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MY LIFE AND DR. JOYCE BROTHERS

By Kelly Cherry

Algonquin

If you're middle aged and single, chances are you're wounded: divorce, lonely bed space, betrayals, failures to connect quite the way you'd dreamed. Then there are your children, who you can't understand, live too far from, or failed to have. And there are your remaining days, growing increasingly and frighteningly measurable.

Nina has deep wounds, and in Kelly Cherry's *My Life and Dr. Joyce Brothers*, she tries to heal those she can and learn to live with the others.

Like superb books by Beverly Coyle, Barbara Gowdy and Tim O'Brien, this is another of 1990's loosely labeled "novels" told in discrete stories, most of which Cherry previously published.

Haunted by an incestuous assault by her older brother, long-divorced from a forgettable man, rejected by the one man she has deeply loved, childless, Nina faces spending the second half of her life alone.

Early in the book, Cherry's frenetic prose mirrors Nina's turmoil. The title reflects how Nina turns at first to psychiatry, support groups and self-help books for guidance as she tries to make sense of her latest lost love: "When I review the relationship, I can see that he was bound and determined not to let it work, for fear he'd have to get married again right away, to me, and not have a crack at the great Lottery of Life, the prize-winning ticket to which would buy instant transformation into the man he was secretly sure he was meant to be, a romantic hero untroubled by the petty desire for security."

By the fourth and fifth stories, however (one of them included in *New Stories from the South, the Year's Best 1989*), tracing the history of her parents, both Nina and her voice settle down to more purposeful pursuit of her future. There she finds the possibility of intimacy and fulfillment, if not the romance she longs for. Her brother's violation of her continues to hover too furtively over her psyche to make her as open to men as she wishes: "'You must never tell anyone,' he said, marrying me to this secret. He stole my own history from me—it wasn't mine anymore, because if I owned up to it, I was betraying him. . . . I remember feeling I was the cheapest female on earth, low, a snake, good for nothing more than this."

Her brother's offense creates an antipathy that generalizes to all men, even the one she loved. "He was the only man I ever told about what happened. I miss him every day of my life, but he doesn't know that. Nor do I want him to know. It would make him uncomfortable, and no man can stand to feel uncomfortable for longer than a day or two at a time. They interpret emotional discomfort as a personal imposition."

Cherry mixes mature insight with a witty tone that sometimes misfires or becomes overly metaphoric. When she is good she is very very good, but when she is bad she is turgid. Fortunately, she stays mostly on target. Even in the early stories, where the one-liners fly, what seems arch at first gradually clarifies itself as the wild and whirling words of a woman incapable of knowing what to do. At its best, the wit crackles like that of Lorrie Moore, the thirtysomething queen of witty wordplay who teaches in the same English department as Cherry.

Even when her prose echoes madness, there's method to it: "My neuroticism on the subject of stupidity—while delightfully, from a psychiatrist's point of view, traceable to sibling rivalry, or perhaps even to a female fear of outdoing the parental figure who set the standard, in this instance my seven-years-older-than-me, father- and mother-substitute brother—was a red herring, designed to throw doctors off the track of my precipitating anxiety, which was fear of feeling my lifelong condition of not being loved."

While this last is not quite a typical Cherry passage, it reflects the nature of this "novel." Self-conscious, occasionally gnarled, often tinged with bitterness and self-pity, yet consistently insightful and wise. It well rewards the hours spent with it.