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The One We Left Behind

It wasn't until after Donnie died that I could admit how much of him I saw in myself.

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"I'm self-destructive," I told my psychiatrist weeks after my brother's funeral.

"That's what I like about you," he said. "You're honest."

Awkward pause. *Did he really just say that?* I wondered.

"What I mean is, I don't think my meds are working," I said, although what I really wanted to say was shut.the.hell.up.

It had been almost a month since my eldest brother, Donnie, died and still grief was difficult to reach. Twenty years my senior, Donnie was in and out of my family's life based on *his* needs -- money, a job, a place to crash, someone to keep his kids for the afternoon. He spent the rest of his time, as far as I understood, in pursuit of the next high.

So it wasn't a shock when his flirtation with death proved fatal. Showing up to his funeral was like showing up to a surprise party you already knew about. I couldn't adequately feign the proper emotions. I was impatient watching everyone kneel by his body in tears. I was angry that his children were without their dad. I figured I'd probably never feel any sadness and explained away my lack of tears with the fact that our relationship, what there was of it, was complicated. And then one night, a month after his passing, I found myself drunk and full of rage, punching my pillows senseless until I passed out. The well was no longer dry.

At a dinner earlier that night, I had been seated between two people who spent the meal talking about what happens to the body as it dies. They talked about it like two people would talk about a movie one has seen and the other must see.

"It sounds like a train rumbling."

"Air comes out of every orifice."

"The body fights to live, just in case there's a chance it can be saved."

I stared across the empty table off into the distance, twirling my hair nervously. This is what happens when grief is late, I told myself -- no one knows it's there.

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The Donnie I knew tortured my father. He lied. Stole. Cheated. He scared me. There were times when I feared Donnie would finally snap and kill my parents -- his behavior got that outrageous. Donnie was the sibling I rarely mentioned to people I was trying to impress. To people I felt safe with, I described him as the black sheep. Off the tracks. Embarrassing. Pathetic. Selfish. When I was a child, Donnie would talk to me about inappropriate things -- sex, drugs, ex-girlfriends. At the time that's just what I thought brothers did, and then I grew up and realized that's what sick people do. Drunks. Druggies. So when I read through the comments on his online obituary days after his death, I wondered, *Who are they talking about?*

"His experience and strength, which he shared passionately, provided hope to many who had none."

"I remember all the times we prayed together wondering about heaven and God. I believe in my heart that is where you are and all your questions are answered."

"Donnie I will miss u very much, you were like the brother I never had."

Donnie's only influence on me was to instill a strong sense of what I should never become.

He started drinking at nine, so I didn't taste my first beer until 15. Donnie started doing drugs in middle school, I didn't try them until college. Donnie never went to college, never had a career. I did both, with ambition.

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But no matter how far I tried to run away from any connection to him, the comparisons were still made. Family does that, I guess. Despite all the ways in which we weren't alike, my parents would point out all our similarities -- the sense of humor, the obsessive compulsiveness, the hypochondria, the paranoia. I'd rather have been compared to the youngest of my brothers, Damon. He's the Ivy-league educated, mother's dream come true -- athletic, popular, attractive, a doctor. I tried to follow Damon's lead, but it never quite panned out. Instead,

no matter how hard I tried to draw a firm line in the sand, I've always felt on the edge of that line, one misstep away from becoming *him*. Donnie.

It wasn't until after Donnie died that I could admit how much of him I saw in myself.

There are times when I've been afraid to die because I'm so afraid to live. I've called my mom at 2AM warning her that this was the last stop on my ride, that I just can't take it anymore. Friends have seen cuts on my wrists and scars on my legs. Dieticians know about the binging and purging. Self-loathing has leaked out of the most secure vaults, perhaps on purpose.

But I also realized that by spending his life slowly killing himself, Donnie had given me room to create my own smaller crises -- and pull myself out of them. Compared to Donnie's faults, my own seemed insignificant. After all, there was always someone I most definitely was not, and I was safe there, the low voltage version of insanity. Once my brother died, that all changed. Looking at Donnie in his coffin, all the desperate moments of my own self-destruction rushed through my mind like an old VHS on fast forward.

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The day of the funeral was also my nephew's 16th birthday. "How could you?" I've asked Donnie throughout the years, in my mind, and I asked him one more time that day. "Why? For what?"

The only thing we know about Donnie's death is that he had been in the hospital the night before and sometime during his stay removed his I.V. and walked out. In the morning, his neighbor stopped by to visit him and discovered his lifeless body in a chair. Because toxicology reports are not required for people who die from "natural causes" (no matter their age), we'll never know what exactly happened -- his heart stopped, but why? What time? *Did he rumble like a train? Did his body fight to live?*

But I don't really need a toxicology report to explain my brother's passing. At this point, it's just a formality. I'm not sure I'll ever come to terms with the fact that Donnie is gone or how he went. I always thought I didn't care whether he was alive or not. Then he died, and I saw that a series of self-destructive acts could actually lead to complete self-destruction.

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This was what he had kept me safe from knowing all these years. And the resentment I felt after he died was, I think, about distancing myself from that truth just a little longer. But now that I see it, that it is a very real option to end up in a coffin at 49, I can choose the alternative -- to live through my lows, to not let them take over.

Somehow realizing that made it easier to finally mourn my brother. I could even feel something close to love for him -- not because he was some great guy in my life, but because if I can love him, just love him, then we are not the same. Then I am still here, making the choices he didn't.

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