

Men & Boxes

a play about a big, messy basement and the siblings in it

by Jennie Webb

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CHARACTERS:

THE OLDEST SISTER is a brisk woman who doesn't look or reveal her age (47) and is proud of both feats. She rises above physicality, and at the same time has honed her body so that she is able to use it as a weapon, and as a shield. Success, for her, is measured by outcome and she will do almost anything to achieve it—she feels she has to. The act of creation is a competitive one. When faced with a challenge, she is an “end result,” “down-to-business,” “no-nonsense” person who attacks with gusto. (She really likes labels.)

THE MIDDLE SISTER, at 45, is comfortable being neither fat nor thin, short nor tall, beautiful nor homely, and if you were to guess how old she is you might say, “45?” Only she's just now starting to realize that given human life-expectancy, she is “middle-aged” and wonders where the first half went. Painfully aware of the physical world around her, she doesn't quite get the relationship between herself and her body. She does what she needs to do, what needs to be done, because she can do it and do it well. Why create when there is already so much here to take care of? She tends to deal with situations from the inside out, sometimes losing herself in them.

THE MUCH YOUNGER SISTER is a quirky duckling who is very, very conscious of the fact that she was born when the youngest of her siblings was 8. So at 33 she is still eagerly scrambling to catch up, and figure out where she fits in ... within her family and in the universe in general. She's a good and enthusiastic observer, but doesn't like to take up room, or cast shadows. Which makes it very hard to sit still, to let go, or to take action. Or to look at her actions. So creating is pretty much out of the question. Problems are much more manageable when viewed at a great distance, and she often finds that when she closes her eyes, they simply disappear.

THE BROTHER spent a lot of his contented childhood as the youngest. Because of that, because he is the only boy, and because his sisters are who they are, he is 41—probably a somewhat youthful 41—and still waiting. But he's okay with waiting. He's also okay with being told what to do. He's particularly good at waiting for instructions. He likes women. He's around women a lot. But none of them has ever asked him, yet, to create anything. Just to move what they've created. Especially if it's really big and has caused a mess. This makes him feel useful.

SETTING:

A large room or rooms with an expansive, never-ending or maze-like feeling. Dominant is a staircase leading down into the space.

The space contains no furniture, but there are many, many boxes. Boxes of all shapes and sizes. Some boxes are empty, and some have things in them. Some look like they have been around quite awhile. There are also piles of cardboard—unbuilt boxes. And rolls of tape. And lots of things which could be put into boxes.

—THE PLAY IS PERFORMED WITHOUT AN INTERMISSION—

Alone, the Middle Sister looks around.

Pause.

MIDDLE SISTER:

(conversing with herself) But really, how are you? I'm not fine, thanks for asking! I'm fucked. I'm fat, I feel like shit, I've got my narcissistic witch of an oldest sister telling me what to do like when we were kids and my much younger sister letting, just letting because she can and I will and that's the way it's always been, and my seventy-five year-old mother moving in with me in four days over the silent objections of my passive-aggressive husband to whom I was once happily married. But he can't very well speak up, can he, otherwise he wouldn't be the world's nicest guy, now would he? After all, don't all of his friends tell him how lucky he is to have me, who raised his two children for him and took care of his insane mother for him when she really should have been institutionalized and to this day takes care of his home and garden and housecat and can mix a mean martini on demand?

I can't believe I said that.

She sits on a box.

What is wrong with me?

The Middle Sister starts to cry.

Her Brother comes down the stairs carrying a large grocery bag.

BROTHER:

Hey.

MIDDLE SISTER:

Hi.

He sits on a box next to her.

MIDDLE SISTER:

I don't know what's wrong with me. I'm a mess, I'm just a mess.

He takes a ceramic jar out of the bag and hands it to her.

BROTHER:

Here.

MIDDLE SISTER:

What's this?

BROTHER:

A cheese crock. I think it's got Port or something in it. It needs to be eaten.

MIDDLE SISTER:

It needs to be eaten?

BROTHER:

Mom wouldn't let her put the stuff down the disposal, and she wouldn't let this back in the fridge, so ...

The Middle Sister opens the cheese, and begins to eat it one finger-full at a time. Her Brother pulls boxes from the bag.

She's starting to clear out the cabinets, too. Bridge mix, candied fruit, Jordan Almonds ...

MIDDLE SISTER:

Must be from your wedding.

BROTHER:

My wedding?

MIDDLE SISTER:

I tied them in little net bags. Remember?

BROTHER:

Hmmm. *(holding another box)* Looks like these have been around awhile.

MIDDLE SISTER:

Oh, my. Since we were Girl Scouts!

She opens the box and samples a cookie. Her Brother takes out a questionable-looking bottle of Brandy.

BROTHER:

Want some?

MIDDLE SISTER:

Mom must have bought that for cooking. *(short pause)* Hand it over.

She finds some dixie cups, and pours. They eat and drink.

Do you remember having picnics down here when we were kids? Mom would make us lunch and we'd bring it down here, set up a picnic on the floor and eat it like we were outside?

BROTHER:

We did that?

MIDDLE SISTER:

Uh huh. Like leftover chicken. Or cheese sandwiches.

BROTHER:

I remember coming down here when Dad had his shop down here ...

MIDDLE SISTER:

No, before that. His shop was out in the garage then.

BROTHER:

And we'd come down here ...?

MIDDLE SISTER:

You and me. We'd have picnics. On weekends, and in summers, I think, because it was before you were in school but I ...

BROTHER:

Hmmm. I can't say that I ever remember eating down here.

MIDDLE SISTER:

Really? How funny.

They continue to eat and drink. Their Much Younger Sister comes down the stairs with a large turkey and returns the bones to their originating box or pile.

MUCH YOUNGER SISTER:

So much for my covert burial. I never made it out of the kitchen.

BROTHER:

Nice effort, though.

The Middle Sister points to the turkey.

MIDDLE SISTER:

What is that?

MUCH YOUNGER SISTER:

What does it look like? It's a frozen Butterball that's older than I am.

MIDDLE SISTER:

What's it doing down here?

MUCH YOUNGER SISTER:

I don't know. I just felt like I had to get it out of harm's way. Mom's holed-up in the pantry with a bread knife—queen protector of the kitchen staples. (*setting down the turkey and noticing the bottle*) What's that?

MIDDLE SISTER:
Blackberry Brandy.

MUCH YOUNGER SISTER:
Yeech.

She hesitates, then pours herself a cup.

BROTHER:
Cheese?

MUCH YOUNGER SISTER:
Why is it that color?

BROTHER:
Port? Artificial Port?

MUCH YOUNGER SISTER:
No thanks.

MIDDLE SISTER:
(to her Brother) You've talked to your kids, right?

BROTHER:
What do you mean?

MIDDLE SISTER:
Since we've been here, since you've been here, you've talked to the kids.

BROTHER:
Yeah, sure. Almost every day. They call.

MUCH YOUNGER SISTER:
They call.

BROTHER:
Their Mom calls. We all talk.

MIDDLE SISTER:
(to her Much Younger Sister) See?

MUCH YOUNGER SISTER:
What?

MIDDLE SISTER:
Their Mom calls! Mom's *call!*

MUCH YOUNGER SISTER:

She's calling her husband. That's not the same.

MIDDLE SISTER:

So her kids can talk to their father! It's different, but it's the same!

MUCH YOUNGER SISTER:

(to her Brother) Okay. Has she called Jessica since you've been here?

BROTHER:

Who? Oh ... I'm not sure. I don't know. I suppose so ...

MIDDLE SISTER:

You suppose so because that's what parents do, but not her!

MUCH YOUNGER SISTER:

You don't know that!

MIDDLE SISTER:

(fighting tears) Are you defending her? Are you all against me now?

MUCH YOUNGER SISTER:

You are not even making sense! What is the matter with you?

MIDDLE SISTER:

I don't know!!!!

She breaks down crying.

BROTHER:

I'm going to see if there are any more bottles that need to be ...

MUCH YOUNGER SISTER:

Right.

He heads up the stairs.

The Much Younger Sister watches her Middle Sister, who has collapsed into an uncomfortable-looking shape on a box.

Do you want me to get you a pillow or something?

She grabs a handful of clothes or linens from an open box near her.

Here.

MIDDLE SISTER:

Thank you. *(short pause)* I'm sorry.

MUCH YOUNGER SISTER:
I would never be against you.

MIDDLE SISTER:
I know, I know. I don't know ...

MUCH YOUNGER SISTER:
Maybe it's hormonal.

MIDDLE SISTER:
Hormonal?

MUCH YOUNGER SISTER:
Sometimes I get crazy, all emotional, just can't stop crying ...

MIDDLE SISTER:
No, no, that's ... I have not seen Jess for almost ... seven years.

MUCH YOUNGER SISTER:
What? No. Wait. At the reunion, and Dad's funeral ...

MIDDLE SISTER:
With everyone else, then. I mean, seen her. Me and her. Spent time with her like when—

MUCH YOUNGER SISTER:
(interrupting) Oh! Right! That's what ...

Pause.

You two were really close, huh?

MIDDLE SISTER:
We are close! I mean, I think we are.

MUCH YOUNGER SISTER:
Of course you are! You practically raised her, didn't you?

MIDDLE SISTER:
I guess that depends on who you ask.

MUCH YOUNGER SISTER:
You know, we never really talked about it, and I wasn't around much 'cause of school and all, but I think that was really great of you. I mean, for both of you. For all of you.

MIDDLE SISTER:
Yeah. Well. We do what we do, don't we?

MUCH YOUNGER SISTER:
She had such a hard time.

MIDDLE SISTER:
Huh?

MUCH YOUNGER SISTER:
With the pregnancy. Getting pregnant.

MIDDLE SISTER:
Oh. *She* had a hard time.

MUCH YOUNGER SISTER:
Didn't she? The testing, and embryos, and in vitro, and ... And that was before everyone was doing it.

MIDDLE SISTER:
She loved it.

MUCH YOUNGER SISTER:
What?

MIDDLE SISTER:
Those were her glory days. Pushing the boundaries of medical science, pioneering exploratory procedures, forcing her body to unnatural cycles, then forging ahead despite the odds and BOOM! A beautiful baby girl sliced like a specimen from her manicured womb, incubated for all the world to see, then left with her dear auntie when she went back to work one week after the "birth." And I use this last term loosely, out of all organic context, referring to the neat and tidy operation that brought Jessica into the world—entirely elective surgery scheduled to optimize business ventures and Christmas card photos.

Pause.

MUCH YOUNGER SISTER:
Wow.

MIDDLE SISTER:
Not that I'm bitter, or anything.

MUCH YOUNGER SISTER:
Of course not.

MIDDLE SISTER:
Look in that sack, is there anything else to drink? (*holding to the empty brandy bottle*) There was only a bit in the bottom of this.

MUCH YOUNGER SISTER:
You can have mine.

MIDDLE SISTER:
Thanks.

She drinks as her Much Younger Sister goes through the grocery bag.

MUCH YOUNGER SISTER:
(holding up a tiny bottle) Airplane scotch?

MIDDLE SISTER:
I'll take it. Whose was this, I wonder?

MUCH YOUNGER SISTER:
Not Dad's?

MIDDLE SISTER:
Dad didn't drink.

MUCH YOUNGER SISTER:
No? I didn't remember that.

Pause.

You look awful.

MIDDLE SISTER:
I'm terrible. I feel like I'm coming apart. I need to go to the bathroom.

She gets up from the box.

This is all the time, the past couple of days. I don't know what's ...

She starts up the stairs then turns.

Where is ...?

MUCH YOUNGER SISTER:
I think I heard her going up to clear the bedrooms out. Mom must've won the kitchen battle.

MIDDLE SISTER:
Hah!

She continues up and out of sight. The Much Younger Sister looks around the room.

MUCH YOUNGER SISTER:

(picking up the cookies) Oh Geez. Antique Thin Mints.

She moves from box to box to box, taking out toys, or pieces of clothing or “art.”

Wow. This is fantastic! *(short pause)* **I have NEVER seen this stuff!**

She finds what looks to be a children’s science project, or an electronic shop gadget.

Okay. I’m going to make an announcement now. There’s a whole world here that I, the much younger sister, the late-in-life “accident,” the “miracle baby”—ha ha—was not privy to. That’s all there is to it. It’s like ... a separate childhood. They do not get that. A childhood where your Mom acted like she had a choice about you being around, where she was maybe friends with your friends’ moms and cared about the things that you cared about and your Dad actually made things for you, spent time with you, explained things to you, and did not think that you were an energy drain from another planet put on earth to mess up his retirement plans. *(short pause)* That’s not fair of me. *(short pause)* But they just got so much more of him. *(short pause)* They don’t get that.

Her Brother comes down the stairs. He carries several more grocery bags.

(covering) I am loving this, I really am!

BROTHER:

Right.

MUCH YOUNGER SISTER:

What’s that?

BROTHER:

Liver.

Pause.

MUCH YOUNGER SISTER:

Liver?

BROTHER:

Liver. Mom gave it to me. Said to take it down here while you-know-who was emptying the bedrooms.

MUCH YOUNGER SISTER:

What are we supposed to do with it? That’s all liver?

BROTHER:

I have no idea. I’ve also got ... *(taking bottles out of one bag)* Cognac ... and Sherry. It might be Cooking Sherry, but Cooking Sherry is still Sherry, isn’t it?

MUCH YOUNGER SISTER:
I don't ... She had all this?

BROTHER:
Cherry Cordial, too.

MUCH YOUNGER SISTER:
No, the liver! What's with the liver?

BROTHER:
Mom just handed it to me and told me to take it down here before it got targeted for destruction.

MUCH YOUNGER SISTER:
That's like a ton of liver! (*looking into one bag*) How many packages are in there?

BROTHER:
A lot. A lot of packages. (*indicating other bags*) There's more here.

MUCH YOUNGER SISTER:
Why did Mom buy bulk liver?

BROTHER:
Ask her!

MUCH YOUNGER SISTER:
You're the one she gave it to! Why would she do that?

BROTHER:
Sanctuary?

MUCH YOUNGER SISTER:
No ... Maybe she eats liver when she's alone? What can you make with liver? Does Mom even like liver?

BROTHER:
She used to give liver to the cats, I remember. But I never remember her cooking it. Or doing anything else with it.

He pours himself some Sherry.

Want some?

MUCH YOUNGER SISTER:
The cats have been dead for years. They died when I was a kid! Why would she have all that liver? Was it frozen?

BROTHER:

It may have been once, but it's not now. I'm not sure if you can freeze liver. I suppose you could—

MUCH YOUNGER SISTER:

(interrupting) That's horrible! That's really disturbing—bags full of liver! *(short pause)* What kind of liver is it?

BROTHER:

It's raw.

MUCH YOUNGER SISTER:

No. I mean, what is liver? Chickens? Is liver chickens?

BROTHER:

I'd imagine it's beef. Cows. You've never had fried liver before? Liver and onions?

MUCH YOUNGER SISTER:

Turkeys have livers, on Thanksgiving.

BROTHER:

Chicken livers, goose livers—pate is goose livers.

MUCH YOUNGER SISTER:

Maybe Mom was making some pate for the bridge ladies or her book group or something? Could it be goose livers?

BROTHER:

They'd have to be some pretty big geese. Of course pigs have livers, but I've never heard of pork liver.

MUCH YOUNGER SISTER:

I am horrified. This doesn't horrify you?

BROTHER:

No more than anything else. Where should I put them?

MUCH YOUNGER SISTER:

Over there by the turkey. This is awful. Doesn't it make you wonder? Mom living here, alone, with all that liver, and who knows what else in the freezer ...

BROTHER:

Not anymore.

Pause.

MUCH YOUNGER SISTER:

What?

BROTHER:

She's not going to be living here very much longer.

MUCH YOUNGER SISTER:

Right. *(short pause)* I have to make a call.

She goes up the stairs and out of sight.

The Brother looks around the room. He drains his dixie cup, then goes up the stairs as well. We hear footsteps from above, and after a moment he comes down the stairs again, carrying a box he recently carried upstairs, along with the hat boxes. He sets them down. He opens the hat boxes one by one, and inside of each is a large turkey.

He pours another drink and looks around the room. He stacks the dozen or so turkeys next to the liver and first turkey. He sips his drink. He eats some cheese and crackers. He starts for the stairs, but then finds a blanket and covers the carcasses. He goes out of sight upstairs.

The Oldest Sister comes quickly down. She sees the food items around the room.

OLDEST SISTER:

Jesus!

She moves toward the mess but stops herself.

You know what? It is not my job to clean up after my brother and my sisters! I am not their mother! And I am not my mother's mother!

She lifts a dixie cup and sniffs inside.

Oh lord, they're drinking cough syrup!

So be it. This is what I shall do: designate things to their proper piles and put things into boxes and label the contents and what happens after that is not my responsibility. If people want to surround themselves with refuse, cling onto the scraps of what was or was not or could be, there's nothing I can do about it! What's mine is the piano and the sideboard and some of the good rugs and clocks and silver because I'm the oldest sister and that's my share, that's my allotment, but as far as everything else in this godforsaken hole you can just leave it to rot and pretend it's paneling, for all I care!

The Oldest Sister begins to assemble a new cardboard box.