

EULOGY

By Shanna Dodd

My brother led a haunted life. Possessed by bodiless voices. Cruel and taunting and demanding voices. Voices from an alien land that existed between the layers of his reality. Sinister voices that gathered at his window, scratching against the metal screen.

I would glimpse him in earnest conversation with an empty room. There would be a wildness in his eyes, a starched and frozen fear to his stance. He had always had an animated way of speaking but these conversations would be tensely hushed. His once fluid hands would become choppy and clumsy, cutting through the air to make his point. His hair, which once fell in cherubic curls about his face, now stood on end, prematurely gray.

I dreaded the nights most of all. Some nights were darker than others. The voices more demanding. My brother would pace his room like a caged animal and argue with the monsters. A distinctive smell would permeate the house. The metallic smell of fear mixed with the sickeningly sweet smell of rotten fruit.

Once, roused from slumber by that smell, I sat up, just a girl with sleep in her eyes, to find my brother standing before me. Sweat poured down his body in rivulets. His slick hands gripped a big kitchen knife. The sharpened edge pressed against his bare belly, poised to plunge. Desperate tears quivered on the red rims of his eyes. He told me the voices were too strong. He

was frightened. Afraid they were forcing him to do things. Horrific things. He believed that the only way to make them stop, to save me, to save us all, was to sacrifice himself.

“Will you forgive me?” he asked.

I stared at the shining blade of the knife. The eye of the beast made manifest; its presence filled the small room. It stared back at me, dull moonlight reflected in its gaze. I was hypnotized, held motionless by its stare. I clenched the silken edge of my blanket as though it were the edge of a cliff and pulled my eyes upward. I searched my brother’s face for a glimpse of the brother I once knew.

“Please don’t do this. You haven’t done anything wrong. You couldn’t. I know this!”

Uncertain if I were begging the voices or begging my brother or even God, Himself, to stop, the words tumbled from me faster and louder.

“Please put the knife down. Please. I love you. I need you here. You’re my big brother. You protect me from the bad things. You can’t leave me alone here. You can’t!”

My brother’s eyes bulged from their sockets as he stared at me. His body shook with exertion as moonlight ricocheted off the knife with each tremor of his hands. Sweat poured from him carving his agony into his face. The smell of it so strong I had to force myself not to gag.

Oh, but then there he was. My brother. Just for a brief second, I saw him. Reaching for me. I rose softly from the bed. The viscous air slowed my movements even more. I took the knife and laid it on the dresser. Then I drew my brother close to me.

He began to weep, sobbing so deeply that the very core of our existence wept with him. The air around us shimmered like heat waves on a blacktopped road. The world began to

fragment and fall in chunks at our feet. All we could do was cling to each other until, at last, there was silence. Blessed silence.

I took my brother's hand and led him to the kitchen table. I made him a glass of water and sat with him in the still grayness of time, caught between the darkness and the light. I knew that come the light of day my brother would be leaving me. Again.

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My brother's name was Jeffrey which means "gift of peace." His was a pure soul, a soul of infinite gentleness and caring. His voice was a whisper soft baritone, rich as warm honey. When he laughed, and he laughed often, his whole being laughed. He found hilarity in the simplest of things. His smile was broad, playful, radiant. His eyes always had this shine, like a child's eyes on Christmas morning.

Those days had been sheltered, carefree days. We danced in circles of sunshine, singing, "Ring around the Rosie, a pocket full of posies. Ashes, Ashes, we all fall down." And so it was that all that I knew of my brother's leaving was that I should be proud of him. We were all so proud of him. When he left for Vietnam.

Jeff had not been drafted. He didn't flunk out of college. He went because he felt it was his duty, his responsibility. There were no maybes, no what ifs. My brother had rigid standards of right and wrong, black and white. He went because he felt that if our government believed it was the right thing to do then it must be so. Like a naïve child, he held all great men as heroes. When Jeff's heroes fell from grace, he became lost in the shadows.

We drove him to the airport and stood on the tarmac. The wind blew so strongly that my mother had to hold my hand to keep me grounded. We watched him climb to the top of shining

silver stairs, stairs that looked like they would lead him to heaven. He waved with a big, toothy smile. I yelled for him to stay but my voice was lost on the wind. I held tightly to my mother's hand until his plane disappeared in the gray skies.

For months, no one spoke of Jeff in our house. I was a child who had lost her big brother to a place I couldn't even pronounce. I saw the newscasts. I was scared for him. As young as I was, I knew Jeff didn't belong there.

One night, late, the telephone rang. It sat there, black and heavy and insistent, in its recessed little cave in the hall. Daddy stared at it for a moment before he picked it up. I wondered why. I thought that maybe he wasn't awake yet. He said, "Hello" and "I see" and "Thank you." Then he slumped a little against the wall, the phone still in his hand. He rubbed his free hand across his face and hung up the phone. Then he walked into his bedroom and shut the door.

The next day I overheard my parents talking. Jeff was coming home! An honorable discharge. I thought that sounded good. I was so happy! But no one else seemed happy. I couldn't understand why so I kept my happiness hugged close to my chest. I watched the road from the living room window for days.

My friends said he must have been shot or maybe blown up and that was why no one was talking about it. It might have been an easier wound to heal. Instead, it was in Vietnam that the voices found my brother. Those wicked voices followed him halfway around the world and lodged themselves like parasites into the walls of our home. They gradually ate at us all.

I didn't get to see Jeff when he came home. There were no parades. No parties. I heard only the whispers of my parents. Saw only their tears.

One night, we got another call. The telephone fell to the floor with a loud, ringing crash. My father's frustration and anger spewed from him like poisonous ash, coating us all. He rushed into my brother's room, tore his leather belt from his pants and began to beat the bed, the walls, bellowing like a mad beast. My mother pleaded with him, "PleaseStopPleaseStop! Please." Her cries rose from her in gasping sobs. She tried to grab his thrashing arms, but he was too strong for her. She fell to the floor and covered her face.

I could only stand barefoot in my gown, a gown that had once been the pale pink of innocence but was now threadbare. I stood and stared at this implosion of my family. I did not cry or scream or even speak. I simply stood there. Beared witness to this rushing, ripping madness that gripped my parents, spinning them in a whirlwind of tears and shouts out the door. It slammed shut, "BAM!" leaving an echoing quiet in its wake.

My parents returned days later. It could have been only hours. Time had been shattered like fragile glass. It floated, a sharp, lethal haze, through the rooms of our house. The air became so heavy that it was hard to breathe. It felt as though we were caught in a vacuum, devoid of oxygen, devoid of sustenance, devoid of feeling.

I wanted to ask a thousand questions. I wanted to know what had happened to Jeff. The words would rise in my throat then become tangled in the murky air choking me. I couldn't speak. I couldn't swallow. I stood, unnoticed and bleeding from all the tiny cuts of broken glass against my skin.

After a time, Jeff came home. There were scars on his arms like gnarly, angry ropes. I asked him what had happened to his arms. He told me, calmly, that he'd taken a razor and cut himself. He had almost died. "Why?" I asked. "Because I had to," he replied. I asked if I could

touch them and he said, "Yes." Gingerly, I traced the livid red scars. Some were bulky and hard, others were small and thin and pinkish.

He was so different. There were constant jerking movements from an inert body. A slow and painful closing of his eyes. He was so thin, so fragile. So...broken.

There were hundreds and hundreds of trips to doctors. Hours in waiting rooms filled with a puzzling grief. The doctors did not understand my brother; they did not even understand the voices. I'm sure they wanted to help but they couldn't see Jeff's humanity, only his battle scars. The doctors told him that the voices weren't real. But I knew my brother. I knew he wouldn't lie.

There was a brief time when he tried to return to school. Another when he tried to hold a job but within weeks, the voices would grow too loud. He would go away again. Jeff would leave us time and again. He would come home, time and again, worn down a little more, a little quieter, lost a little deeper.

New medicines came and gradually the voices became tamped down or so Jeff said. He had learned that in order to stay home he had to keep the voices to himself. I knew he still heard them. I could hear him, prowling the house at night, arguing with them. But, at least, he was home. There were isolated moments of clarity. Moments when my brother's self would rise like a fine sunrise and the light would chase all the shadows from the room. Then the clouds would come and cover the sun.

The new medicines, miracle drugs they told us, took a toll on his body. He became so ill from the effects that I began to wonder if perhaps he would be better off with the voices. The drugs changed his appearance. His eyes that were once a clear and shining green were now a muddy brown, the whites were nicotine yellow. His teeth fell out. His kidneys failed.

My family never truly recovered either. There were four siblings when Jeff boarded that plane. The oldest brother left soon after Jeff came home from Vietnam. My older sister left right after the very first hospital stay. They found safety in epic denial.

My parents never gave up on my brother. Their lives revolved around his. They felt that maybe, somehow, they'd failed him. That they were to blame. And so, alone and ostracized, whiskey became the voice that whispered comfort in the night. They subsequently drowned.

I am the baby sister. I left but I didn't go far. I thought a world without monsters would be like the rose-tinted memories of my early childhood. I came home very quickly. Better to deal with the monsters you know than the ones you don't.

Jeff died suddenly at the age of fifty. Although I knew that he wouldn't live as long as most people, it still came as a shock. I grieve so deeply not only for the loss of my brother but for the life he sacrificed, the family we all lost. It feels like a hole, bloody and ragged and gaping, punched into the very center of me. No amount of earnest symbolism could ever fill that hole.

I miss him. I miss those fine moments in his shining light. My only solace now is that he is at peace. I can see him standing beneath a cloudless sky, eyes closed, face upturned, feeling the warmth of a glorious sun, blissfully immersed in the sound of silence.