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Finding Truth in Memoir.

A Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of the

Department of English

West Chester University

West Chester, Pennsylvania

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

the Degree of

Master of Arts

By

John O. Abernethy

December 2020

Dedication.

To Sandy, my wife of forty-seven years and tenth-grade lab partner, without whose enduring love, support, humor, and patience this work of fiction and memoir would not exist in any way, shape, or form. I am the person I am today because of her.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the faculty, staff, and fellow students of West Chester University of Pennsylvania for a challenging but truly amazing educational experience. I could not have realized this life-long goal of a degree in creative writing without your individual support. I will remember these relationships and value your friendships for the rest of my life.

I acknowledge the enormous contribution and support of Dr. Eleanor Shevlin, my faculty adviser. Thank you for your guidance and support of my studies and the sharing of many hours of engaging conversation. Your selfless and energetic dedication to the students and department of English is admirable.

Thank you Dr. Kristine Ervin, my thesis director, who first inspired me to appreciate the power and lyric beauty of creative nonfiction. Your insightful editing skills and personal challenges to speak my truth were indispensable to the success of my thesis. More than that, you were a good friend and I'll miss our time working together. Also, many thanks to Professor Peter Duval and Professor Nancy Pearson for serving as indispensable members of my thesis committee and contributing valuable suggestions for its continued improvement.

Abstract

This thesis represents four chapters of a memoir. The first chapter is a work of fiction and the remaining three chapters are written in the genre of creative nonfiction. The completed work will continue this structure and present personal narratives of memoir interspersed with works of fiction. Fiction serves to support and complement the variability and deficits of memory, to fill in the gaps, in the process of revealing the personal truth of memoir. The two genres will be linked in terms of theme, metaphor, and lyric voice.

Fundamental to this thesis is the assumption that a memoir can reveal a person's authentic self and emotional truth. At the center of my truth is a need to find meaningful purpose and personal significance. Growing up a doctor's son, I struggled to find the extrinsic value and public acceptance my father embodied. Most poignantly, I fell short of my own expectations. If I'm being honest, this project is an attempt to achieve external validation and become a writer of some renown. If I'm fortunate, I'll locate an intrinsic worth inside my own skin.

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An Inconvenient Brother: A Metaphor.

Sometimes, it's so quiet that I can pretend he's not here, that he never really existed, and that I'm alone, all by myself. I stretch out my legs and sigh, listening to the scratching of my toenails on the flannel sheets of my bed. I imagine that I can't hear the sucking sound he sometimes makes when he sleeps, the sudden rupture of his snorting, or the incoherent words he murmurs in his dreams. It's better when my allergies are bad and I can't breathe through my nose. Then I can ignore the constant, oppressive odor of his body, particularly his feet, his nighttime breath, his farts.

Sometimes, I listen to the liquid swirl of the wind skimming through the trees outside our bedroom and watch the clouds scuttering past the full-moon-bright night sky without thinking of him. I imagine what it's like to be one person and not always two, to be alone with my own thoughts.

I imagine what it would be like to be absolutely free of him. I could listen to music he doesn't like and play it as loud as I wanted or watch TV documentaries that get on his nerves. "Turn that shit off," he'd complain, throwing an arm over his head. "I'm trying to sleep and don't want to hear about endangered humpback whales."

If he weren't always around, I could play the video games I wanted, or even read to myself. I could get clothes that didn't have to fit both of us and forget about worrying that he'd say something stupid or out loud to someone I was trying to impress.

Most other guys my age live alone like that. Maybe there's a sister or two, or a diapered kid brother who's absorbed in his own world, focused on a yellow Big Bird or a

green TMNT caped hero instead of me. Intellectually, I know my brother can't help it, that he doesn't have a choice, and has to be with me. Still, it's difficult when he's never out of sight or away from my keen sense of smell.

I always have to think up a lame excuse of why I can't go to a movie on a Saturday night if some guys ask me, or join the French club at school that has girls, or even talk alone with a girl who has long, lavender nails and smells like vanilla and makes me feel light-headed. If I tried to do any of that, my brother would be there, right beside me, annoying.

Saturday afternoons, my mom lets me borrow her car. It's a crappy, sixteen-year-old Bug painted a sick yellow with 207,098 miles on the clock; but it's a car. I didn't have any real plans, but, you know, sometimes it's just nice to get out of the house. I was thinking of driving up north towards Marshwood; it was something I did as a way to clear my head.

Before I could back out the driveway, my dad poked his head out the front door and waved at me. I stopped the car and rolled down the window so I could hear what he had to say.

"I was going to ask you to go to lunch today at the 202," he said leaning his elbows against the door frame. "Thought we'd have a chat, man to man," he added with a grin. My dad didn't ever talk like that, so I wasn't sure what to say.

"Maybe tomorrow," I replied, thoughtfully. "I have something I want to do today."

I didn't think it was a lie, not really. I knew I'd come up with a plan as I drove. I waited to see if my brother would call me out on this and make some snide remark; he knew I didn't have a plan. But this morning he kept his mouth shut. Instead, he reached out and

turned on the radio. An NPR podcast was airing, a story about killer bees, so he started twisting the knob to find something else.

Mom's car is embarrassing for a teenager to drive. It stutters at traffic lights, and the engine rattles like a tin can filled with loose change, leaving behind a thin trail of blue smoke. Last week, I was at a traffic light, headed to the doctor's, when some guys I recognized from school pulled up beside me in an orange Stinger GTS. As soon as they recognized me, they started yelping with raucous laughter and dissing me hard.

"What are you doing out on the road in that shit bucket," one of the guys yelled -- I think his name is Jared -- "Is that piss-yellow toilet you're driving even street legal?" The other guys in the backseat started laughing hard, bouncing against each other like a pair of zombies shot up in a *Black Ops* game.

"Who are those assholes?" my brother asked. "Friends of yours?" Then he kind of snickered, looking straight ahead as if they weren't even there. Of course he knew the answer to that question; he was just being a dick. I don't have friends that would have a car that chill.

I'd never do it, but if I knew for certain that it wouldn't kill him, and my parents, too, I'd climb up on the steeped roof of our house and jump off, launching myself into the blue unknown. Honestly, my brother annoys me that much.

Before I was born, my parents knew they were having twins. My mom was super-sized, and the sonogram in the obstetrician's office clearly showed two fetuses. "You're having twin boys," the doctor said with a laudatory grin.

My parents told me they felt blessed and really happy at the news. They'd read, and heard from other parents, that being a twin meant always having a best friend at your side.

“As a bonus,” one man told them, being stupid, “if one ever needs a spare body part, a kidney or a cornea, a perfect donor is always right there.”

That was a joke, I thought. Like my brother would ever give up an eye or a kidney for me, and I wouldn't take it even if he did.

As I began to drive mom's car in the direction of Marshwood, my brother settled on a radio station that played Techno dance music. It's insistent and repetitive beat jangled my nerves and threatened to fry the Bug's fragile speakers.

“Can you turn that down!” I hollered. My brother reached out to adjust the volume, sighing as he did.

“Do you ever wonder what it would be like,” he began, “if we weren't twins, or even brothers?” I could tell he was looking at me, but I didn't turn my head. Of course I thought about that all the time but never wondered if he might, too. I didn't answer him right away; I was afraid to take him seriously. There were so many times in the past that he burned me when I let my guard down.

“Maybe if we were just two buds hanging out together,” he said, “you know, like friends.” I still wasn't saying anything. I wanted to hear where he was going with this. “I mean,” he went on, “we know so much about each other, all our bad habits.” I looked over and saw this roguish grin on his face like a guy that had just swallowed a canary. “There aren't any secrets between us,” he quipped, looking back at the road. “I think we'd be much better friends than brothers,” he observed, chuckling as he slid down in his seat. “Also, nobody likes either one of us very much,” he added and folded his hands behind his head.

I thought about that for a mile or two; I couldn't argue with him but wondered what it would be like to have my brother as my best friend. Were we really so much alike? It was hard to wrap my head around. I mean, who wants a brother as a best friend? Maybe if he weren't my brother it would make more sense.

"Hey bro," he said, pointing up ahead, "turn in there. I want to get a burger and some fries."

I pulled the Bug into the drive thru and looked at the menu. I thought maybe I'd get a fish sandwich. I ordered and paid for both meals; my brother never had any money.

"I don't want to eat in the car," I said, "but I know some place we can go." Neither of us liked to eat inside a burger place; there were too many bored parents with out-of-control, squirmy kids.

"It'd better be close," my brother complained. I could hear the grumbling of his stomach.

In another mile, I turned into the cemetery where our grandparents are buried.

"This is a weird place to eat," my brother commented dryly. I agreed but nobody would bother us and it was close.

Under a tree on a hill, there was an iron bench where we could chill and eat our lunch. Our grandparents were nearby, about ten feet away and six feet down. I started right in, shoving fries in my mouth and munching on my fish sandwich. It looked kind of gross, like I hadn't eaten in days. I think I was nervous about what my brother might say next, after his comments this morning. I looked over and he was staring at me; he hadn't even started eating his burger.

“I really think we could have been friends,” he said with a vulpine grin.

“But we really get on each other’s nerves!” I shot back. I was feeling frustrated.

“Yeah, I know,” he went on, “but friends are like that. You can be alike and different, and the differences are annoying, but bring you closer, too.”

I shook my head. “I don’t know. You can be so annoying. I can’t stand it sometimes.”

“Yeah, I know, but you need people to be perfect, and never a pain in your ass,” he answered. “You can’t have friends and expect that. That’s unrealistic.”

I couldn’t stand anyone telling me I was wrong. It made me feel worthless.

“Just think about it,” my brother said. “Let it sink in like the dirt on our grandparent’s graves.”

I stood up and walked over to their headstone. It wasn’t the first time I’d stopped by to visit and to think. I looked down and saw that I was still carrying my brother’s burger and fries. I thought about how hungry he must be.

I knelt down to clear some grass away from the marker and dropped the bag in front of my brother’s headstone. It made me sad to leave him alone here, hungry in this quiet place. I wondered if maybe we could have been friends.

Dr. Z's Surprise Visit.

Dr. Z was a friend of my dad's. I found out recently that he was an ENT, an otolaryngologist. He surgically removed tonsils and treated chronic earaches, the scourge of many kids. He was a big man, a red grizzly bear, with large, fat fingers and bushy eyebrows. I can't imagine his being able to poke around in a kid's ear, nose, or throat without inflicting considerable damage or disfigurement. I have a few memories of Dr. Z, but my second most vivid one was sitting across from him at my parent's grey and white Formica kitchen table watching an entire tub of Breyers vanilla ice cream disappear into his gigantic maw, one large spoonful at a time. When he finished, he belched. I'll tell you about my most vivid memory of Dr. Z a little later, but I have to work up to it.

My dad was quite an impressive man, a pediatrician and the father of a brood of five children. It seemed like every kid I knew had my dad for a doctor. Everyone assumed that I was just as smart as a doctor by osmosis. Kids would say, "I guess you know all about (insert some medical condition here), since your dad's a doctor." I still get that today, even though I don't have a clue. Not wanting to look stupid, I always played along which now I know was a mistake; I was becoming disappointed in being myself.

I was shorter than most guys growing up. For a few years in childhood I was shorter than my younger sister Jane. I was often mistaken for the youngest of my siblings as well as a girl. Because my mother loved my curly, blond hair, I didn't have my first haircut until I was three.

My grandfather would tease me, saying, "he should have been a girl."

One Halloween, my grandparents dressed me as Little Bo Peep and took me to visit some relatives. I remember them all laughing and clapping their hands with delight. I squirmed in my grandfather's embrace, convinced that something was wrong with me and that it was my fault. As an adult, I still have a dysmorphic body image.

It was an uphill climb for me to feel like a regular boy. I remember one particular middle school baseball game on a grey September day. I was all alone way out in left field, hoping to stay invisible and away from the ball. In the distance I could hear the other boys horsing around, trying to distract, or encourage, the batter. Then I heard a solid crack of the bat, and a ball was in the air, headed in my direction. After the ball bounced a few times, I picked it up just as the batter was rounding second base. The guys on my side were looking at me, waving their arms and yelling, "throw the ball, throw the ball!" I threw it high with Herculean effort toward the infield. When it landed, it just sort of dribbled forward towards the shortstop. I felt my face burning a bright red and experienced a moment of panic. Fortunately, I was soon invisible and forgotten again. It's lonely, not being seen, but most of the time I didn't mind.

Growing up, I was late arriving at the puberty party. In eighth grade, I remember sitting next to a friend of mine in music class, singing along to some corny song, probably the school's alma mater. He was new at school, having just moved from Alaska with his military family, and spoke with a slight stammer. I think we became friends because he was new and a little different.

I still had a pure soprano voice and, not knowing differently, was actually proud of it. My friend's voice had already changed and sounded like an Elvis record played backwards.

While singing, I noticed that he had turned his head to stare at me; I think his jaw even dropped. I remember thinking he must be envious of my voice. I can't sing anymore, but I'm a great whistler; it's something that makes me happy. The following year, he stopped being my friend and hung out with guys in the in-crowd instead. He didn't want to stand out either. That was the same year that a boy next to me in a locker room asked me, in a voice loud enough for everyone to hear, "why do you have a baby dick?" That's been a source of tremendous worry for me: the size of my penis.

I don't remember exactly when I started to become concerned about it, but I do remember the summer before seventh grade, the beginning of middle school, when my mom took me to the local Army-Navy store to get gym clothes. Army-Navy stores were the forerunners of mega emporiums like Dick's Sporting Goods in the early sixties. Anyway, after getting my gray shorts and t-shirt, the salesman remembered that I would need a jockstrap. I don't think guys wear them anymore; they wear compression shorts instead.

Anyway, the salesman climbed a wooden ladder to look on a dusty shelf high above my head and started moving boxes around. Then he looked down at me and said to my mother, "I guess he needs a small." Not knowing about waist sizing - small, medium, and large - I was horrified, shrinking into my sneakers like Frank Baum's Wicked Witch of the West after being doused in water. I wondered how he could possibly know about my secret shame.

I desperately wanted to talk to someone about my worry, but never had the courage. I'm not sure why, but my whole life I've been consumed by the thought that having a small penis made me less of a man. I didn't think I measured up and was afraid of being exposed. I

think my problem might stem from my whole dysmorphic body image; I don't see what others see when they look at me.

I did try talking to my brother about my problem once. My wife and I were renting a cottage on Cape Cod for a week in September and my older brother Bud, who lived in Boston, came out to visit. Earlier that day, we had decided to buy tickets for a whale watching tour, and so walked down the wooden plank to board one of the diesel-belching tour boats packed with other tourists. I was looking forward to getting out into the open water. I'm always happy and rejuvenated around the ocean; maybe it's the negative ions bouncing around in the salt air.

Out of sight of the coastline, the tour boat began to knife through the water with the bright sunlight leaping across the rolling wash like a pod of fairy dolphins. On either side, the sea breeze freshened and frothed the Atlantic waters. With a mighty splash, a humpback whale surfaced off the port side of the tour boat, sending up a geyser of cold saltwater which washed over my face and arms: it made me smile. After a dive of fifteen to thirty minutes, whales must surface to take a life-giving breath. I felt exhilarated and awestruck by the whale's display of power and freedom. I took a deep breath along with him and felt the relief and release of letting go, of being one with that moment.

I walked over to the railing and stood next to my brother. "That's amazing," he said, "I've been on these tours before, and never seen a whale this close." Bud was taller than I by four inches, but otherwise we look very much alike. When I was in high school, he shared with me that he resented our dad for never showing him how to throw a ball or giving him

the sex talk. In the same conversation, he told me, “John, if you ever have questions about girls or sex, you can always talk to me.”

I don’t know why I chose that moment on a tour boat to unload my deepest anxiety, but I did. Maybe I was inspired by the open sea, the liberating display of nature, or the anonymity of the crowd. Normally my brother was empathetic and kind, so I hoped he’d understand.

“I have a small penis,” I said, never taking my eyes off the glistening back of the retreating whale.

“Huh,” he replied, pulling down his Red Sox cap. “I don’t have that problem.” And then there was silence. If I were looking for some fraternal reassurance, like “don’t worry so much, or size doesn’t matter,” I wasn’t going to hear it from him. I guess he forgot the offer he made years earlier, encouraging me to ask him any questions I had about sex. His response left me feeling hollow and deflated, and even more alone.

I’ve felt inadequate my entire life, always comparing myself to my dad and older brother. When I was about six, Bud and I took swimming lessons at the local YMCA. It must not have gone well because my mother hired a lifeguard at the country club pool the following summer to teach me to swim. On Fridays, it was Family Swim night at the Y. I remember it was a crowded and noisy place. I felt disoriented by all the kids’ voices echoing off the pale blue cinder block walls and suffocated by the smell of over-chlorinated water. I never liked family swim night.

At least once, my dad took my brother and me to a Men’s Only swim at the Y; no one wore swimming trunks. I liked that visit, being with my dad, feeling special that it was just us

boys. It was much quieter on Men's day; just a few grownups, but no kids my age. It seems strange now, but I don't remember feeling uncomfortable around the men walking around the pool naked. I was with my dad and felt safe. What I do remember clearly is standing next to my father, in front of a grey, changing room locker, and looking, from eye level, at his uncircumcised penis. I'm not sure what I thought about it at the time, but I do know I've been comparing my own penis to its size all my life.

A childhood friend of mine also had an uncircumcised penis. Standing next to him at an elementary school urinal trough, I looked over and noticed his penis looked just like my dad's, just a smaller version. At the time, I thought there must be two designs, and I couldn't understand why mine wasn't like theirs. I may have started worrying about being different at that moment.

Although people tell me I look like my dad, physically I take after my mom's side of the family; I'm short with thinning hair and knobby, utilitarian hands. I am good with my hands and have a natural ability for fixing things. In middle school, I was mostly a "C" student and suffered from terrible eczema on both legs. As a result, I earned the nickname "Jungle Rot." After looking at one of my report cards, my mom started crying, convinced that I'd never get into college. My homeroom teacher in ninth grade once said, looking at me over his glasses from behind his desk, "John, you should start thinking about finding another career track because college is most likely not in the cards for you." Even after doing well in college and earning an advanced degree, I still feel the sting of that assessment.

In middle school, I didn't do as well as I thought I should as a doctor's son. One teacher held up my test paper and announced to the rest of the class that I had achieved the

lowest grade. I doubt that I would have gotten through that period of my life if I hadn't had my best friend Bob, someone I could hang out with after school. Since I didn't share any classes with Bob, he was the smartest guy I knew, I needed to find my own tribe, a herd of other guys to feel safe with. But I never found my tribe. I envied the nerds, their analytical brains, but I didn't speak their language. Other guys find their tribe in a sport or club, but I never could. Groups of people intimidate me, and I can feel the loneliest in a crowd.

My dad encouraged me to join the scouts, but after the first meeting, I was afraid to. I remember the troop met in the basement of a church accessed through a set of Bilco doors and down a short flight of stairs. Most of the younger scouts were on the floor studying maps, but as I walked towards the back of the room, a place I usually feel safer, three older boys surrounded me.

"We're going on a camping trip this weekend," a tall kid with red hair and freckles said. "You should come." They were going to camp on my grandfather's farm. "We'll have fun," he continued, his face a few inches away from mine. His breath smelled like cinnamon gum. "We'll tie you naked to a tree," he promised, and they all laughed as they walked away. Even now I'm convinced that if I had just stood up for myself, my life would have turned out differently.

It shouldn't come as a surprise, but I'm a voracious reader and love to disappear inside fictional characters I admire. I'm drawn to novels with strong male protagonists. In ninth grade, Hemingway and Steinbeck were two of my favorite writers. I read all of Ian Fleming's James Bond novels and consumed great swaths of science fiction novels and

superhero comics. I think they helped me live vicariously as the guy I wanted to be: strong and confident, not worrying what other people thought.

It sounds like I'm whining to say my dad wasn't around very much when I was a kid, but really I'm not. As a pediatrician, he worked insane hours, even answering phone calls during dinner time from frantic mothers worried about their kid shoving an eraser up his nose. I think I always assumed any problems I had were my own fault, a character flaw. Reading didn't always help me feel better, though, and one book in particular just increased my anxiety.

A chapter in this book was about a young teen's emerging sexuality. He was at the beach and suddenly felt his testicles descending into the liner of his swim trunks. I didn't know how to process that passage, wondering why I never felt my balls descend. I'm not sure why the writer was describing this experience. Normally, testicles drop out of the groin shortly after birth. They do descend lower in the scrotum at puberty, but it's an incremental process, not something a boy would suddenly notice in what was described, I thought, as an absolutely necessary rite of passage, close to a glorious religious experience.

Given my anxiety and awkwardness, I had given up the possibility of ever being with someone. I don't think I ever would have dated if Sandy hadn't asked me out in my sophomore year of high school. She used to date my best friend Bob and sat down next to me on our first day of biology class; we became lab partners. She was really pretty, with long brown hair, beautiful soft hands, and enormous blue eyes. I still don't know why she found me interesting, or boyfriend material. Later that year, we sat together on a school trip to DC and she offered me half of her cheese and mustard sandwich. I hated mustard, so I knew she

meant a lot to me when I ate it. When I looked at her, she gave me a funny, fluttering feeling in my stomach.

We've been married for over forty years, and I can't imagine being with anyone else. It's terrible to admit but I still have trouble believing she loves me. I only see the ways in which I don't measure up. She didn't like me at first because I said something snide about Bob. I still do that, making fun of people, most likely because I'm insecure and it makes me feel better about myself. At the same time, I value my sense of humor a great deal; I've got a quick wit and enjoy making people laugh.

I think my dad was insecure too, despite his actor good looks and professional success. He was five-foot ten with striking blue eyes and hands like a concert pianist. In the hospital, just before my mother died, they were having a fight and he accused my mom of looking down on him because he was a farmer's son. "Well then, stop acting like one!" was my mom's quick retort.

He was the son of a farmer and the first boy in his family to go to college. He won a full scholarship to the University of Pennsylvania and finished in three years. Afterwards, he enrolled in their medical school. During the summer, my dad earned money for books and food -- he said he ate a lot of ketchup sandwiches -- by building roads with the WPA, a New Deal employment program created during the Great Depression by Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

He enlisted in the Army as a newly-minted doctor and became a captain during WWII, splashing ashore on one of the Normandy beaches two days after the start of

Operation Neptune, or “D-Day.” I’m sure the injured soldiers he treated didn’t know he was a pediatrician, but they probably appreciated his gentle bedside manner.

I’d never describe Dr. Z’s bedside manner as being gentle.

I’ve had chronic ailments all my life: allergies, eczema, migraines, neuralgia and rotten teeth (I call them Irish teeth), poor eyesight, panic attacks, and depression. I’ve had an on-going problem with bowel movements; actually, a lack thereof. I’m not surprised considering that I was always holding on to so much powerful, emotional shit. I guess my dad was aware of it, and maybe he even told me Dr. Z was coming to examine me. I just don’t remember.

That evening, I was home from school, lying on the living room couch still in my P.J.s and looking at one of my favorite comic books: The Green Lantern. I was probably nine or ten. The front doorbell rang and Dr. Z lumbered into the living room followed by my dad. Dr. Z was a Sasquatch of a man at least six inches taller than my dad.

He and his family were Seventh Day Adventists who hold their church services on Saturdays. They don’t believe in consuming meat, narcotics, or stimulants, such as caffeine. Dr. John Henry Kellogg, of cereal fame, was a Seventh Day Adventist who believed that eating healthy was fundamental to being healthy. Dr. Kellogg and his brother W. K. established a church sanatorium at Battle Creek, Michigan. One of the patients at the sanatorium was C. W. Post (of Post cereals). Not surprising, my favorite breakfast cereal growing up was Wheaties, “The Breakfast of Champions.” Eating cereal promotes good bowel movements, but they never helped me. I should know; I ate a lot. Often, I was saving up the box tops to send away for a prize. My favorite was a gun that shot rubber bands.

My dad ushered me into his medical office which was in our house and asked me to hop up on the exam table. His office was fun for a kid like me to explore. He had a microscope and showed us images of squiggly bacteria. I liked to practice taking blood pressures with the sphygmomanometer and more than once Bob and I attempted to reanimate a dead bug with his hyfrecator, an instrument that used electricity to zap warts. I combined his tapes and tongue depressors to build rafts and other wooden structures.

He had a dad sense of humor and once came out of his office carrying a small white box. When he removed the top, there was a thumb in a bed of cotton surrounded by something that looked to me like blood; he said he removed it from one of his patients. “Wow,” I said, the highest sign of kid approval. Then he showed me it was just his own thumb, surrounded by ketchup, sticking up through a hole in the bottom. Pediatrics was perfect for my dad because he was very gentle with kids. I wanted to be a doctor like him, but never felt adequate enough. It was something my brother was supposed to do.

I must have been wondering what was going to happen when my dad asked me to lie down on my stomach and pull down my P.J. bottoms. With my head turned to the side I watched Dr. Z roll a finger cot over his index finger, a “condom” used in medical examinations, and apply some lubricant to its tip. Then Dr. Z speared me with his sausage-sized finger. I must have yelped and squirmed at the sensation because I remember yelling frantically that I had to poop and needed to go to the bathroom right away. When he pulled out his finger, I sprang off the exam table and ran into a bathroom underneath a staircase.

Sitting on the toilet in the dark, I realized that no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't let go. I wish I could have screamed or fought back, swearing like a normal boy, but I

couldn't. I'm trying harder now to let go, writing about my dark memories so that they lose their power over me. I want to become like the whale, to feel the exhilaration and awesome power of the humpback exploding upwards through the depths of the ocean towards the bright blue sky and fresh air above. To breach the surface of my own constraining fear and inhibitions and inhale a live-giving breath; to look back at my brother in the boat and smile.

The Sex Talk.

My brother Bud and I were driving east on Sycamore Road in our mom's 1967 Marina Blue Camaro convertible in the summer before my senior year of high school; I was sixteen and riding shotgun. The top was down and the sky flashing through the trees above me was the same intense blue as the car. I had my arm over the door frame catching the cool breeze with my hand, mesmerized by its rise and fall against the air pressure. Bud was going to meet up with a college friend to borrow a textbook. On the car radio, Bobbie Gentry was singing "Ode To Billie Joe," a song about teenage suicide.

"I can't believe dad never gave me the sex talk," Bud shouted above the wind and the radio. I looked over at him, noticing his hands tightly gripping the steering wheel. I wondered where this conversation was leading. "Did he say anything to you?" he asked, looking at me suspiciously.

"No," I answered. Bud shook his head. I really didn't want to hear anything about sex from our dad, although I could have used some information. I still wasn't sure where the clitoris was.

"He never showed me how to throw a baseball, or defend myself in a fight, either!" he went on, looking back at an oncoming car. In his defense, our dad never followed any sports and I'd seen him throwing a ball; I throw as erratically as he does. I had a hard time imagining dad in a fight; he advised me that if guys in school gave me any trouble, "just walk away."

When Bud was a freshman in college, he had an unnerving experience related to the “talk.” He told me that the other guys were swapping stories about high school exploits, personal fantasies, and never-fail coital techniques, most of which he knew nothing about. In loud voices the other freshmen shared the most arcane knowledge of what college girls really wanted. He told me he felt embarrassed during these “bull” sessions. “Dad really screwed me,” he fumed, “never telling me anything about sex.” I didn’t press him for details about what the guys talked about.

Not surprisingly, I hadn’t had the “sex talk” either. Dad was a medical doctor, but he was surprisingly reserved on the subject of sex. The closest he ever came to the subject was over the dinner table dinner one night when I was a high school junior. I had just asked my parents if I could borrow the car so I could do some research at the library for a term paper. My dad looked up from his pork chops and said to my mom with a sly grin, “I bet he’s going to the library just to look at the girls.”

I’ll admit I was preoccupied with sex, but dating and physical performance were a challenge for me: I had a hard time ignoring the chatter of the monkeys in my head, the self-doubts that distract me.

That sucks if you’re a guy; there’s an expectation that your sex drive is hard-wired, part of the installed operating system that you don’t even have to think about. You turn on the autopilot and pursue a well-traveled flight plan which includes some aerial acrobatics and ends with sticking a landing, or “getting laid.” To some women, it probably feels as mechanical as I’ve just described it

In middle school, I have a memory of sitting on the carpet in front of the TV, probably watching an episode of Star Trek, and seeing my older brother Bud, neatly pressed into a white dinner jacket, go out the door to his senior prom. It was another three years before my own prom but I was already worried about not having a date. At school, I was usually alone, more so in a room packed with other kids; I was convinced that I'd always be alone.

I probably would have been, if I hadn't met Sandy in biology class in the fall of 10th grade. She sat down beside me because she had once dated my best friend Bob. We became lab partners which worked out well for both of us. She didn't like cutting into bugs and frogs and I got to kiss a girl.

"That's disgusting," she said to me over the open body of a frog splayed out on a dissection tray. I think it was the formaldehyde because she was covering her nose with the sleeve of her blouse. My parents met in a somewhat similar situation; it was during my dad's internship and my mom, a nurse, was assisting him with a circumcision.

In the spring of 10th grade, during a Wednesday afternoon study hall, Sandy asked me if I wanted to go to the movies on Friday night. It was going to be our first date. She had arranged to double with a girlfriend of hers who was interested in Will, another guy in our class. I soon discovered that Sandy loved matchmaking. When she asked me, of course I said "Yes."

I don't remember the movie we were seeing, or the other couple, but I do remember standing outside of a Rexall Drugstore waiting for Sandy (neither of us could drive), watching her walk down the street towards me. When I saw her, I felt my stomach flip.

We started going out, just the two of us, and passing notes to each other between classes. Recently, I found a shoe box full of the notes she sent me. She used to call me Charlie Brown because I was always glum. Low self-esteem and academic problems can cause depression in teens, I've read; I think I could have been a case study.

A few times we went to teen dances at the YMCA which were held in their dimly lit basement. There was a five-dollar cover-charge and the local bands played Motown music. Sandy loved to dance and I tried to follow, at times appearing to have my shoelaces tied together. At one dance, when the band took a break, I bought two, twenty-five cent bottles of coke and we sat on metal folding chairs against a wall back away from the crowd. My ears were still vibrating to the loud music when I leaned over and kissed Sandy. Years later, after we were married, she told me she thought I made my move too soon.

I was a senior in high school when my dad asked me to go to lunch, just the two of us. It was a Saturday, about 11:00. We stopped at the 202 Diner, one of those stainless steel modulars popular in the 1950s that resemble a passenger train car that's had its wheels boosted. We sat in a booth facing each other, looking down at our menus. I was distracted, trying to decide between lunch or a late breakfast, when my dad let out a frustrated sigh and said, "Your brother is annoyed that I never told him anything about sex."

Knowing what I now know, I wish my brother had kept his mouth shut. Dad turned his head to look out the smudged, plate-glass window next to our booth. There was a parking lot big enough for the three trucks which had separated from the herd of semis that stampeded down the four-lane highway running past the 202. The diner was popular with

truckers and my dad because it had a large menu and served a satisfying variety of comfort food; I love to eat as much as my dad.

As he started to talk, I felt some nervous perspiration begin to run down my sides. “Your brother wants me to tell you about sex,” he said. I was not prepared for this conversation and didn’t feel any more comfortable about it than my dad looked. He closed his eyes as if collecting his thoughts. At that time, Sandy and I had already started fooling around so I figured I knew enough.

Our relations started during the summer before our senior year in high school, when we were hanging out with Bob and his friend Mark. Mark’s parents went to the shore every weekend, so the four of us would have drinking parties at his house. A guy in our class used to drive to New York City and buy booze to sell to us and other high school kids. We always got Southern Comfort and drank it with coke; we’d get so stupid drunk we’d end up breaking something almost every weekend. I remember one of us tossed an empty bottle of coke towards a trash can and it bounced out and sailed through a kitchen window, breaking it.

At one of these parties, Sandy and I were lying on the floor of a bathroom with the door closed, trying to get away from the noise and chaos outside. On the other side, Mark and Bob had begun to tear down his mother’s living room drapes. Iron Butterfly’s “Inagadavida” was playing on the stereo loud enough so that a water glass on the bathroom sink was jouncing with the bass.

We were kissing and I remember nudging one of her hands down over the fly of my pants; no one had ever touched me there before. Sandy has a light touch and really beautiful hands; it felt amazing. I inhaled sharply and arched my back as I heard the sound of my

zipper being pulled down, shivering at the touch of her soft fingers against the thin cotton of my underwear. That led to getting my first blowjob. If I hadn't been drinking, I never would have been able to get out of my head long enough to enjoy my first sexual experience.

So, when dad asked me to lunch in the spring of my senior year of high school, I was seventeen and already beginning to feel somewhat confident about sex. Sandy and I hadn't gone all the way, so there were plenty of gaping holes in my knowledge base, questions that my dad could have answered: about foreplay and being a more considerate lover. But we were both too embarrassed and uptight to have a real conversation about love making.

When dad turned his attention away from the parking lot, he looked down at the table and rubbed his eyes, his face scrunched up with tension. Behind me, I heard the loud chatter of heavy china in the kitchen and the easy banter exchanged between the waitstaff. At the table, there were two glasses of ice water, flatware rolled in cheap paper napkins, and a couple of disposable placemats advertising local businesses. One ad offered a 10% discount on pre-arranged funerals.

"Bud's annoyed that I didn't tell him about sex," he began again, "how to do it, and how to treat a girl." He sighed and shook his head. "I don't understand why he's so upset," he admitted, "but he wants me to have a talk with you." I could see that this was painful for him; we couldn't even make eye contact. "Nobody needs to be told about about sex," he continued in a tone meant to deflect my questions.

Maybe my dad didn't need to have sex explained to him. He grew up on a farm and probably learned the basic moves by watching a hired bull mount and inseminate one of his

father's dairy cows. And watching a cow deliver her calf could have provided a rudimentary knowledge of the female anatomy I suppose.

"You have dreams about sex and just figure it out," my dad argued.

But of course, dreams aren't the same thing. Although I had wet dreams, I never learned anything about sex from dreaming. I didn't remember any details; I just saw the results on my PJs. And until you have sex, I don't think you can imagine it. Maybe he was venting his frustration or getting rid of any guilt he was feeling, or even giving me an opening to ask a question. Being too shy about sex myself, I wasn't going to say a word. I think that was okay with him; he didn't seem to be in the mood for a conversation.

I held my breath, hoping that the waitress would come back for our order, as my dad tented his hands over his forehead. He kneaded his greying hairline with his fingertips, looking down at the Formica tabletop. I couldn't imagine what he was going to say next, but hoped that the talk wouldn't get too graphic, or worse yet, that he'd ask me to share what I knew: I didn't know very much.

During spring break in my freshman year, a little more than a year and a half after lunch with my dad, Sandy and I drove to the Jersey shore and rented a motel room to have sex. It must have been beginner's luck, but fooling around in the beginning was easy, much easier than I would have imagined after the conversation I had with my dad over lunch.

In the early 70s, Sandy and I had to be careful because it was illegal for unmarried couples to rent motel rooms in New Jersey. I discovered that the danger of unlawful sex was a huge turn on for me. As soon as the door opened, we jumped into bed and made love like rabbits. Afterwards, we took a walk along the shuttered boardwalk, listening to the raucous

chatter of the gulls smoothed out by the sound of the surf washing the abandoned beach.

Soon, I got distracted, aching with lust, and wondered when we could get back to the motel room. In my teens and twenties, I needed (or wanted) very little recovery time.

Sandy didn't want to get pregnant, so we tried to be extra careful. A friend told her the pill wasn't foolproof, so she wanted me to buy condoms. That meant I had to buy rubbers. Now they're displayed openly in pharmacies and grocery stores, but when I was a college student you had to ask the pharmacist, usually a gray-haired, intimidating man standing behind a raised counter. They cost a quarter each and you had to specify if you wanted them wet or dry, prelubed or not. I always tried to avoid eye contact with the pharmacist, and if a woman were behind the counter, I'd have to turn around and quickly walk back out the door.

In the summer before my sophomore year of college, Sandy and I were staying with Bob and Mark at his parent's beach house when our free and easy sex life got slapped down by an unexpected wave. After an hour or two of broiling on our beach towels, Sandy and I decided to cool off by taking a walk along the surf line. We were holding hands and I remember enjoying the sound and the feeling of the effervescent surf nibbling on my toes. At nineteen, I was happy, doing better in college than I had expected, and in a serious relationship. I felt like the sad and insecure Charlie Brown version of myself was receding with the ocean tide.

That's when Sandy leaned in close and whispered in my right ear, "I missed my period." Immediately, there was a deafening roar in my ears, drowning out the sound of the surf. I couldn't catch my breath and had to get away. Heedlessly, I sprinted away from Sandy

towards the boardwalk, running through the other vacationers lying prone on their towels, dragged away as a wave of panic crashed over me.

At some point, the rational part of my brain rebooted and I stopped and turned around. Sandy hadn't moved and was standing alone in the surf. I ran back and pulled her close. She was crying and I felt desperately ashamed of myself; I still do. Not for the last time -- there would be other difficult moments -- I told her, "I'll never leave you."

But that promise was difficult for me. Sandy was the first serious girlfriend I'd ever had, and I wasn't sure what I wanted in a relationship; I had met her when I was just fourteen. She was helping me feel less insecure and alone, but wanted some commitment from me in return. I knew I wasn't ready for marriage, to make a commitment, but I worried that if I couldn't commit then Sandy would leave me. That's when having sex began to become tangled with my fear of being abandoned.

I couldn't tell Sandy, "I'm worried about you getting pregnant because I'm not sure I want to spend the rest of my life with you." Of course there was never any question in my mind that I would do the honorable thing. And, I was too insecure to be alone and couldn't say, "By the way -- don't leave me until I'm sure you're the one because I can't stand to be alone." How cruel and selfish is that?

Soon, the pleasure I used to feel in lovemaking was overwhelmed by a fear of pregnancy or abandonment. I started making excuses and tried to avoid all sexual situations. If we did start making out and touching each other, usually in my car on a dark and deserted road, I was blocked from enjoying any pleasure of skin on skin by the monkeys chattering in

my brain: “you’re a failure...you can’t do it...she’s going to leave you all alone.” Sandy couldn’t understand what was going on and I couldn’t explain. I’d apologize and look away.

I wasn’t over my fear of abandonment, of being alone, and a lack of sexual intimacy seemed to weaken our connection. I’m a very needy person, which is another poor characteristic for a guy. I think most women like to have a confident, take-charge guy. Or at least they think they do.

Sandy always had enough confidence for the both of us, and the thought that she might not need me made me feel even more worthless and insecure. It was a vicious cycle: not being able to get aroused, losing my self-esteem, and a weakening connection with Sandy. I was drowning in a tsunami of emotions.

I’ve always put a lot of pressure on myself to succeed, and this was just one more way in which I was failing. I felt emasculated and insecure, but I imagine Sandy blamed herself, feeling less interesting and desirable. At times I did work up the courage to talk about the problem, but Sandy could be defensive or appear indifferent. She admitted feeling frustrated, wanting to have sex, but she told me it was OK, that she could just pleasure herself. She was happy with the relationship we had. For some reason that made me feel worse, like she didn’t really care about me.

There were some momentary glimpses of sunlight when sex was as easy as it was before, usually in the presence of some danger or an easy excuse to explain why I couldn’t perform. Then I could get out of my head and embrace the sensuality of the moment, just like I did when we were on the bathroom floor of Mark’s parent’s house. One time, during a Christmas break, I was at home recovering from the flu and Sandy came to visit. She sat

down beside me on my bed and we started to touch and get aroused. She slid under the covers and we had sex, being careful not to alert my parents downstairs.

Before Sandy and I got married I walked into my parent's dining room and asked my mom an intimate question. "Did you and dad have sex on your wedding night?" I remember feeling insecure, that I might be an inadequate lover and unable to perform after Sandy and I got married. My mom was standing on a step ladder dusting the top of the curtains, and she turned to look at me and replied quite simply, "Of course."

I am surprised that my mom was so forthright; she was usually very uncomfortable talking about intimacy. If she said anything on the subject, she'd spell out the word: S-E-X. I wish she would have asked me a follow-up question, like, "what's bothering you?" or "do you want to talk about what happens on your wedding night?" Even if she did, I think I would have been too embarrassed to answer. I have a problem talking openly about sex.

I wish sex and intimacy and relationships didn't have to be so complicated and hard to talk about. I wish I were more secure, less buried in a grave of doubts, and able to stay present in a moment of pleasure. I would have liked to have remained carefree a little longer, riding in a vintage convertible down a far less-traveled road under a clear blue sky beside my brother who's no longer with me.

But, there are always twists and unexpected turns in any story, and complications in life, too. My dad had his share, and shared them with me that afternoon at the 202 Diner.

"Your brother's upset that I never told him about homosexuals or sadists," he confessed, almost choking on the words. He wouldn't look at me, unraveled and confused.

“Why would he need me to tell him about that?” he asked, shaking his head with excruciating frustration.

I didn't know the answer to that question, and I never asked my brother for more information. I was as bad as my parents, and I didn't want to hear about my brother's problems. I had my own shit to deal with.

That's what I remember about my sex talk at the diner. I shared the experience with Sandy, and she shook her head and reminded me, “I told you your family is weird,” I know that's true; my family is weird. Still, it makes me feel sad to hear it said out loud; it makes it feel more crushing.

The Tin Kid.

I walked into the bathroom one morning and found my sixteen-year-old brother Bud sitting on a stool, backlit by the bright sunlight streaming in behind his head. He was holding his white, athletic socks and staring down at his feet, size 10 and a half. The bathroom walls are covered with wallpaper of a repeating pattern of yellow and orange sunflowers and its window looks out over the garage. It's called the yellow bathroom, as opposed to the more-modern blue one which my parents and two sisters share. The yellow bathroom is by default the boys' bathroom.

From the kitchen, I heard my mom yelling, "Get down here and eat your eggs before they get cold!" Mom didn't like to cook and got tense when we didn't come to the table right away. We're going to be late for school again, I thought.

Bud is so smart, a genius, perhaps, that he never had time for completing practical tasks, like keeping track of the time or getting dressed for school. In my family, a sign of genius is being lost in thought and staring at your shoes. In about six years, my brother's hollow gaze would come to mean something very different.

Because my dad was a doctor, it's assumed that everyone in the family was intelligent. My mom told all her friends, and even store clerks, that her children were perfect. I don't know what she meant by that, but growing up I got the message that you had to be perfect to be worth anything. Everyone thought my brother was perfect and I got tired of hearing it.

At thirteen, I knew I wasn't perfect by looking at my disappointing report cards and the scars of my chronic eczema. When I limped into the bathroom that morning, I was there to dispose of the plastic wrap which had been bandaged around my legs. I was embarrassed for anyone to see my legs wrapped in plastic at night; at thirteen, I felt humiliated, like having to wear a diaper to bed.

The doctor said the plastic wrap sealed in the steroid cream, his latest attempt to exorcise my eczema demon. Looking down at the raw and oozing flesh, compared with the clear-skin calves of my brother and boys in my gym class, I felt like an untouchable.

I complain to friends, and anyone who will listen, that Bud was the golden child and could do no wrong. I think of myself as the less valuable tin kid. When he started college, I took over his newspaper route at the hospital. I hated being a newsboy delivering papers to sick people. There was a hospital smell I didn't like, and patients often asked me to pick through greasy coins in their bedside tables to pay for the paper. I was convinced the coins carried germs. Twice I was accused of stealing money. I was so embarrassed I couldn't defend myself and turned a deep scarlet.

One afternoon I broke down and passionately confessed to mom that I hated being a paperboy and couldn't do it anymore. My mother looked at me and asked in frustration, "Why can't you be more like your brother?" It was a question I heard more than once in my life.

Of course I always wanted to be like him, the older brother. We share many personality traits and interests; we both love to read, although we like different books, have a quirky sense of humor, and enjoy telling outrageous stories, riffing and playing off each other

like jazz musicians. But our dispositions are poles apart: my brother has an angelic and quiet exterior, while sometimes I erupt in anger and frustration.

We look alike and sometimes sound the same. It really bugs me when I hear his voice coming out of my mouth, the words delivered in the same cadence with a particular nasal, annoying quality. I desperately wanted to be my own person and I struggled to stand out. Like most brothers, I guess, our relationship is complicated.

In my peculiar family melodrama, I play the role of the reliable, rather ordinary boy, with both feet planted on the ground. Most days I don't feel grounded though; I feel like a mess. My dad encouraged this dichotomy between my analytical brother and me; he seemed proud that I was like his Scot-Irish father, also named John, who was running the family farm when he was just sixteen. My grandfather wanted to be an attorney, to be sitting in a cushioned leather chair behind an oak desk, but boys weren't educated in his agrarian family; they were given farms.

I'm sure my dad meant the comparison as a compliment, and I do admit that I was proud I could effortlessly do things my brother couldn't. One time I watched my dad try to teach my brother how to drive the red, IH tractor on his father's farm. "Let the clutch out slowly," my dad cautioned. It was a cloudless summer day, and my grandfather was still alive. Bud didn't have the eye-hand coordination and backed the tractor into the corn crib. When I took my turn to drive, I enjoyed the experience of showing him up and nailed it the first time.

The downside of being the practical son was that Bud frequently reminded me how van Gogh's brother supported him so that he could focus on painting his golden sunflowers. I

never had any intentions of supporting him, but felt guilty for not wanting to, like I was being selfish.

Bud always believed his spiritual energy was so strong that he couldn't wear a wristwatch because it disrupted the mechanism. I looked into that theory one time and found other causes for malfunctioning wristwatches: some people generate a strong magnetic field or their skin is more acidic than average. It was a good story, though, and illustrated his exceptionalism.

I didn't always believe what Bud said, but once, when I was about five, he whispered to me in bed that if you walked barefoot outside, tapeworms could crawl into your brain through the soles of your feet. I don't remember if it was that night, but I remember a dream, feeling tapeworms wriggling in my head, their bodies sliding out through my nose and eyes, and crawling back under my T-shirt. I screamed until my brother woke me up.

I tell a good story, too, and should worry more about what I tell people; I'm very convincing.

In high school Bud liked to read books about the occult and believed in astral projection and magical thinking. One of his favorite writers was Edgar Casey, the "sleeping prophet." Casey was an early 20th century American healer and clairvoyant who claimed he was able to use his unconscious mind to enter a dream world where all spiritual energy -- past, present, and future -- existed forever.

Bud always wanted to explore an alternate reality and tried to make contact with a Ouija board that he got for his birthday. Our dark-paneled Victorian house groaned and creaked at night and could be spooky even without the presence of a Ouija board. My dad

didn't like us to use electric lights in the day if we weren't in our rooms studying. He'd rather we spend our time outdoors where the light was free. One afternoon, I remember sitting on a second-floor landing, with my younger sister Jane, assisting Bud to make contact with the dream world.

As he peered down at the board, his portal into the vast beyond, his profile was framed by the weak October light straining through the rippled glass of a window above us. The same thin light, saturated with the smell of the house's dried woodwork, bumped against the dust motes in the air. His breathing slowed as he lightly touched the heart-shaped planchette to allow it to move freely.

I don't remember the question he whispered, but as the planchette stuttered across the board, to point out a series of letters, I remember an eerie feeling, the same presence I felt pursuing me in our dingy basement. I remember it provided an answer to my brother's question, but I don't remember what it was.

After the session, we rode our bikes to the park near our house and collided in a tangled mass of flesh and bike as we swerved to avoid a tree root in the brick sidewalk.

"It's the spirit world reaching out to us," my brother cried with wide-eyed terror, "we've looked into something we shouldn't have."

I don't remember that we ever used the Ouija board again, but my brother never stopped looking into the spirit world.

My brother startled me one day, telling me, "I'm moving into the spare room in the attic." We lived in a large house with a finished, third floor we called the attic. My five

cousins crashed in the attic whenever they visited from Johnstown. I should have felt relieved and excited to have my own space; the room we shared for twelve years was the smallest in the house. Its pale blue and white wallpaper featured Colonial soldiers marching through quaint villages in endless formations. Our desks faced a window looking out into tall fir trees and a copy of Gilbert Stuart's unfinished portrait of George Washington hung over a sealed-up fireplace. Sometimes the portrait, lit by passing cars in the night, kept me awake.

Bud wanted his own space and complained of my messiness. His desk was neat and organized while mine was sticky with plastic glue and cluttered with the leftover parts of model airplanes. I didn't like the idea of him moving out even though we never talked that much. He was three years older and had his own interests and friends. Maybe I wanted to move to the attic so I could feel grown up, too. Anyway, in the end I got my way.

One of the attic rooms was large and had four double beds. It was freezing in the winter and sweltering in the summer. The other two rooms were used for storage. All the rooms gave me the creeps; I felt like something was watching me. Even now, I have these dreams that my brother is alive, still living in the dark attic, and I'm trying to turn on lamps which have burnt out bulbs. In my dream I need to turn on the lights or something will get me.

My dream life can be scary. I used to have these hallucinatory nightmares that were as real as being awake, dreams about talking to reanimated dead relatives or walking in dug up graveyards where coffins were smashed open. Turns out some of my dreams were prescient. For years I dreamed I couldn't walk and then I got rheumatoid arthritis. It became almost impossible to put on a pair of shoes or walk without a cane. My dreams lost some of their

terror when I started taking antidepressants, but I still have odd ones about walking into school cafeterias where there's never any food left. I hope that doesn't come true.

Of course, I was afraid of the usual kid shit, too, like moaning ghosts or monsters behind a closet door. Once I remember listening intently to a sound I thought was blood dripping from a vampire's fangs as he climbed the stairs to my bedroom. The next morning I discovered it was a leaky bathroom faucet.

Like my brother, I can get fixated by a thought or irrational belief. When I was in third grade, I worried that I'd die if I forgot to keep breathing. When I was eight, my brother took me to see a 3D horror movie, but I couldn't put on the glasses and sat on the floor. I got scared anyway by the soundtrack and lurid, flickering lights.

Bud was in his third year at Penn when my parents called me to tell me he had a nervous breakdown and was in a hospital in Philadelphia. At the time, he was living in a fraternity, and his brothers called my parents because he wouldn't eat or get out of bed. The initial diagnosis was a drug-induced psychosis and he spent about two weeks in a psych ward.

I've read that schizophrenia and psychotic disorders possess someone in their twenties as a result of genetics, excessive use of alcohol or drugs, or even childhood abuse. I went to an analyst who thought my brother and I might have been abused, but I don't remember any and I never asked my brother. Interestingly, there's some evidence of a connection between the microbiome in your bowel and your brain that can cause mental

illness. He'd enjoy the weirdness of that, that his gut made him sick; and maybe he'd laugh at the irony that he died of colon cancer. At least I hope he would.

After his breakdown, Bud stayed with my parents for two months. At the time, I was a college freshman suffering through my own panic attacks in English 101, having a tough time adjusting to college life and living in a dorm. There were too many people, too much stimuli for me to process, and most of the time I felt like I was drowning. When I came home for Thanksgiving, I was looking forward to being out of the dorm and returning to a place where I felt safe. When I walked into the house with my gray duffle bag, I found that Bud wasn't speaking in complete sentences or taking showers. He smelled bad and didn't like changing his clothes.

The once bright yellow bathroom we shared was dirty and exuded a funk I could almost taste. It made me gag. The yellow orange wallpaper of sunflowers was peeling along the edges, and the toilet was a nightmare to use for someone as compulsive as I was becoming. The bowl wasn't flushed and filled with shit. Even the toilet seat was stained with skid marks and pubic hairs. I don't think my mom could stand to clean the bathroom anymore.

I felt unsettled being around Bud when he had these psychotic breaks. He had this terrified look in his eyes, like a cornered animal, and he wasn't the secure person I remembered. It wasn't just because he was dirty; I couldn't stand to hear him talk about his delusions about being controlled by the devil; he really did act as if he were possessed. He'd stand at the kitchen sink, drink one sip of water, and then walk around the table, repeating the figure over and over again. I watched him pace around the house, going from room to room

and peering into closets. We were alike in so many ways that I was scared it could happen to me. When he recovered, I never asked him what he was looking for, and now it's too late. Maybe he was looking for a way out of his prison.

My dad, a physician, experimented by giving him different antipsychotics and spent hours sitting next to him on the couch, holding his hand and trying to pull him home. On sunny days, my mom walked with him around the neighborhood where we grew up. He said it felt good to hear her talk. Mom liked him to wear his Penn sweatshirt whenever they went out, and that bothered me. I was envious that she was so proud of him even after he had fallen apart. She was being a good mother, expressing her pride even when he was at his lowest, but I resented it. When we went out to a restaurant, I discovered that I was embarrassed by how he acted and looked.

When he recovered, he asked us to call him Hugh. Bud was a nickname he was given because he was named after our dad. Maybe he needed to start over, to assume a new identity, to forget about his broken self. I guess I was being stubborn, but I tried calling him Hugh once or twice. It just sounded too strange, too formal, to keep it up. I did know what it was like wanting to make a fresh start when I entered college. I didn't like the nobody I was in high school or being the pale reflection of my brother that all my teachers remembered.

Bud's ambition was to become a famous poet. I admired his determination and his discipline, but I could never have lived his life. Most of his adult life he lived in public housing in Massachusetts on disability. Over the next thirty years of his life he followed the same pattern: he'd stop his medication and quit his job; then he'd start to hear voices and couldn't sleep, convinced that he was possessed by the devil or an alien. When he lost all

sense of reality, he'd wander away from wherever he was living, and fall into a delusional maze under a highway overpass or in a condemned building. If my parents were lucky, some stranger would find him in a day or two and take him to a hospital; if not, he'd disappear for a week.

He didn't like taking medication because he said it corrupted his art and often advised me to stop taking mine. When he began to feel oppressed by his comfortable life, he told me, he'd clear his head by camping out in the woods of south Jersey or residing in a secluded refuge under the Ocean City boardwalk. I worried about him, but I was also jealous that my mother and sisters never stopped referring to him as a genius.

While my brother was chasing recognition and poetic immortality, I focused on becoming self-sufficient. Although I studied English as an undergraduate, I didn't know how to support myself with the degree. I worried that I'd become ensnared by the riptides of my terrors: my anxiety and depression. All my life I had been anxious about being alone and unable to support myself, so getting married helped me cope. I made a commitment that forced me to get out of bed every day. I threw myself into every job I got and struggled to find a profitable purpose.

Feeling less and less secure, I readily grabbed on to a lifeline, an offer to work in the accounting department of a bank. I found that mastering the organized systems challenged me and suited my need for regularity and stability.

In the end, I never really valued what I did but I was proud of my tenacity and the accomplishments I achieved despite my mental challenges. I'm not sure my parents really understood; both my parents pursued medical careers. One day at lunch my dad asked me,

“how can you stand adding up numbers all day long? Doesn't it get boring?” I couldn't explain to him what I did, that in fact I thought it could be mentally stimulating, like doing the crossword puzzles that he loved. And I got a lot of affirmation from the people I worked with. That always amazed me.

I never seriously tried to be a writer while my brother was alive. He liked to read and write poetry, but I never had any interest, or ability, in that form. Except in college, I always wrote short fiction and won a prize in middle school for my first science fiction effort. I showed Bud one of my stories, published in a college magazine, and he started writing short stories, too. I never told him that I thought his fiction wasn't very good, that I didn't think he didn't have the ear for it. I always thought I was the better writer. And, I was better at driving the red farm tractor.

Maybe I never tried writing because I was afraid I'd fail; as long as I never tried I could tell myself I was a writer waiting to become. Or, I worried that if I did succeed, then I'd be appropriating something that he was the first to claim.

After my brother died in July of 2016, I enrolled in a graduate creative writing program. I felt free to pursue my interest in writing, to see where a focused effort would take me, to find out how good I could be. I've noticed that Bud continues to exist in many of my stories. I kept his cell phone number in my contact list, but never tried to call. It would be nice to hear his voice mail message again.

Bud would have appreciated the irony that his ashes rest in an urn on top of a bookcase. Along with books I'm attached to, and a collection of first-time writers, there are memory reminders, mostly travel souvenirs and photos of my family. There's a picture of my

dad's parents on the farm and a nice one of my mom and her younger sister. There's a great photo of a seven-year-old me, grinning ear to ear, standing next to my dad; he has his arm around my shoulders. And a group shot of my wife and me with friends on a trip we took to Morocco. The bookcase stands in the spare bedroom Bud slept in when he would come to visit. So in a way, I'm still still living near him, at least in the presence of many other memories.

I knew it was important for him to find immortality, to be remembered, and live on through his poetry. Late in life, he was drawn to the religious teachings of the Jehovah's Witnesses who believe that their adherents would be resurrected to heavenly life, to share as co-rulers with Christ in God's kingdom. That's an audacious belief I don't accept. But as long as I'm alive, my memories and stories may give him a few more years to be present. I hope that's enough.