

COLUMBIA

A Journal of Literature and Art

—Colette Brooks

24 Frames

1

Three months before my brother's death, he walked up to me and spoke quietly so that no one else could hear. *Will you write about me?* He paused as if in response to my blank look. *I don't want to disappear without a trace.* I listened to these disturbing words and tried to remain calm. *Of course I will,* I whispered, *but don't talk like that.* He nodded his head and walked away, and for a moment he appeared almost peaceful.

2

Once upon a time I was someone's older sister . . . now, I have discovered that a whole set of relations disappears upon a death. What we think of as the roles that define us forever simply dissolve. Some fashion absence itself into a sustaining force and in this paradoxical effort, I think, lies the truth of what we mean when we speak of living with loss.

3

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It is early in September, and I am about to leave for my first day of kindergarten. My brother, not yet old enough for school, is beside himself *crying his eyes out* as my mother would put it. She holds him back as I walk up the street. His sobs fill the air. Abruptly, I turn and

run to the house. *It's okay, Billy*, I tell him. *I'll be back*. Slowly he calms down. The world so terribly out of joint falls back into place and he feels much better.

I can't recall this incident myself. It was recounted by my brother to my sister days before he died. He had rarely spoken of his childhood and we had sometimes wondered whether he remembered anything at all. But this was a memory he kept close at hand for thirty some years before passing it on, and now I like to imagine, at moments, that I remember it, too.

4

In his twenties, my brother began to take photographs; he developed them himself in labs where he spent days at a time exploring the intricacies of subject, contrast, and scale. He roamed the Seattle area and later the Northern California coast for his compositions, and as I view them now it seems to me he was born with an eye for beauty. Each of these landscapes is infused with a feel for the natural world, an affinity so unforced it hardly occurs to me to wonder why there are no traces of a human presence here. And I realize how he might have found solace only in places where he felt that no one else was watching.

He took one self-portrait, a stark black-and-white shot captured with the aid of a timer. In it I see a still-handsome face that isn't yet haunted. He looks directly into the camera as though not yet afraid of what it might reveal.

5

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What can explain the unaccountable power of a photograph? Why do we study with such avidity the figures and shadows that form on a surface bounded only in square inches?

Maybe at heart we are all miniaturists, best able to encompass our world only in the tiniest possible slices of time and space.

Or perhaps it is the stillness of the photograph that proves so intensely absorbing. Maybe these images—because they are still—help us forget for a moment that life really goes by in a blur and slips away from even the most observant among us.

My brother never owned a home and had problems enough renting an apartment; nor did he amass much in the way of personal property during his life. After his death, my sisters and I found most of his worldly belongings carefully stowed in a big cardboard box. He had a few books, a backpack, a camera, a watch, some clothes, a small spiral notebook, and a bike lock. We divided his possessions among us.

Later, we were given the thirty-eight cents the coroner had found in his pocket.

As I signed for the envelope I remember thinking: *a penny for each year of his life.*

My late father, a man we never knew, once owned a picture book that now belongs to me. It is titled, *The World's Greatest Wonders*, and each of its pages recounts the glories of civilizations long extinct. The black and white photographs (which seem themselves of ancient vintage) are accompanied by captions that possess a sure authority. *Vast Ruins of Unknown Origin; Where Once a Great Mayan City Stood; The Oldest Wooden Pagoda in the World.* Each site is insistently identified—this ruin rather than that—as if the past is ripe for the reading by those who know its ways. In some sense I find such appropriation appealing, but I also mistrust the impulse. For when I look at these pictures in some moods, in reality I see only rubble, one half-fallen facade essentially the same as another. And in these moments the greatest wonder is that we should presume to make such efforts of retrieval at all.

When I am at Harvard University, where I have sometimes taught during the summer, I like to wander into Widener Library, the largest facility of its kind in the country. It is a massive stone construction that seems always to have stood there, older than time.

Some of its many thousands of books have hardly been dusted off in decades. But it is not the scale of the structure or its traces of antiquity I find affecting; what draws me to the building has something to do with the inscriptions I first noticed inadvertently early one evening. They were chiseled in the stone and placed inconspicuously at either end of the library's broad portico. One reads: THIS LIBRARY ERECTED IN LOVING MEMORY OF • HARRY ELKINS WIDENER BY HIS MOTHER •

The other reads:

HARRY ELKINS WIDENER
A GRADUATE OF
THIS UNIVERSITY

BORN JANUARY 3 1885
DIED AT SEA APRIL 15 1912

UPON THE FOUNDERING
OF THE STEAMSHIP
TITANIC

As I studied these inscriptions, I began to think about young Harry Widener, only twenty-seven years old at his death, who *loved the books which he had collected and the college to which he bequeathed them*. Harry's books are kept now in a dark room that is situated like a sentinel at the top of a winding staircase. No visitor to the library can avoid looking into the room; one sees immediately a large oil portrait of a serious young man who gazes a bit stiffly at the viewer, book clutched in his hand. Harry's collection includes some 3,000 rare books, and for every first edition of Milton or Shakespeare there are five editions of *Kidnapped* or *Oliver Twist*. When I think of Harry, I think of Billy, who also seemed to have read everything, who always had a book in his back pocket. Most of those books were paperbacks borrowed from the public library. Billy was never able to go to college; he spent his adult years battling his illness. But he always hoped that that he might one day live the kind of life that came so easily to others (*I just filled out an application for the University of Washington, having requested such material from them a while back when I must have been feeling unusually optimistic and brave.*)

I like to think of Harry and Billy and the conversations they would surely have had about art and literature and ideas, two bookish young men talking the evening away as they sat in a college cafe.

I also like to think about Harry's mother—the heartbroken woman whose wealth could not protect her from the worst ache in the world. It is said that she attached only one stipulation to her gift to Harvard: in order to graduate, members of each senior class would have to pass a swimming test. I know this story is probably not true. But I know why this woman would picture her son swimming his way to safety in the North Atlantic that night. And I know how impossible it is, in the end, to keep those one loves out of harm's way. Even if one has had a lifetime of practice.

9

My father also took an avid interest in architecture. One of his books contains painstaking reproductions of architects' plans for Renaissance palaces, courtyards, and city squares.

As I look at these intricate drawings, I marvel at the beauty of abstraction. The lines are austere; the curves and angles arrayed in patterns that are impossibly precise.

It is like studying a family tree: names placed neatly in bloodless squares and boxes.

But who in this world could live within these ethereal lines?

It is only a dream of order with the dreamer standing off at a distance as dreamers always do.

10

One summer, when we were small, our family drove down the coast from Seattle to Santa Barbara. It was the first real trip we had ever taken. Along the way we were menaced by a daredevil who tried to run us off the twisty coastal precipice of Highway 1. The episode frightened us all, even my mother, who was clutching the wheel as if thinking *this is what happens to women who are alone in the world*. Somehow we survived, pulled off the road, and found a

place where we could stay the night and wait for morning's light. Sure enough, there is a picture of us kids posed in front of a Motor Court ("AIR COOLED—ELECTRIC HEAT"). My mother has moved back a good fifty feet to take the shot as if to prove beyond dispute that we have finally come to California.

Our motel was overrun by crickets, as was the rest of the area that season, and my mother spent most of the night knocking the large brown insects off the ceiling and walls and away from our beds so that my brother and I, half-hysterical, could sleep.

From our earliest days, it seems, anticipation and foreboding were intertwined.

11

As children, my brother and I used to watch one science fiction film in particular whenever it was shown on TV. There was a boy in the movie with a telescope who looked out his window and saw people swallowed up by the earth in his own backyard, and parents who didn't believe him but were soon discovered to be under the spell of the aliens themselves, and a happy ending that turned at the very last moment into its opposite as the boy woke up from his nightmare only to see the Martian ship land all over again outside his window.

I don't know what the movie meant to my brother, but to me it was a vision of reversal that I recognized and found almost reassuring.

12

At the time of his death my brother had a favorite T-shirt labeled "Paris" in his possession with a picture of the Eiffel Tower on it. He was always talking about travel. Whenever I look at that T-shirt now I think: *Paris is another city he never saw.*

Some people asked me if he had ever been suicidal or if it had *just come out of the blue*. I hardly knew how to reply. He talked and wrote about it repeatedly over the years; it became a litany that seemed the root of a single unending conversation. Yet when it finally happened, it was a heart-stopping shock. I knew it but I didn't know it: *nothing ever comes out of the blue*.

A therapist who examined him in his late teens told us matter-of-factly: *he's a time bomb*.

That was a good twenty years before the world ended, for him, forever.

I always thought after that of ticking, of something ticking away. Sometimes I could hardly hear it, and sometimes I heard little else.

After a while that sound seemed as natural as a heartbeat.

When my sister called that April evening from across the country to say *Billy's dead*, she had to repeat that simple sentence three times before I actually understood it. In that moment, I remember thinking: *nothing can hurt him now*.

Earlier that spring I had written him a letter. After his death I found that letter in the box where he kept his belongings. I also found the valentine I had made for him that year, the homemade red heart cut out of construction paper and covered with extravagant swaths of silver glitter. The letter was written as one adult speaking to another; it went on for pages but could have been condensed into a single sentence: *I want you to fight for your life*. The valentine spoke to a more primitive impulse, and it bore the more abiding message: *I love you*.

If my brother had had AIDS, I sometimes think, I would have been able to say goodbye, I could have spent years perfecting the art of separation. But he would have resisted such rehearsals. There was always a part of him that wanted only to live.

I want to write the whole story, but I remember only disconnected moments and I wonder: how that can ever be enough?

I remember my brother in restaurants: he would hail waiters with a grandiose flourish, waving his arm, snapping his fingers, sometimes shouting *Garçon!* to make his point. I was usually embarrassed, but I enjoyed seeing him smile.

I remember him playing music: he used to riff for hours on a setup he had assembled secondhand. Sometimes if he was broke, he had to sell or pawn pieces of his system, but unless he was desperate, he held on to his guitar.

I remember him at the river: we were kids, playing near rapids in the Northwest. Suddenly, he fell down the bank and into the water and was swept off towards the falls before I could even scream. I saw him disappear under the churning surface, and then I saw nothing, until his thin arm broke through the waters and grabbed at a branch. He held on until an adult could run to help him out. I have rarely been as happy as I was the moment he walked back up the bank.

Yes, I remember, but given the slightest distraction these images disperse, and the story seems even more elusive.

Would it truly be unthinkable, I sometimes wonder, to disappear without a trace? Couldn't one leave this world as abruptly as one enters it, here one moment then simply not? I imagine it would be like letting go, harboring no hope of somehow being held back.

But to disappear in that way, one would have to root out memory itself from the living, if not love, and most of the time that hardly seems possible.

19

Pictures and documents can be held at a distance, I have discovered, but voices float into one's head like whispers and are not so easily dispelled. I have tapes of my brother talking, bits recorded on an answering machine and preserved accidentally, but I never listen to them. Hearing the voice I knew so well, in the most offhand moment, would leave me with a sense of loss that was inescapably immediate.

20

So how are you, my brilliant, lovely, flaxen-haired (that means blonde, doesn't it?) princess of a sister? I found an old picture of you and me standing in front of the pink house, you were about 6 or 7 and you looked so beautiful—you were a beautiful kid, and though no longer a kid, are still beautiful, as far as I am concerned . . . M-I-C, See you real soon, K-E-Y, why? Because we love you! M-O-U-S-E . . . Love, Bill

21

I have collected all the photographs I can find of the two of us in an album. So many years—I'm surprised there aren't more pages.

In one shot we are very small, sitting side by side in an armchair so huge that it wraps itself around us and still there is room to spare. The chair is covered with a tropical print, its leaves and flowers so large that they loom over us so that we seem to have been thrown unprotected into a primeval world. But no matter: though tiny, we are together and so we laugh.

Time passes: we are at church, we eat popsicles out in the yard, we attend our first formal affair (I with a frilly dress and patent

leather shoes, he with a white shirt, suspenders and tiny bow tie), we visit Santa Claus, we pose dreamily in our pajamas, we squint into the sun as we are held in place by grandparents, we sit for a series of studio photographers, we begin to lose our sweetness as the gawky edges of adolescence emerge. We adopt and discard personae with abandon in those teenage years, changing hair styles and clothes as if they were costumes.

We pass through our twenties and move into our thirties, living in distant cities but still *colletteandbilly* to those who know us—partners, bookends, a pair.

22

But the picture I see most clearly was never taken with a camera. It was during his last visit. I was at a grocery store, walking through an endless parking lot. I spied him from a distance, riding his bike, pedaling so intently that he sailed right past me as he began to pick up speed. He moved through the lot and into the street and up into the hills where his figure began to fade against the bright glow of the sky.

I watched him until he disappeared.

And that is how I see him still: light drawn to light, heading straight into the sun.

23

Once upon a time I was someone's older sister . . .

Recently I dreamt about my brother. He is on the landing outside my apartment, trying to push his way in as I struggle to keep him out. I manage to close and lock the door. I know he is still there waiting, so I warn him that the super is on his way up. He begins to walk away. I call out *I love you* as he leaves.

When I awaken I think: yes, I love you, but I have to let you go.

I sometimes study a picture of my family taken long ago, a candid shot in which no one is looking into or even seems to be aware of the camera. My mother crouches in the foreground holding a camera of her own which she has aimed at something unseen that lies off to the side; my father stands farther back, hands on hips, his gaze following hers; my sisters stare off in the opposite direction altogether, oblivious to whatever it is that has drawn the interest of the grownups, and a fifth figure stands just out of sight, all but invisible, taking this picture of someone taking a picture, capturing four figures whose glances radiate outward beyond the fixed edges of the frame.

Because I cannot tell what kind of event is being recorded—who took the shot, when, or why—and because it is impossible to determine what anyone is actually looking at, the picture seems oddly empty.

The more I study this snapshot, the more I seem to see an image on the verge of vanishing.