Ten Years Later

My brother Bill had buckteeth before his braces. An absurd, Bugs Bunnyish overbite. There’re pictures of him around our house, and I can’t help but laugh a little bit when I see that overbite. Sometimes he’d cover them with his lips in photos, but when he was really smiling, the photos I like best, the incisors stick out like fence planks.

When we were very young, still living with my grandmother, around ages four and six, we had a pillow fight in the living room. We each grabbed one of the conical pillows from the armrests and wailed on each other. There was no strategy, no ducking, or moving out of the way. We swung them like bats, spinning each other’s heads with the force of the blows. He hit me. I hit him.

He screamed.

I hit him again. I stopped when he started crying. One of his teeth had been caught on the cushion’s zipper and embedded itself in the carpet. Our parents got on their knees and ran their fingers along the floor, searching for something the Tooth Fairy could take.

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At sixteen my brother went to the hospital for back pain, what we thought was appendicitis with displaced pain, easily repaired, the day after Easter 2005. The doctors realized it was a tumor, not appendicitis, before he’d gone under anesthesia. They would need to perform a major exploratory surgery to find whether it was benign or malignant. They offered my brother a choice between having surgery on April fourth, his seventeenth birthday, or April sixth, two days before my fifteenth birthday. He chose surgery on his birthday so he’d have a chance to recover in time for junior Prom.

I went to school that day. It was business as usual—homeroom with Mr. Croco, Earth Science with Dr. Paone until lunchtime. I was called to my uncle’s office. He was the head of the guidance department at Bill’s and my high school.

That day he pointed to a spot on the inside of his forearm and told me to poke it.

There was a pillowly lump. It slid away from my fingers.

“This is a fatty tumor. Your brother’s is probably the same thing,” he told me.

“They run in our family.” He poked it, and it bobbed.

He told me it would be okay, and I believed him.

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If our chores were done our father took us to Toys R’ Us some weekends and we were allowed to get one action figure each. We’d watched Saturday morning cartoons earlier and would pick the figures from those that we liked best. When Strong Guy appeared on an episode of X-Men and I found him in the store that same day, it felt like divine providence, God rewarding me with my new favorite toy. That was often how it worked.
The *Spiderman* cartoon was Bill’s favorite. It made a weird kind of sense that my older, genius brother would fall in love with the brainy Peter Parker. *X-Men* was the show for me, and it made the same weird kind of sense that the middle child would fall in love with an ensemble cast, no one character ever receiving too much attention.

We debated which figures we were going to get with great sincerity and intensity. He made decrees as we huddled over the cardstock back from his Cosair action figure with pictures of the other Starjammers. There were five—Cosair the leader that he already had, Raza the swashbuckling cyborg, Cho’od the lizard man with a parrot on his shoulder, Hepzibah the cat woman, and Ahab their time-traveling rival.

He pointed to Raza, “I want him,” he said. That meant I wouldn’t be allowed to get him. Our grandmother had bought me a diecast Optimus Prime for a birthday and Bill had nearly brained me with it. We fought until he got one too.

“Okay,” I said, knowing not to push my luck, and claimed Cho’od. Neither of us wanted Hepzibah, and Bill tasked me with getting Ahab because we’d need a bad guy for them to fight.

I started collecting action figures again in college. Sometimes I trace back, trying to find out why, and I return to those afternoons, debating my brother in the aisles of Toys R’ Us. I want to be back there again, with him.

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My uncle drove me from my high school to Yale New Haven Hospital where my brother was recovering from the surgery. He hadn’t regained the strength to speak outside
of telling our grandmother to eat her McDonald’s in the hall. As hungry as he was, he wouldn’t be cleared to eat until they took the tube out of his nose.

My father walked me out of the room, down the hallway toward the hospital cafeteria. My father and I were the same size, and I thought that I’d be bigger in a few months, though it turned out that my growth spurt had ended. We’re told frequently how alike we look, separated by thirty years of age and his moustache. While we walked I concentrated on the floor, trying to place my feet perfectly in the tiles. Red and black diagonals cut bluish gray squares. He talked. He must have been trying to fill the time so he could tell me when we’d gotten to the cafeteria so I’d be sitting.

“Sometimes the cells in the body multiply too fast—”

“Does Bill have cancer?” I said. It was my father’s third run at an explanation, and I was smart enough to see what he was trying to get at.

“Let’s sit down,” he said.

We hooked into a small room with leather chairs off the side of the corridor. I don’t remember what we talked about. I didn’t listen to what he was saying. I didn’t feel shock. I didn’t feel surprise. I felt anger. How could he have let me guess?

I’ve struggled since with that anger. I wonder if I could’ve handled it better than he did. How would I tell a hypothetical son that his brother had cancer? It’s easy for me to say it would’ve been better quick and blunt, and to say that’s what I would do. It’s impossible to know. Sometimes there’s no way to say the things that need to be said, and we need to say them anyway.
I took it out on my father. My brother and sister and I joked that it was his fault. That his sperm had been faulty, and that if he fucked better Bill wouldn’t be sick.

Normally that language would have been grounds for punishment. My mother had brushed my teeth with liquid hand soap more than once. Our world was different though, and Dad pretended to laugh, as though any of us actually found it funny.

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April 6, 2005—two days after my brother’s seventeenth birthday and his first major surgery and two days before my fifteenth birthday—my brother was diagnosed with cancer. I roll these dates around, repeating them. I think about them because the emotions are too large for me to look at all at once. I don’t trust my mind to break them down so they become palatable, or communicative of what they were. These dates though, they’re hard, indisputable data, small bites that I can swallow.

When he was diagnosed, we joked that God had given him cancer for his seventeenth birthday.

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As boys we emptied the Rubbermaid bins we kept our action figures in onto the floor of his bigger room, picked teams, and made stories with the figures. They were regurgitations of the stories we’d seen on TV—Wolverine was under mind control and the good guys needed to break the chip off of the back of his head, but in a twist he would overcome the mind control by the force of his will and love for his team; the Hobgoblin had kidnapped Mary Jane and Spiderman and friends needed to rescue her from a
villain-infested lair; Beast, my favorite X-Men and one that we could never find in the stores, was killed and the good guys needed to track down Mr. Sinister to exact revenge.

When Bill was diagnosed it felt like a regurgitation of the medical dramas my sister watched. They always came down to the dramatic close, where a grizzled but good looking doctor didn’t save the patient. There’d be a montage set to a sad ballad. The doctor grieving. The nurses comforting each other. The family huddled together, walking out of the show, into the rain.

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Bill’s prognosis was a seventy-five percent chance of full recovery. Three out of four. I couldn’t focus on the three patients that lived though. I obsessed over the fourth. The one who dies. I wrestled with those fears. I didn’t have an air conditioner in my bedroom that summer, and I sweat lakes in the night. I didn’t sleep, not well. I ate fast food for weeks at a time because there was no food in the house. I stopped believing in God. I bullied the younger members of my Boy Scout Troop. I tried to find some meaning or relief in a world that had hit me in the mouth. The people I loved weren’t safe and there was nothing that I could do about it. I struggle with the same uncertainty ten years later.

His cancer was testicular, but only by technicality. The tumor had formed before birth. A cell that was meant to be part of his testicles got turned around, left behind while he was forming. We had physicals every year growing up. Our mother had been a physician’s assistant for a decade. Her father was an award-winning internist. Someone
should’ve caught it before he was seventeen, before it had grown to the size of a softball wrapped around his aorta.

When the surgeons found what they were dealing with, they elected to leave it. The risk of a scalpel slipping, a drop of sweat in the eye, a clumsy thumb, a fraction of a mistake and a boy they liked, one who had decided to have surgery on his seventeenth birthday so he wouldn’t miss his junior prom would cease to be. They elected chemotherapy instead.

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I revisit these memories in hopes of healing. It isn’t the first time I’ve run through it all. I try and work through it every year around this time. The winter lifting sends me back. It’s nags me like an improperly set broken bone.

I hope that one day I won’t cry when people recite their cancer narratives at Relay for Lifes. That one day I won’t give up whole TV shows because of one off-color joke about cancer. I am working through this again in hopes of the impossible—that the months between April and August 2005 will have not happened to my family.

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My brother refused to vomit during his first rounds of chemo. The doctors and nurses gave him advice—spitting pushes the urge back, waiting for the nausea to pass to sip water—and for a while he managed. Nights when I have too much to drink and whiskey forces its way upward, when I’m crouched around the toilet, knees touching cold porcelain, calves tight from supporting my weight, I think of him in the same position in the hospital. I spit. He was at the toilet because he wanted to live.
I wonder if I would drink the way I do if those months hadn’t happened. Maybe I wouldn’t punch holes in the drywall. I wouldn’t have shouting fits after spilling a glass of water. I would be the kind of guy that smiled, and started conversations. Maybe I’d go running on sunny spring days. Maybe I’d be happy.

I wonder how much of me was built around his cancer.

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His regiment went in a three-week cycle once he’d recovered from his surgery. He’d get two weeks off, and then he would do one week in the pediatric oncology ward, getting his dose of chemo. Our mother would stay with him, curled on a couch two feet too small for her. His roommates were all on their own schedules, and rotated, but for the most part the hospital tried to place Bill with older kids.

Taylor was a year younger than me. He loved basketball, and he needed spinal taps. No one explained to me what a spinal tap was then. I knew enough about it by how afraid Taylor was before he went, and his silence when he came back. His father had a tenuous work connection to my father, and would wear an old-fashioned nightcap when he slept. He made jokes about sleeping with our mother to raise Taylor’s spirits. It’s hard to remember which of these boys died and which didn’t. We don’t talk about it.

Greg was my brother’s age and he’d been a track star before they’d found cancer behind his knee. He and Bill would play Halo 2 on the hospital TVs. Greg met a girl from the Midwest online and the two would have Halo dates, talking on Xbox headsets for hours. I don’t know if he’s alive, but I hope that the cancer went into remission and he ran to her.
Once when there was no one Bill’s age, there was an infant. He cried all night.

His father is our mechanic, and he and my mother held vigils together over their sons. He gives us discounts on oil changes, new brake pads, tire rotations, whatever we need.

When I pick my car up there’s a shared sadness that neither of us knows how to nor tries to address. We both know his son is dead.

When my sister and I were sent away so doctors could talk to my brother and parents about possible treatments, we’d play air hockey or foosball in the playroom.

There were children around us, some healthy, some bald from the chemo. We kept to ourselves. Our foosball men kicked gently. The air hockey puck clicked softly on the walls as it meandered toward the goal.

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Bill and my mother watched Anchorman repeatedly. She normally didn’t like Will Ferrel’s brand of crude humor—the dumb jokes, prolonged erection shots—but we were all doing things that we normally wouldn’t.

My sister spent her days with her best friend’s family. I got dropped at home after school and did my mother’s chores—loaded and unloaded the dishwasher, brought in the mail, walked the dog—and then headed to a friend’s too. We both came home when we thought our father would get back from work and he’d drive us to the hospital.

Sometimes Bill would be himself, crack jokes about how much I liked chocolate ice cream or how bad my hair looked. Often he’d be too ill. I think he wanted to be happy to see us, but he was too sick.
It didn't stop him from going to the gym. He'd come home on a Friday night, and he'd wake me up early the next morning to work out. His weight totals were dwindling while mine were going up. He'd shed his hair. At first I'd had shoulder-length curls—imagine Peter Frampton, add acne and braces and you've got me at fifteen—but I'd shaved my head in solidarity.

The other regulars, mostly middle-aged men, peppered him with questions. How was he doing? When would he have it licked? Was he back full-time?

He lay on the bench press and I looked down at him. We had loaded a forty-five pound plate and a twenty-five pound plate onto each side of the forty-five pound bar. He lined his fingers up.

"It's a one way trip," I said. "I can't lift that much so if you drop it, it's staying there."

He laughed, despite having heard that joke every time we worked out.

I put my hands under the bar in the center. When he was ready he counted down from three and we lifted it together before I let go. He brought it down until his elbows bent 90 degrees. The track marks where the IVs had been popped as his muscles expanded. The portacath they installed in his shoulder—a port the size of a half-dollar for pumping the chemo as close to his tumor as possible without making a new hole each time—poked through his tank top.

He pushed the weight up and I counted aloud, telling him that he could do more. He could try harder. He could do this. He needed to.

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Teachers told me about my brother all through high school. An English teacher stopped me in the hallway to tell me that the highlight of his Friday nights had been reading my brother’s essays when Bill had been in his class.

During a detention for not doing my Algebra homework, a math teacher told me that my brother was the best student he ever had. He told me that Bill was a hell of a tennis player too, though I didn’t need to be told. I’d been on the receiving end of some of his serve. When we played together he aimed to hit me.

In another detention for skipping my geometry homework, a teacher who whispered in front of the classroom to make the boys listen told me that Bill was the best student she ever had, but I shouldn’t worry about it. “Some boys are better at the more concrete math. They have trouble visualizing the shapes.”

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I loved the monster movies on the Turner Classic Movie challenge. That summer I watched a black-and-white one where a biped alien vegetable attacked scientists in Antarctica. It lumbered after them, bald-headed and growling.

My brother came in. The scientists turned, showing it they had fire. The monster screamed, not yet fleeing, but no longer on the offensive.

“What’re you watching?” Bill said.

“It’s a movie about you,” I said, and laughed. We told lots of jokes in those days. That’s the one I regret the most. Months earlier, Bill would’ve kicked my ass. Earlier that year, when I’d refused to call in our pizza order he’d grabbed me by my foot and yanked me away from the television. The Xbox controller I’d been holding came unplugged, and
he’d swung me around the room by my foot, hitting me into the walls, the chairs, and whatever else he could find while the dog barked for him to stop.

That day, he went upstairs, and I watched the rest of the movie. I should’ve apologized, but I didn’t.

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When they assessed how effective the chemo had been, they found that the tumor had grown. He would need to have another major surgery. Since he’d had an allergic reaction to the morphine last time, he’d only get an epidural for the pain.

The date of the second surgery doesn’t stick out in my mind like the first. I don’t remember a lot of things from that time.

I remember that a boy at school told me that cancer was genetic as a comeback to a petty insult. I told my father I punched that boy in the mouth and made him apologize. I didn’t.

I remember that when people came to the house my mother made them rub their hands with Purell to protect my brother’s compromised immune system. She and my father didn’t want him to leave other than going to the hospital, but he’d see the occasional movie, and when he was home we worked out every other day.

I knew they were lying about the importance of the surgery. My sister knew too. There was a tension in the house, and though I can’t remember that day, I know how angry it makes me now that they didn’t tell me what was really happening.

Now I know that the surgery was a last ditch effort, a Hail Mary pass to move my brother into the surviving three.
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The surgeons told us that Bill would need more chemo after his second major surgery. My parents told me not to take the news so hard, that everything would be okay. What would I have told myself if I were in their situation? Would I have been able to tell me the truth? They must have been as frightened as I was, struck with the same inability to verbalize a son’s cancer.

That July my father and I went camping on Nantucket with my Boy Scout Troop. While my brother was on chemo, I was on an island paradise off of Massachusetts. I imagine that he was happy for us, having a week in the sun. More likely he was too tired and too sick to care. His best friend Sean was on the trip as well. While our troop was riding bikes to the beach, the boy in front of Sean stopped suddenly at the bottom of the hill. Sean swerved to avoid him, hit a stick, and went over his handlebars. I remember the way the asphalt made divots in his shoulder deep enough for the blood to pool there as he sat on the side of the bike trail, yelling angrily at the boy who stopped.

He went to the hospital and had to wear a sling for the rest of the trip. I wished there were some world where they had been at the same hospital for those hours. Maybe a friendly face could’ve helped Bill.

My parents told me that I should still go. That I needed time for myself. That I shouldn’t feel bad for the time I was having fun, and that I should really enjoy myself. It had been as hard a summer for me as for any of us. I should’ve been by my brother’s side. What do you say to someone who misleads you with your best interests at heart?

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That August—I should remember the date, I should call my mother who would, but it doesn’t seem right to put her through that pain—after the surgeries and the chemo, after the months of fast food and near-constant answering of questions about how my brother was doing, after the summer’s heat wave broke and we got back from Nantucket—my brother’s cancer went into remission.

This is the part that’s hard for other people to understand. I have trouble understanding it myself. Why do I still hurt so much, when I was at my brother’s twenty-seventh birthday party this year? I want to put it down, but I don’t know how. I hoped that revisiting this would help me climb to a place of peace, and it hasn’t. I knew he was going to die and then he didn’t. I prepared for him to die, and then he lived. I mourn.

Ten years later, with a healthy brother, I’m sick over the things that we went through. By all accounts, he’s doing better than I am. He’s accepted a residency in radiology at one of the best hospitals in the world, and his girlfriend is the best one he’s ever had. He and his friends play Starcraft for hours on Friday nights. We watch horror movies together. Our sister takes us to parties. We moved to the same city to spend more time together, yet I carry his cancer with me now. I call the people in my life when I dream of them dying to check in and make sure that it was a dream. I shake at the thought of doctor’s appointments. What do I do with the mourning I started for a brother who didn’t die?