
Opening Extract from...

The Sisters Brothers

Written by Patrick deWitt

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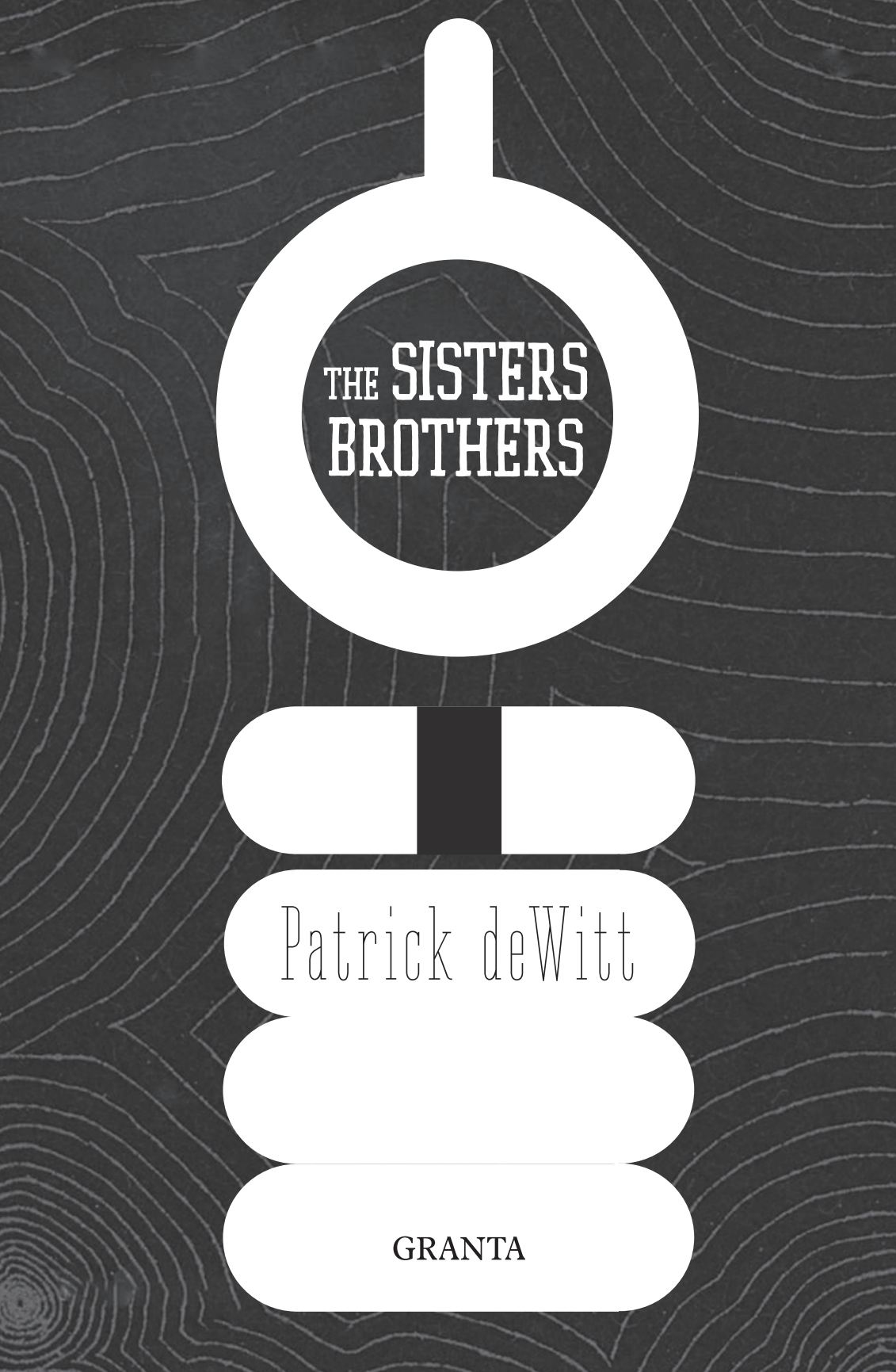
THE SISTERS BROTHERS
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I was sitting outside the Commodore's mansion, waiting for my brother Charlie to come out with news of the job. It was threatening to snow and I was cold and for want of something to do I studied Charlie's new horse, Nimble. My new horse was called Tub. We did not believe in naming horses but they were given to us as partial payment for the last job with the names intact, so that was that. Our unnamed previous horses had been immolated, so it was not as though we did not need these new ones but I felt we should have been given money to purchase horses of our own choosing, horses without histories and habits and names they expected to be addressed by. I was very fond of my previous horse and lately had been experiencing visions while I slept of his death, his kicking, burning legs, his hot-

popping eyeballs. He could cover sixty miles in a day like a gust of wind and I never laid a hand on him except to stroke him or clean him, and I tried not to think of him burning up in that barn but if the vision arrived uninvited how was I to guard against it? Tub was a healthy enough animal but would have been better suited to some other, less ambitious owner. He was portly and low-backed and could not travel more than fifty miles in a day. I was often forced to whip him, which some men do not mind doing and which in fact some enjoy doing, but which I did not like to do; and afterward he, Tub, believed me cruel and thought to himself, Sad life, sad life.

I felt a weight of eyes on me and looked away from Nimble. Charlie was gazing down from the upper-story window, holding up five fingers. I did not respond and he distorted his face to make me smile; when I did not smile his expression fell slack and he moved backward, out of view. He had seen me watching his horse, I knew. The morning before I had suggested we sell Tub and go halves on a new horse and he had agreed this was fair but then later, over lunch, he had said we should put it off until the new job was completed, which did not make sense because the problem with Tub was that he would impede the job, so would it not be best to replace him prior to? Charlie had a slick of food grease in his mustache and he said, 'After the job is best, Eli.' He had no complaints with Nimble, who was as good or better than his previous horse, unnamed, but then he had had first pick of the two while I lay in bed recovering from a leg wound received on the job. I did not like Tub but my brother was satisfied with Nimble. This was the trouble with the horses.

Charlie climbed onto Nimble and we rode away, heading for the Pig-King. It had been only two months since our last visit to Oregon City but I counted five new businesses on the main street and each of these appeared to be doing well. 'An ingenious species,' I said to Charlie, who made no reply. We sat at a table in the back of the King and were brought our usual bottle and a pair of glasses. Charlie poured me a drink, when normally we pour our own, so I was prepared for bad news when he said it: 'I'm to be lead man on this one, Eli.'

'Who says so?'

'Commodore says so.'

I drank my brandy. 'What's it mean?'

'It means I am in charge.'

'What's it mean about money?'

'More for me.'

'My money, I mean. Same as before?'

'It's less for you.'

'I don't see the sense in it.'

'Commodore says there wouldn't have been the problems with the last job if there had been a lead man.'

'It doesn't make sense.'

'Well, it does.'

He poured me another drink and I drank it. As much to myself as to Charlie I said, 'He wants to pay for a lead man, that's fine. But it's bad business to short the man underneath. I got my leg gouged out and my horse burned to death working for him.'

'I got my horse burned to death, too. He got us new horses.'

'It's bad business. Stop pouring for me like I'm an invalid.' I took the bottle away and asked about the specifics of the job. We were to find and kill a prospector in California named Hermann Kermit Warm. Charlie produced a letter from his jacket pocket, this from the Commodore's scout, a dandy named Henry Morris who often went ahead of us to gather information: 'Have studied Warm for many days and can offer the following in respects to his habits and character. He is solitary in nature but spends long hours in the San Francisco saloons, passing time reading his science and mathematics books or making drawings in their margins. He hauls these tomes around with a strap like a schoolboy, for which he is mocked. He is small in stature, which adds to this comedy, but beware he will not be teased about his size. I have seen him fight several times, and though he typically loses, I do not think any of his opponents would wish to fight him again. He is not above biting, for example. He is bald-headed, with a

wild red beard, long, gangly arms, and the protruded belly of a pregnant woman. He washes infrequently and sleeps where he can—barns, doorways, or if need be, in the streets. Whenever he is engaged to speak his manner is brusque and uninviting. He carries a baby dragoon, this tucked into a sash slung around his waist. He does not drink often, but when he finally lifts his bottle, he lifts it to become completely drunken. He pays for his whiskey with raw gold dust that he keeps in a leather pouch worn on a long string, this hidden in the folds of his many-layered clothing. He has not once left the town since I have been here and I do not know if he plans to return to his claim, which sits some ten miles east of Sacramento (map enclosed). Yesterday in a saloon he asked me for a match, addressing me politely and by name. I have no idea how he knew this, for he never seemed to notice that I was following him. When I asked how he had come to learn my identity he became abusive, and I left. I do not care for him, though there are some who say his mind is uncommonly strong. I will admit he is unusual, but that is perhaps the closest I could come to complimenting him.'

Next to the map of Warm's claim, Morris had made a smudged drawing of the man; but he might have been standing at my side and I would not have known it, it was so clumsy a rendering. I mentioned this to Charlie and he said, 'Morris is waiting for us at a hotel in San Francisco. He will point Warm out and we will be on our way. It's a good place to kill someone, I have heard. When they are not busily burning the entire town down, they are distracted by its endless rebuilding.'

'Why doesn't Morris kill him?'

'That's always your question, and I always have my answer: It's not his job, but ours.'

'It's mindless. The Commodore shorts me my wage but pays

this bumbler his fee and expenses just to have Warm tipped off that he is under observation.'

'You cannot call Morris a bumbler, brother. This is the first time he has made a mistake, and he admits his error openly. I think his being discovered says more about Warm than Morris.'

'But the man is spending the night in the streets. What is holding Morris back from simply shooting him as he sleeps?'

'How about the fact that Morris is not a killer?'

'Then why send him at all? Why did he not send us a month ago instead?'

'A month ago we were on another job. You forget that the Commodore has many interests and concerns and can get to them but one at a time. Hurried business is bad business, these are words from the man himself. You only have to admire his successes to see the truth in it.'

It made me ill to hear him quote the Commodore so lovingly. I said, 'It will take us weeks to get to California. Why make the trip if we don't have to?'

'But we do have to make the trip. That is the job.'

'And what if Warm's not there?'

'He'll be there.'

'What if he's not?'

'Goddamnit, he will be.'

When it came time to settle I pointed to Charlie. 'The lead man's paying.' Normally we would have gone halves, so he did not like that. My brother has always been miserly, a trait handed down from our father.

'Just the one time,' he said.

'Lead man with his lead man's wages.'

'You never liked the Commodore. And he's never liked you.'

'I like him less and less,' I said.

'You're free to tell him, if it becomes an unbearable burden.'

'You will know it, Charlie, if my burden becomes unbearable. You will know it and so will he.'

This bickering might have continued but I left my brother and retired to my room in the hotel across from the saloon. I do not like to argue and especially not with Charlie, who can be uncommonly cruel with his tongue. Later that night I could hear him exchanging words in the road with a group of men, and I listened to make sure he was not in danger, and he was not—the men asked him his name and he told them and they left him alone. But I would have come to his aid and in fact was putting on my boots when the group scattered. I heard Charlie coming up the stairs and jumped into bed, pretending I was fast asleep. He stuck his head in the room and said my name but I did not answer. He closed the door and moved to his room and I lay in the dark thinking about the difficulties of family, how crazy and crooked the stories of a bloodline can be.

In the morning it was raining—constant, cold drops that turned the roads to muddy soup. Charlie was stomach-sick from the brandy, and I visited the chemist's for a nausea remedy. I was given a scentless, robin's-egg-blue powder which I mixed into his coffee. I did not know the tincture's ingredients, only that it got him out of bed and onto Nimble, and that it made him alert to the point of distraction. We stopped to rest twenty miles from town in a barren section of forest that had the summer prior been burned through in a lightning fire. We finished our lunch and were preparing to move on when we saw a man walking a horse a hundred yards to our south. If he had been riding I do not think we would have commented but it

was strange, him leading the horse like that. 'Why don't you go see what he is doing,' Charlie said.

'A direct order from the lead man,' I said. He did not respond and I thought, The joke is wearing thin. I decided I would not tell it again. I rode Tub out to meet the walker. When I swung around I noticed he was weeping and I dismounted to face him. I am a tall and heavy and rough-looking man and could read the alarm on his face; to soothe his worries, I said, 'I don't mean you any harm. My brother and I are only having our lunch. I prepared too much and thought to ask if you were hungry.'

The man dried his face with his palm, inhaling deeply and shivering. He attempted to answer me—at least he opened his mouth—but no words or sound emerged, being distraught to the degree that communication was not possible.

I said, 'I can see you're in some distress and probably want to keep traveling on your own. My apologies for disturbing you, and I hope you are heading for something better.' I remounted Tub and was halfway to camp when I saw Charlie stand and level his pistol in my direction. Turning back, I saw the weeping man riding quickly toward me; he did not seem to wish to hurt me and I motioned for Charlie to lower his gun. Now the weeping man and I were riding side by side, and he called over: 'I will take you up on your offer.' When we got to camp, Charlie took hold of the man's horse and said, 'You should not chase someone like that. I thought you were after my brother and nearly took a shot.' The weeping man made a dismissive gesture with his hands indicating the irrelevance of the statement. This took Charlie by surprise—he looked at me and asked, 'Who is this person?'

'He has been upset by something. I offered him a plate of food.'

'There's no food left but biscuits.'

'I will make more then.'

'You will not.' Charlie looked the weeping man up and down. 'Isn't he the mournful one, though?'

Clearing his throat, the weeping man spoke: 'It is ignorant behavior, to talk about a man as though he was not present.'

Charlie was not sure whether to laugh or strike him down. He said to me, 'Is he crazy?'

'I will ask you to watch your words,' I told the stranger. 'My brother isn't feeling well today.'

'I am fine,' said Charlie.

'His charity is strained,' I said.

'He looks sick,' said the weeping man.

'I said I'm fine, damn you.'

'He *is* sick, slightly,' I said. I could see that Charlie's patience had reached its limit. I took some of the biscuits and put them in the hand of the weeping man. He gazed upon them for a long moment, then began to weep all over again, coughing and inhaling and shivering pitifully. I said to Charlie, 'This was how it was when I found him.'

'What's the matter with him?'

'He didn't say.' I asked the weeping man, 'Sir, what's the matter with you?'

'They're gone!' he cried. 'They're all gone!'

'Who's gone?' asked Charlie.

'Gone without me! And I wish I was gone! I want to be gone with them!' He dropped the biscuits and walked away with his horse. He would take ten steps and throw back his head to moan.

He did this three times and my brother and I turned to clean our camp.

'I wonder what was the matter with him,' said Charlie.

'Some kind of grief has made him insane.'

By the time we mounted our horses, the weeping man was out of sight, and the source of his worry would remain forever a mystery.

We rode along in silence, thinking our private thoughts. Charlie and I had an unspoken agreement not to throw ourselves into speedy travel just after a meal. There were many hardships to our type of life and we took these small comforts as they came; I found they added up to something decent enough to carry on.

'What has this Hermann Warm done?' I asked.

'Taken something of the Commodore's.'

'What has he taken?'

'This will be revealed soon enough. To kill him is the thing.' He rode ahead and I rode after. I had been wanting to talk about it for some time, before the last job, even.

'Haven't you ever found it strange, Charlie? All these men

foolish enough to steal from the Commodore? As feared a man as he is?'

'The Commodore has money. What else would attract a thief?'

'How are they getting the money? We know the Commodore to be cautious. How is it that all these different men have access to his wealth?'

'He does business in every corner of the country. A man cannot be in two places at once, much less a hundred. It only stands to reason he'd be victimized.'

'Victimized!' I said.

'What would you call it when a man is forced to protect his fortune with the likes of us?'

'Victimized!' I found it amusing, genuinely. In honor of the poor Commodore, I sang a mawkish ballad: *'His tears behind a veil of flowers, the news came in from town.*'

'Oh, all right.'

'His virgin seen near country bower, in arms of golden down.'

'You are only angry with me for taking the lead position.'

'His heart mistook her smile for kindness, and now he pays the cost.'

'I'm through talking with you about it.'

'His woman lain in sin, her highness, endless love is lost.'

Charlie could not help but smile. 'What is that song?'

'Picked it up somewhere.'

'It's a sad one.'

'All the best songs are sad ones.'

'That's what Mother used to say.'

I paused. 'The sad ones don't actually *make me sad*.'

'You are just like Mother, in many ways.'

'You're not. And you're not like Father, either.'

'I am like no one.'

He said this casually, but it was the type of statement that eclipsed the conversation, killed it. He pulled ahead and I watched his back, and he knew I was watching his back. He stuck Nimble's ribs with his heels and they ran off, with me following behind. We were only traveling in our typical fashion, at our typical pace, but I felt all the same to be chasing him.

Short, late-winter days, and we stopped in a dried ravine to make up camp for the night. You will often see this scenario in serialized adventure novels: Two grisly riders before the fire telling their bawdy stories and singing harrowing songs of death and lace. But I can tell you that after a full day of riding I want nothing more than to lie down and sleep, which is just what I did, without even eating a proper meal. In the morning, pulling on my boots, I felt a sharp pain at the long toe of my left foot. I upended and tapped at the heel of the boot, expecting a nettle to drop, when a large, hairy spider thumped to the ground on its back, eight arms pedaling in the cold air. My pulse was sprinting and I became weak-headed because I am very much afraid of spiders and snakes and crawling things, and Charlie,

knowing this, came to my aid, tossing the creature into the fire with his knife. I watched the spider curl up and die, smoking like balled paper, and was happy for its suffering.

Now a shimmering cold was traveling up my shinbone like a frost and I said, 'That was a powerful little animal, brother.' A fever came over me at once and I was forced to lie down. Charlie became worried by my pale coloring; when I found I could no longer speak he stoked up the fire and rode to the nearest town for a doctor, whom he brought to me against or partially against the man's will—I was in a fog but recall his cursing each time Charlie walked out of earshot. I was given a kind of medicine or antivenom, some element of which made me glad and woozy as when drunk, and all I wanted to do was forgive everyone for everything and also to smoke tobacco ceaselessly. I soon dropped off into dead-weighted sleep and remained untouchable all through that day and night and into the next morning. When I awoke, Charlie was still at the fire, and he looked over to me and smiled.

'Can you remember what you were dreaming of just now?' he asked.

'Only that I was being restricted,' I said.

'You kept saying, "I am in the tent! I am in the tent!" '

'I don't remember.'

' "I am in the tent!" '

'Help me stand up.'

He assisted me and in a moment I was circling the camp on wooden-feeling legs. I was slightly nauseated but ate a full meal of bacon and coffee and biscuits and managed to keep this down. I decided I was well enough to travel and we rode easy for four or five hours before settling down again. Charlie asked me repeatedly how I was feeling and I attempted each time to answer,

but the truth of it was that I did not exactly know. Whether it was the poison from the spider or the harried doctor's antivenom, I was not entirely in my body. I passed a night of fever and starts and in the morning, when I turned to meet Charlie's good-day greeting, he took a look at me and emitted a shriek of fright. I asked him what was the matter and he brought over a tin plate to use as a looking glass.

'What's that?' I asked.

'That's your head, friend.' He leaned back on his heels and whistled.

The left side of my face was grotesquely swollen, from the crown of my skull all the way to the neck, tapering off at the shoulder. My eye was merely a slit and Charlie, regaining his humor, said I looked like a half dog, and he tossed a stick to see if I would chase it. I traced the source of the swelling to my teeth and gums; when I tapped a finger on the lower left row, a singing pain rang through my body from top to bottom and back again.

'There must be a gallon of blood sloshing around,' said Charlie.

'Where did you find that doctor? We should revisit him and have him lance me.'

Charlie shook his head. 'Best not to search *him* out. There was an unhappy episode regarding his fee. He would be glad to see me again, it's true, but I doubt he would be eager to assist us further. He mentioned another encampment a few miles farther to the south. That might be our wisest bet, if you think you can make it.'

'I don't suppose I have a choice.'

'As with so many things in a life, brother, I don't suppose you do.'

It was slow going, though the terrain was easy enough—a mild downhill grade over firm, forested earth. I was feeling strangely happy, as though involved in a minor amusement, when Tub made a misstep and my mouth clacked shut. I screamed out from the pain, but in the same breath was laughing at the ridiculousness of it. I stuck a wad of tobacco between my uppers and lowers for cushioning. This filled my head with brown saliva but I could not spit, as it proved too painful, so I merely leaned forward and let the liquid leak from my mouth and onto Tub's neck. We passed through a quick flurry of snow; the flakes felt welcome and cool on my face. My head was listing and Charlie circled me to stare and ogle. 'You can see it from behind, even,' he said. 'The scalp itself is swollen. Your *hair* is swollen.' We passed widely around the unpaid doctor's town and located the next encampment some miles later, a nameless place, a quarter mile long and home to a hundred people or less. But luck was with us, and we found a tooth doctor there named Watts smoking a pipe outside his storefront. As I approached the man he smiled and said, 'What a profession to be involved in, that I'm actually happy to see someone so distorted.' He ushered me into his efficient little work space, and toward a cushioned leather chair that squeaked and sighed with newness as I sat. Pulling up a tray of gleaming tools, he asked tooth-history questions I had no satisfactory answers for. At any rate I got the impression he did not care to know the answers but was merely pleased to be making his inquiries.

I shared my theory that this tooth problem was linked to the spider bite, or else the antivenom, but Watts said there was no medical evidence to support it. He told me, 'The body is an actual miracle, and who can dissect a miracle? It may have been the spider, true, and it may have been a reaction to the doctor's

so-called antivenom, and it may have been neither one. Really, though, what difference does it make *why* you're unwell? Am I right?'

I said I supposed he was. Charlie said, 'I was telling Eli here, Doc, that I bet there's a gallon of blood sloshing loose in his head.'

Watts unsheathed a polished silver lance. Sitting back, he regarded my head as a monstrous bust. 'Let's find out,' he said.