters—the Indian rosewater pudding thickened with rice flour that turned into a stringy, viscous vat suitable for affixing wallpaper. The rest—the salmon steaks rolled around somethingorother, the stir-fries of thisandthat with an accent of whathaveyou—it's all a blur.

Patience; I am rounding on something. I propose: food is by nature elusive. More concept than substance, food is the *idea* of satisfaction, far more powerful than satisfaction itself, which is why diet can exert the sway of religion or political zealotry. Not irresistible tastiness but the very failure of food to reward is what drives us to eat more of it. The most sumptuous experience of

ingestion is in-between: remembering the last bite and looking forward to the next one. The actual eating part almost doesn't happen. This near-total inability to deliver is what makes the pleasures of the table so tantalizing, and also so dangerous.

Petty? I'm not so sure. We are animals; far more than the ancillary matter of sex, the drive to eat motivates nearly all of human endeavor. Having conspicuously triumphed in the competition for resources, the fleshiest among us are therefore towering biological success stories. But ask any herd of overpopulating deer: nature punishes success. Our instinctive saving for a rainy day, our burying of acorns in the safest and most private of hiding places for the long winter, however prudent in its way, however expressive of Darwinian guile, is killing my country. That is why I cast doubt on whether the pantry, as a subject, is paltry. True, I sometimes wonder just how much I care about my country. But I care about my brother.

Any story about a sibling goes far back indeed, but for our purposes the chapter of my brother's life that most deserves scrutiny began, aptly, at lunch. It must have been a weekend, since I hadn't already left for my manufacturing headquarters.

As usual in that era, my husband Fletcher had come upstairs on the early side. He'd been getting up at five a.m., so by noon he was famished. A self-employed cabinetmaker who crafted lovely but unaffordable one-of-a-kind furniture, he commuted all the way to our basement, and could arise whenever he liked. The crack-of-dawn nonsense was for show. Fletcher liked the implied rigor, the façade of yet more hardness, fierceness, discipline, and self-denial.

I found the up-and-at-'em maddening. Back then, I hadn't the wisdom to welcome discord on such a minor scale, since Fletcher's alarm-clock setting would soon be the least of our problems. But that's true of all *before* pictures, which appear serene only in retrospect. At the time, my irritation at the self-righteousness with which he swept from bed was real enough. The man went to sleep at nine p.m. He got eight hours of shut-eye like a normal person. Where was the self-denial?

As with so many of my husband's bullying eccentricities, I refused to get with the program and had begun to sleep in. I was my own boss, too, and I detested early mornings. Queasy first light recalled weak filtered coffee scalded on a hot plate. Turning in at nine would have made me feel like a child, shuttled to my room while the grown-ups had fun. Only the folks having fun, all too much of it, would have been Tanner and Cody, teenagers not about to adopt their father's faux farming hours.

Thus, having just cleared off my own toast and coffee dishes, I wasn't hungry for lunch—although, following the phone call of an hour earlier, my appetite had gone off for other reasons. I can't remember what we were eating, but it was probably brown rice and broccoli. With a few uninteresting variations, in those days it was always brown rice and broccoli.

At first, we didn't talk. When we'd met seven years before, our comfort with mutual silence had been captivating. One of the things that had once put me off about marriage was the prospect of ceaseless chat. Fletcher felt the same way, although his silence had a different texture than mine: thicker, more concentrated—churning and opaque. This gave his quiet a richness, which dovetailed nicely with my cooler, smoother calm. My silence made a whimsical humming sound, even if I didn't actually hum; in

culinary terms, it resembled a light cold soup. Darker and more brooding, Fletcher's was more of a red wine sauce. He *wrestled* with problems, while I simply solved them. Solitary creatures, we never contrived conversation for the sake of it. We were well suited.

Yet this midday, the hush was of dread and delay. Its texture was that of sludge, like my disastrous rosewater pudding. I rehearsed my introductory sentence several times before announcing aloud, "Slack Muncie called this morning."

"Who's Mack Muncie?" asked Fletcher distractedly.

"Slack. A saxophonist. From New York. I've met him several times. Well regarded, I think—but like most of that crowd, has trouble making ends meet. Obliged to accept wedding and restaurant gigs, where everyone talks over the music." All of this qualified as the very "making conversation" I claimed to avoid.

Fletcher looked up warily. "How do you know him?"

"He's one of Edison's oldest friends. A real stalwart."

"In that case," said Fletcher, "he must be very patient."

"Edison's been staying with him."

"I thought your brother had an apartment. Over his jazz club." Fletcher imbued "his jazz club" with skepticism. He didn't believe Edison ever ran his own jazz club.

"Not anymore. Slack didn't want to get into it, but there's some—story."

"Oh, there's sure to be a *story*. It just won't be true."

"Edison exaggerates sometimes. That's not the same as being a liar."

"Right. And the color 'pearl' isn't the same as 'ivory.' "

"With Edison," I said, "you have to learn how to *translate*."

"So he's mooching off friends. How's this for *translation*:

your brother's homeless." Fletcher habitually called Edison "your brother." To my ear that decoded, "your problem."

"Sort of," I said.

"And broke."

"Edison has been through thin patches before. Between tours."

"So because of some mysterious, complicated story—like not paying the rent—you brother has lost his apartment, and now he's couch surfing."

"Yes," I said, squirming. "Although he seems to be running out of couches."

"Why did this *Slack* person call, and not your brother himself?"

"Well, I think Slack has been incredibly generous, though his apartment is small. A one-bedroom, where he also has to practice."

"Honey. Spit it out. Say whatever it is that you don't want to tell me."

I intently chased a floret, too undercooked to fork. "He said there isn't enough room. For the two of them. Most of their other colleagues are already doubled up, or married with kids, and—Edison doesn't have anywhere else to go."

"Anywhere else but *where*?"

"We have a guest room now," I pleaded. "Nobody ever uses it, besides Solstice every two years. And, you know—he's my *brother*."

A contained man, Fletcher seldom looked visibly irked. "You say that like playing a trump."

"It means something."

"Something but not everything. Why couldn't he stay with Travis? Or Solstice?"

"My father is impossible and over seventy. By the time my sister was born, Edison was nearly out of the house. He and Solstice barely know each other."

"You have other responsibilities. To Tanner, to Cody, to me. Even"—a loaded pause—"to Baby Moronic. You can't make a decision like this by fiat."

"Slack sounded at his wit's end. I had to say something."

"What you had to say," said Fletcher levelly, "was, 'I'm sorry, but I have to ask my husband.' "

"Maybe I knew what you'd say."

"And what was that?"

I smiled, a little. "Something like, 'Over my dead body.' "

He smiled, a little. "Got that right."

"I realize it didn't go that well. The last visit."

"No. It didn't."

"You seemed to get on the wrong side of each other."

"There was no 'seeming.' We did."

"If it were just anybody, I wouldn't ask. But it isn't. It would mean so much to me if you tried a little harder."

"Got nothing to do with trying. You like someone, or you don't. If you're 'trying,' you don't."

"You can give folks a break. You do that with other people." I took a moment to reflect that in Fletcher's case this wasn't always true. He could be harsh.

"Are you telling me that throughout this negotiation you never talked to your brother directly? So his friend is trying to offload the guy behind his back."

"Maybe Edison's embarrassed. He wouldn't like asking favors of his little sister."

"Little sister! You're forty years old."

An only child, Fletcher didn't understand about siblings—how set that differential is. "Sweetheart, I'll still be Edison's *little sister* when I'm ninety-five."

Fletcher soaked the rice pan in the sink. "You've got some money now, right? Though I'm never too clear on how much." (No, he wouldn't have been clear. I was secretive.) "So send him a check. Enough for a deposit on some dump and a couple of months' rent. Problem solved."

"Buy him off. Bribe him to stay away from us."

"Well, he wouldn't have much of a life here. You can't say Iowa has a 'jazz scene.' "

"There are venues in Iowa City."

"Pass-the-hat gigs for a handful of cheapo students aren't going to suit Mr. Important International Jazz Pianist."

"But according to Slack, Edison isn't—'in the best form.' He says Edison needs—'someone to take care of him.' He thinks my brother's confidence has taken a knock."

"Best news I've heard all day."

"My business is doing well," I said quietly. "That should be good for something. For being generous." *The way I've been generous with you*, I almost added, *and with kids who are now my children too*, but I didn't want to rub it in.

"But you're also volunteering the rest of this family's generosity."

"I realize that."

Fletcher leaned on either side of the sink. "I'm sorry if I seem unfeeling. Whether or not the guy gets on my nerves, he's your brother, and you must find it upsetting, his being down on his luck."

"Yes, very," I said gratefully. "He's always been the hot shot.

Being strapped, straining his friends' hospitality—it feels wrong. Like the universe has turned on its head." I wasn't about to tell Fletcher, but Edison and Slack must have fallen out, since the saxophonist's urgency had been laced with what I could only call, well—disgust.

"But even if we did decide to take him in," said Fletcher, "*and we haven't*—the visit couldn't be open-ended."

"It can't be conditional, either." If I was going to think that way, and I preferred not to, I had amassed, as of the previous couple of years, most of the power in our household. I disliked having power, and in ordinary circumstances rather hoped that if I never exercised this baffling clout it would go away. For once, however, the novel agency was useful. "Saying, 'only for three days,'" I said, "or 'only for a week.' That doesn't sound gracious, but as if we can only stand his company for a limited period of time."

"Isn't that the truth?" Fletcher said curtly, leaving the dishes to me. "I'm going for a ride."

Of course he was going for a ride. He rode his bicycle for hours almost every day—or *one of* his bicycles, since he had four, competing with unsold coffee tables for limited space in a basement that had looked so cavernous when we moved in. Neither of us ever mentioned it, but I'd bought him those bikes. Technically, we pooled our resources. But when one party contributes the contents of an eyedropper and the other Lake Michigan, "pooling" doesn't seem the right word, quite.

Ever since my husband had started cycling obsessively, I wouldn't go near my own ten-speed clunker, by then gathering

dust with deflated tires. The neglect was of my choosing, but didn't feel that way. It was as if he'd stolen my bike. Were I ever to have dragged the thing upstairs, greased the chain, and wended down the road, slowly and not very far, he'd have made fun of me. I preferred to skip it.

Every time Fletcher went for a ride I got annoyed. How could he stand the boredom? He'd come home some afternoons in a state of brisk satisfaction that his time had improved, usually by a few seconds. Churning the same route through the cornfields to the river a smidgeon faster was of no earthly consequence to anyone. He was forty-six, and soon the computer on his handlebars would simply track his disappointment in himself. I didn't like to think that I begrudged him something all his own, but he had the furniture making, which was private enough. He used those rides to shut me out.

I felt so guilty about this annoyance that I went to lengths to disguise it, forcing myself to *suggest* he go for a ride in order, say, to get out of his system some frustration with Tanner, "since it makes you feel so much better." But a too-lilting falsetto gave my falsity away. Most confounding: he *liked* that the cycling annoyed me.

Clearly, I was a bad wife. Aerobic jaunts would lengthen his life. After Cleo, his ex, went so bizarrely off the deep end, Fletcher had grown ever more consumed with control, and as obsessions went the cycling was harmless. Between exercise and his stringent diet, my husband had lost the tiny roll at his middle for which my own mashed potatoes and muffins had been to blame. Yet I'd cherished that little roll, which had softened him in a larger sense. By soliciting forgiveness, the gentle excess had seemed also to dispense it.

I required that forgiveness in some quantity. During the previous three years I must have put on about twenty pounds (I was loath to stand on a scale and confront an exact number). When running Breadbasket I'd been pretty thin. In the catering trade, food has a way of becoming repulsive; a vat of cream cheese is indistinguishable from a batch of plaster. But in my subsequent endeavor, the Mexicans on my staff were forever bringing trays of tamales and enchiladas into work. I'd cooked on my feet; now I sat in my office. Thus I'd come to squander an appalling proportion of my mental time on empty vows to cut down to one meal a day, or on fruitless self-castigation over a second stuffed pepper at lunch. Surely on some unconscious, high-frequency level other people could hear the squeal of this humiliating hamster wheel in my head, a piercing shrill that emitted from every other woman I passed in the aisles of Hy-Vee.

It wasn't fair, but I blamed Fletcher for those twenty pounds. I may have been a quiet sort who hugged the sidelines, but that didn't mean I was a pushover. I was the kind of person at whom you could finger-wag and tut-tut-tut, who wouldn't talk back, who would submit to all manner of browbeating while seeming to take it all in like a good little camper, and you'd walk away and think, *There, that's put her straight*, and then I'd sift off and blithely do whatever you'd just told me not to.

That defiant streak had backfired when I started noshing pointedly between meals on whatever entire food group Fletcher had recently disavowed. (The repudiation of cheese was deadly. The day after that announcement, I returned from the supermarket with half a wheel of Brie.) His spurning of the very dishes that had entranced him during our courtship and early marriage—banana cream pie, homemade deep-dish pizza—hurt

my feelings. I shouldn't have conflated love and food, but that's a mistake women have made for centuries, so why should I be any different? I missed cooking, too, which I found therapeutic. Hence I still baked an occasional coconut layer cake, which Fletcher would boycott, and even the kids would avoid as their father glowered nearby. Well, someone had to eat that cake. Fatally, I felt sorry for it.

We had at least evolved a ritual compromise. From each contraband confection, I cut a one-bite *amuse-bouche*, arranging it with a dab of whipped cream, a garnish of mint, and a couple of pristine fresh raspberries on a large china dessert plate with a sparkling silver fork. This I would leave in the middle of our prep island, the way kids put out cookies for Santa, then make myself scarce. Fletcher would never take the bait while I was watching; still, it meant more to me than I can say that these illicit samplers of what he now deemed "toxic" vanished within the hour.

Strictly speaking, as a nutritional Nazi my husband had grown more attractive, but I'd been attracted to him before. Besides, a pointiness was now more pronounced. He had a high forehead and long oval face; shorn to a prickly furze to minimize the balding, his head was bullet-shaped. His long, strong nose in profile looked like a checkmark, and the wire-rimmed glasses added a professorial sharpness. Some strict, censorious quality had entered the triangular geometry of his wide shoulders and newly narrow waist, so that simply being in his physical presence made me feel chided.

As I collected our dishes, it bothered me that Fletcher hadn't stayed to tidy the kitchen, which wasn't like him. Commonly we dispatched cleanup with the interlocking fluidity of synchronized swimmers. We were at our best working side by side—neither of

us understood or relished "leisure" time—and my fondest memories were of just this sort of cleanup on a grand scale. When we first started dating, on nights I'd catered a big buffet Fletcher would install Tanner and Cody in sleeping bags on my living room floor, so he could help with the kitchen. (When I first saw him shake his hands at the sink—thrusting fingers downward *splat-splat*, a small, instinctive motion that ensures you don't dribble water all over the floor on the way to drying your hands on the dishtowel—I knew this was the man I would marry.) Swabbing counters, sealing leftovers, and rinsing massive mixing bowls, he never complained; he never had to be told what to do. He only took breaks to sidle behind me as I removed another set of warm tumblers from the dishwasher and kiss my neck. Believe it or not, those cleanups in spattered aprons were romantic, better than champagne and candlelight.

Such memories in mind, I could hardly begrudge sudsing the broccoli steamer after lunch for two. I reviewed our conversation. It could have gone worse. Fletcher might himself have announced "over my dead body"; I'd slyly said it for him. I'd never asked outright, "Is it okay if my brother stays in our house for a while?" He'd never said yes or no.

Our house. Of course, it was our house.

Having rented most of my life, I still hadn't shaken the impression that this address on Solomon Drive belonged to someone else; I kept the place fanatically neat as if the real owners might walk in any time unannounced. The house was larger than we required; the kitchen's plenitude of cabinets invited the purchase of pasta- and bread-making machines that we'd use once. Deserving of the contemptuous tag *McMansion*, our new home had been an overreaction to the cramp of Fletcher's tract

rental, one of those "temporary" resorts men seek post-divorce, from which unless a new woman puts her foot down they never move. I'd been flushed with awe that I could suddenly afford to buy a house, in cash no less, and in some ways I bought it simply because I could.

Also, I'd wanted to find Fletcher a workspace. Furniture was his passion, so I bought his passion for him. Naïve in the ways of money, I couldn't have known beforehand how much he would resent me for it.

Earlier in our marriage, Fletcher had worked for an agricultural company that made genetically modified seed. I'd been keen to enable him to quit because he wasn't a natural salesman—not from environmentalist aversion to fiddling with nature, or political outrage that corporate America wanted to patent what was once literally for the picking. I didn't hold many opinions. I didn't see the point of them. If I opposed the production of non-germinating disease-resistant corn, it would still be sold. I considered most convictions entertainment, their cultivation a vanity, which is why I rarely read the newspaper. My knowing about an assassination in Lebanon wouldn't bring the victim to life, and given that news primarily aggravated one's sense of helplessness I was surprised it was so widely heeded. Refusal to forge views for social consumption made me dull, but I loved being dull. Being of no earthly interest to anyone had been a lifelong goal.

In kind, this brick neocolonial had no character. It was newly built, its maple floors unscarred. I adored its unstoried blankness. The sockets were solidly wired, and everything worked. I'd never courted character on my own account, save in the sense of being disinclined to shoplift or cheat on my husband; Edison was the one who sought the designation "a real character," and he could

have it. I gloried in anonymity and by then violently resented that the glare of an uninvited public spotlight had turned me into someone in particular for other people. (For pity's sake, you'd think after purposefully burying myself in the very middle of the country the least I could expect was to be inconspicuous.) I had enough history, and with the lone exception of Edison himself my instinct regarding the past was to draw the shade.

The big, lobotomized house formed the perfect neutral backdrop against which Fletcher's furniture could stand out. At this point my husband's handiwork had replaced most of the department-store appurtenances of our original combined households. (This joining of domestic forces was the first time in my life that someone had helped me move. With ferocious efficiency, Fletcher could carton a room in an afternoon, which has to be even more romantic than prizing the fiddly scraps from the food processor.) So lithe were his creations that whenever I walked into the living room the furniture seemed to have been grazing on throw rugs moments before. Its back corners curled like stag horns, bowed legs prancing on pared feet, the couch was weighted down with pillows, without which the skittish creature might have cantered out the door.

Though Fletcher liked to think he was improving, my favorite piece was one of his first. We called it the Boomerang. Its red leather cushion was oval. The rail forming the contiguous arms and back slooped high on the right, then arced down on the left, until the far end of the left-hand arm almost touched the floor. The chair looked as if it had been hurled. The slats supporting the great rising back line were also curved—laminated Macassar ebony, rosewood, and maple that he'd soaked for a week to bow. The Boomerang was a talisman of sorts. Most people who've re-

fined a skill may cling to such a touchstone: early proof they've got the goods. The object to which they can always refer when a current effort is foundering: *See? If you can do that, you can do anything.* I'd no equivalent myself, because I didn't care about product. I liked process. Be it a marmalade cake or the absurd merchandise I sold then, output was chaff to me the instant of completion. I found finishing projects perfectly awful.

After scrubbing the beige film from the rice pan, I peered out the front window. It had started to rain, but that never drove my intrepid husband home. Safe in my solitude, I crept upstairs to my home office and booked a plane ticket between LaGuardia and Cedar Rapids, choosing an arbitrary return date that we could always change. I wrote a check for five hundred dollars with "incidentals" scrawled in the lower-left-hand corner. Enclosing the check and e-ticket printout, I addressed a FedEx mailer to Edison Appaloosa, care of the address Slack had dictated that morning, and booked a pickup on my account.

My having bought this house with the proceeds of my offbeat business two years before might have meant that I had the "right" to install my brother in its guest room without permission. But pulling fiscal rank struck me as vulgar and undemocratic. There were three Feuerbachs in that house, and only one Halfdanarson.

What called me to run roughshod over Fletcher's opposition was something else. I was not, as a rule, held hostage to family. At some point I would make the disagreeable discovery of how deep a tie I retained to my father, but not until he died; meantime, I was free to find him unbearable. My sister Solstice was sufficiently my junior that I could almost be her aunt, and it was only at her insistence that she visited me in Iowa every other

summer. (She grew up in the fractured remains of a nutty, failed family, on which she'd long tried to impose a more appealing cliché. So she was the only one who bought presents, sent cards, and paid visits whose perfect regularity suggested a discipline.) My lovely mother Magnolia had died when I was thirteen. Both sets of grandparents had passed. A loner until Fletcher, I'd borne none of my own children.

Edison was my family, the sole blood relative whom I clearly and cleanly loved. This one attachment distilled all the loyalty that most people dilute across a larger clan into a devotion with the intensity of tamarind. It was Edison from whom I first learned loyalty; it was therefore Edison from whom all other loyalties flowed, and the beneficiaries of this very capacity to cling fiercely were Fletcher and our kids. I may have been ambivalent about the past we shared, but only Edison and I shared it. In truth, I hadn't hesitated for a heartbeat when Slack Muncie called that morning. Fletcher was right: it was a trump. Edison was my brother, and we could really have ended the discussion then and there.