Providence. And Independence

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When you drown, they say, your life passes through you in moments. But what about fire? What about air? My brother and I had the same source; I always thought we were two pieces of one thing. His solidity, my flightiness. His yang, my yin. I, of the two of us, was prodigal, although who would have predicted this, looking at the taciturn young girl and the handsome, wild man?

I begin with Providence because that is the last place we were together, and being there together was a return to an earlier journey we made with our parents. I went to Brown to teach for a semester and my brother came to see me there and later my mother came and my brother's children, and we all went to the outer reaches of Providence to see the house where we had lived for a short time during the war, when my father was training to be an Air Combat Intelligence Officer at Quonset Point. The house was not at the Navy Base because they had wanted privacy. As we drove by it, my mother gestured at the base with renewed disinterest. "Imagine," she said, "living there!"

Instead, my father rode for an hour on a train each way, although it isn't far by our standards now. The train ran along the rocky shore, everyone looking out, perhaps even leaning out to look for ships and planes, the shore and its outlines taking on a new intensity. My father in particular had to know the shapes of airplanes at a great distance. This was his assignment. A brief
glimpse, a flash in the eye. Enemy or ally. Type, size, purpose, capacity. He had described this to my brother in a letter, saying nothing to his son that the army could find irregular. He was going to plan missions over Indochina. He was going to be stationed in the Philippines, although he didn’t know that yet.

My mother drove from Kansas to Providence with my brother and me because my father was already there. All paraphernalia, all the worry about gasoline and ice on the roads. Her hat box taking up too much room in the car, but essential. The ten year old boy and the dog and the baby. An attendant at a service station looking at me and shaking his head. He was sorry about my condition, he said. My mother asked him what he meant by that. Heart condition, he reported sadly, pointing to the dark circles around my eyes. The first evidence that I should not have survived my brother.

But there was a house waiting for us in Providence and my mother was excited about it. She put her worries about me aside and drove on boldly across the weather-beaten continent. She was a beautiful woman. She was on a mission. She loved my father and Roosevelt in that order and had no doubts about taking two children across the country in wartime in order to serve both of them.

My father was thirty-three years old. I don’t know whether his reactions to the war and his own enlistment were complicated or straightforward. My mother says it would not have occurred to him to stay put. The men who did that were not men who you would want to know, she says. And I was a “war baby,” she contends. “We had you for the same reason a lot of people had babies around then — something to look forward to, something to show faith.”

I was born when my brother’s character was
already formed; his habits of thought were already in place. He and my mother and father were already a family, with a history and customs and private jokes. They were a unit which was unimpeachable, into which I never fit. They had two dogs and four different dwelling places, settling at last in a bungalow in Highland Park, in Shawnee County, in Kansas a couple of years before the war. The dog of that time was named Powder. She'd landed in my father's lap when he was surveying an artillery range for the Army in an open jeep. He drove back home with the terrified creature in his arms, and my mother, who had longed for a real collie, could never entirely forgive this mongrel for its wild, gun-shy, upstart ways. A year later, or a little less, I arrived as well. Skip told me, the last time I saw him, that he never bore me any grudge. "You took a load off me," he said, although parental attention wandered back and forth between us over the years. I got the strongest beam of it while I was around, but I was the wanderer, the prodigal, wild and gun-shy. I don't know if it ever evened out. What I know is that I misunderstood everything up until Providence.

My grandmother said things like that. "Up until." I like to say I come from peasants, but there are no peasants in America. Where I come from, you get educated or you don't, and that's the only difference that counts. My mother worried when she met Father because he wore his hat in the middle of his head. He wasn't sophisticated. She was a Kansas City girl, and he was a country boy. He'd grown up on a patch of land with three brothers, and each of them had dug a lake instead of planting corn or wheat. It was the water, in that dry corner of the midwest, that supported the family. But my father showed promise in other ways. He was going to be a lawyer like his father before him. While the boys cut ice from the lakes every winter to store in ice houses and sell
in the hot summertime, Granddaddy Dickinson took a bus all the way into Kansas City every day to practice law. He charged money for the privilege of fishing in the lakes, and he grew a good crop of hemp and milked his own cows every dawn before he got on the bus.

My father called my mother Dythe, not Edith. She was a beautiful, willowy girl when he met her at Kansas City Junior College, her hair in waves along the sides of her face and pulled into a chignon. My grandmother made all Mother’s clothes, and they were stylish, vampish, not practical. It was 1930. My mother wanted to be a dancer, but my grandmother wouldn’t hear of such a thing. The theater, she called it. Instead Mother got skinny dresses and plenty of beaus.

My grandmother was called Katie by everyone, as if she had no right to a title. I remember how surprised my friends were when I called her this, or my mother did, but it wasn’t a name. It was a significance, for me, at least. Grandmother seemed too general, as if it applied to every old woman around. Katie was a widow, but I never thought of her that way. She was alone. She was single. Another significance. In all my born days, until I went away to college, I only knew four of those. Single women. There was something wrong with each of them, of course, but with Katie it was only physical, the disability. She was deaf.

My brother was called Skip because, in a moment of prophesy, a nurse placing him in my mother’s arms for the first time said, “Here’s your little Skipper.”

When Skip was small, he was devoted to my mother’s brother Bill, who wore a leather jacket and a cap with flaps and managed, against the usual set of odds, to become an Air Force pilot right at the start of the
Second World War. But who knows which of them inspired the other. Skip had always wanted to fly. When he was three or four years old, my mother looked out the window in time to see him propel himself off the porch rail in a noose. It wasn’t suicide. It was his first attempt at flight.

Bill tested airplanes in California and taught other boys to fly them and one day he turned the controls over to a student who made the kind of mistake that is fatal in airplanes and the two of them were killed. Skip was eight or nine at the time.

My mother was shattered. She hadn’t decided how much her brother mattered to her and he was already dead. She sat by the pool at a modest country club my parents had joined so that Skip could learn to swim. She watched her son dive off the high board and thought about her brother and retreated into a private part of herself that none of us has any access to. Her father had died suddenly, and now her brother’s plane had gone down. I wasn’t born yet, but it was all going to be repeated exactly in my own life.

Now, when I look back on my childhood, there is a lot of Katie in it and not much of Skip. But that can’t be right. Katie lived in another town altogether. She lived in Kansas City, clear across the state line. We didn’t even talk to her on the phone. My mother wrote letters, typed, and Katie wrote back, longhand — a terrible scrawl. She put quotation marks and parentheses around everything. I can still see it. And the scrawl, as if she were writing in haste.

Katie was my mother’s mother. My father’s mother was Grandmother Dickinson, and that was different. There was the education, the upbringing, the settled, respectable past. I never knew her; she died during
the war. But Skip did. He spent a big part of his childhood at the lakes with Grandmother and Granddaddy Dickinson. Summers. The house Spartan, Grandmother Dickinson using a wood stove, my grandfather in his white beard, looking like God.

The Lakes. It should be capitalized: a place experienced by everyone but me. I was too late. It is part of the "unfitness" of my life that I missed all that. Grandmother died when Skip was twelve and Granddaddy lingered on, but it didn’t matter; it was over. I remember a housekeeper named Mrs. Munroe. My grandparents were good Baptists, but Mrs. Munroe was something else. She spoke in tongues and disapproved of everything—even the joys of Granddaddy’s last years. She must have worn a house dress and a tiny bun. That’s how I see her. And black, tie shoes. She was no replacement for the diminutive grandmother whose erudition and quick wit and temper were her legacies.

Each of these people deserves remembering, but who am I to remember the dead? They surround me. They proceed me. "The Dead." The last time Skip visited us here, in Toronto, we rented the John Huston movie and made him sit through it, which he did politely while I slept on the couch beside him, hating it even in my dreams. He’d wanted to watch the one about wolves, assuring me that it wasn’t sad. But he was too sleepy, after watching our choice, to stay up for his. He had to get up early to get his plane off the ground. So I watched this one about wolves, and it wasn’t sad, but I missed having him next to me and I wished we had let him have it his way. I think of these small, stupid cruelties, these little
competitions in taste, and I want to give him everything. The things I have done and left undone, the gifts ignored, unused, unremarked, the attention that strayed away from course.

When Katie was dying in her own slow fashion, none of us could follow her. It was only a matter of going part of the way... along the track of her mind, which wandered in and out of reality. I was living in Hawaii then, although I came home at least once and was taken out to the nursing home to visit her — an experience which resulted in one of my first, short, unfinished stories. I was captivated by the fact that, even senile, she had tried to escape. She had succeeded, in fact. She'd climbed over the locked half door of her room and glided out into the orchard that surrounded the nursing home. So much do we hate, in my family, being bound to anything!

But Skip went with her, even then. He sat by her bed in that place and listened to her describe the river she was not ready to cross. He listened. He was already familiar with death. His best friend had died, and our father. He'd already invented the Good News Bad News Church of Everlasting Life, which was a new-age version of the old food chain. He gave the chicken human incorporation by swallowing it. He swallowed everything. He went into the ocean and into the air. He loved motorcycles, boats, skis, planes. He was out there on the river, riding rapids the way, as a small boy, he had tried to fly.

In high school, Skip bought a Model T. One day he told me to climb in while he went around to the front to crank it up. When it took off, suddenly hurtling down the street, he chased it down, while I sat quietly in the
passenger seat, waiting to be saved. I see him running along beside me, the street visible between the floor boards, the car swaying and tipping, rounding corners precariously. Or maybe I only wanted to be inside. I watched him with such passion. When he was away from home, I used to go down to the laundry room in the basement and try on his clothes. I walked around in his jeans. His shirts and caps. I put them on like a better, male skin.

He had a motor scooter hidden in a neighbor's garage and drove it around secretly, hoping that our parents, who had forbidden its use on the grounds of danger and un-respectability, wouldn't catch him. (When they insisted that he wear a wool suit to church, he kept his pajamas on underneath.)

In college he bought an enormous sailboat, a C-scow that had to be transported up and down the continent.

When he got married the first time, at the age of twenty, he traveled west to the wedding by river, in an inner tube.

Later, with Mary, it was a Harley. Sea kayaks. Canoes. Scuba dives. And the first plane.

He was a pacifist. He joined the Coast Guard so he wouldn't have to take up arms. He became a Quaker, too. But it was his ship in the Pacific that was sent out to arrest the Quaker captain of the Golden Rule who had sailed into the atomic testing range to protest the use of atomic weapons. Torn between two lovers, Skip must have been, for we are a legal family. I suppose towing the Golden Rule back to land was all part of the Good News Bad News Church of Everlasting Life, things operating as they were meant to operate. I suppose that's what he
must have felt. I remember asking him, but I can’t remember what he said. The heart is often pitted against itself.

When the salmon travels upstream, its face changes. The jawline juts forward. The nose sharpens. The eyes and cheeks realign themselves so that the fish, on reaching its source, is transformed. Unidentifiable.

I wanted the male life, the male body.

To keep up with my brother, I became a Quaker. In the summer I went to Quaker Camp in Iowa. While my friends went to Wisconsin or the Ozarks and learned to paddle canoes, I watched movies about atomic bombs and held hands with a boy or two while everyone sang The Ash Grove after supper. When the Coast Guard sent Skip and Ruth to Honolulu, I went on an airplane to spend the summer with them. I was fifteen and Hawaii was not yet a state. We lived only two blocks away from my future mother-in-law’s apartment, but there were no high-rises in 1958. There was only our squalid apartment block with its giant cockroaches and a Chinese graveyard at the end of the street. Skip and Ruth had a baby by then, but that didn’t interest me. I was interested in sailors with their buttoned pants, in the local boys without socks and in my brother, who told me boys never mean what they say.

I was interested in Patrick Ko, Irish-Hawaiian, who gave me a ring decorated with the sacred heart of Jesus. He told me it had been his mother’s.

And I kept it. In spite of Skip’s warning. In spite of the fact that it turned my finger green and had an expandable band.

Skip and Ruth moved to Oklahoma, where he studied architecture with Bruce Goff. I went back to
Kansas. But I didn’t stay. Not after Patrick Ko, who’d led me into the waves at Waikiki. I took train rides down to visit my brother and once kissed a sailor in the dome car. Before long, I married a boy from Hawaii. Then I spent fourteen years on those islands where I had once lived with Skip.

When the plane crashed, all of us changed shape. We didn’t know how to speak to the new faces around us. Son, daughters, mother, sister, former wife. Skip had lived in Kansas, going up and down, up and down the river of air over our continent while the rest of us fanned out. When he and Ruth divorced, he found his high school sweetheart. She’d grown up two doors away from the house where Mother lives now, which is not such a big coincidence in a small town. And her parents are buried a few feet from my father, although they weren’t friends. And now they all lie there together as if there’s anything resolved in soil. They’d lie there even if what we put in the ground were the ashes of Mary and Skip.

Who can believe in death?

Three months after Skip died, I was in Kansas with my mother, and my daughter flew out to visit us. We drove to the airport in Kansas City to meet her. It was September already, the fall of the year. Esta was glad to see us. We took her to lunch somewhere and then talked about what to do with the rest of the afternoon. Mother and I usually go to outlet stores when we’re in Kansas City, but Esta hates shopping. She has sprung from a different genetic twig or a different creed. So I suggested something I’d been wanting to do for years. Something I had wanted to do with Skip. I knew it
might be too late, that I'd waited too long to press my claim, but I pressed it anyway. I said, “Let’s drive out to the lakes.”

My mother looked stunned.

I said, “We could go home by the old road. I haven’t been out there since I was a baby. I’d really like to see what it looks like.” I knew it was a dangerous idea. I shouldn’t force my mother, at a time like this, to confront a site where so much had been vouchsafed to the three of them, my mother, my father and brother. But I persisted. “You should show the place to us.”

Mother told me to take Independence Road. It would lead directly to the property. “The house is long gone,” she said. “You knew that didn’t you?”

“Sure I knew.”

The heat that covered us as we drove was predictable. What else could rise from that river of stories that had connected three generations of Dickinsons? Waves of heat rose off the asphalt around us as we passed the evidence of American industry. Burger Kings and McDonald’s and insurance companies and places to rent cars. An endless chain of buildings meant to stand twenty years, no more, some of them having already served that purpose. The air-conditioning in the car matched the unreality around us, the mirage of modern life that covered something older, more basic, something as hard and unhurried as the weather. We drove for half an hour or so, full of our lunch and our various purposes. Mine was simply to win back the dead. I can’t speak for my mother and daughter. The two lane highway and the metallic glass surfaces surrounding it reflected all of us in a vaporous haze. My mother shut her eyes tiredly. “This is Independence,” she said.

“Truman lived across the road,” I reminded Esta. “We’ll have a look at his house.”
My mother's eyes snapped open. "Where'd you get that idea?"

"That's what you always said. You and Daddy. I've told people that a million times." I had a clear picture of my grandfather waving to Harry and Bess as he walked by on his way to catch the bus into town.

"Nonsense. They lived in town."

"You're kidding." I felt I could no longer trust my mother. She was changing the stories. "He was Granddaddy's friend."

"They never met."

"We must be getting close; here's Dickinson Road."

"There won't be much to see."

"The lakes. We can see the lakes. I remember right where they were, not too far from the porch." Skip had told me that when he was sick in the hospital several years ago, unable to speak or move as the result of Guianne's Baret, he'd stayed sane by moving through the rooms of the old house inch by inch in his mind. He'd made himself remember the most minute details. Doorknobs. Window shades. Ornaments. But the house was gone. The property had been converted to a park. Swimming pool, closed for the season, bounded in a chain link fence and connected to a barracks-like changing room whose musty interior I could imagine from as far away as the parking lot. There was nobody else around.

Esta and I climbed out of the car, promising to be back in minutes. "I just want to show her one of the lakes," I said, although my purposes were stranger than that and harder to explain. All summer, after the crash, I'd heard the thrumming of a small plane overhead. I knew Skip and Mary were present, but they were unavailable even so. We hadn't even put their ashes in the ground,
because we had not received them. There was no expla-
nation for the crash and no evidence that it had
occurred. We'd been told. We had been shown certifi-
cates. But there was more to it than that. Who knows
what the source of a child's amazement is at the end of a
noose?

We cast long shadows on the ground, Esta and I,
but they did not absorb our heat. Unbelievably, unbear-
ably, they threw it back at us. We were assaulted from
above and below so intensely that our bodies sagged and
our lungs hurt, but there were bushes ahead crackling
and humming in the hot, dense air. "This way!" I shout-
ed to Esta, realizing she had gone a different way. "Over
here!" We were swallowed up. Taken in. Incorporated in
a vegetation that belonged to our ancestors. There was a
chimney visible ahead. Gray stone covered with weeds. I
pushed in farther, deeper, brushing wings and sounds of
buzzing off my arms and neck and legs, wet now and
dizzy in the heat and blind in all the green. I couldn't see,
but I had to keep moving if I wanted to find water. My
mother couldn't stand this kind of heat. She'd always
hated it. Air conditioning was a necessity to her, but she
was back there in the car, surrounded by the past and her
new grief and dying to be on the road again. Dying to
be . . . "Mother!" I turned around, pushed against leaves,
looking for a way out. Air. She shouldn't be up there
alone in a hot car. What was I thinking of? I wasn't used
to looking after her. Skip had always done that. I'd never
been the one to live nearby or deal with her problems
and realities. I had my own life. I lived in Canada for
Christ's sake. I had no idea how things worked down
here. I couldn't even find my way back to the car. I had
no idea where the road was. I didn't know the lay of the
land. I didn't know what the doorknobs had looked like
or what the salt shakers had looked like or where the
root cellar had been.

I climbed back to a place where the light was hotter and brighter. I got out of the bushes and back on the dusty grass. I found the parking lot and saw my mother's car, its front doors open and a pick-up truck parked next to it. "Mother!" I shouted again, to let her know I was back, looking after her. I'd given up my quest. It was pointless. I couldn't find the lakes alone and there was no one to guide me. What I had instead was a mother who should be sitting in a mall drinking iced tea and eating something sweet. The truck worried me. I had left my mother sitting alone in a parking lot in what was clearly a backwater. A wasteland. A time warp. The truck had not been there when we arrived. And it was empty.

So was my mother's car. Someone had dragged her into the woods. It was impossible not to imagine the new grief, the shocked disbelief. "You took her out there and left her alone!" I must have been yelling. "Mother! Mother!" Then I realized it was Esta yelling at me. It seemed odd. That I should be a mother when I was so clearly unready. That I should be anything but a small child looking for her brother in the woods.

"Where's grandmother?"
"I don't know!"
"Criminy! You go look over there, past the pool. I'll go back down to the woods!"

We wandered back and forth. There was a set of swings, motionless, empty. A walnut tree, my father's favorite kind. Motionless. Alone. The changing room. Locked. The swimming pool. Bare. And the great buzzing swallowing vegetation that had eaten up our past.

We were drenched, too. Although we hadn't found a drop of water, we had produced plenty of it. I searched the park around the swing set and pool then found Esta at the edge of the bush, stabbing at branches
blindly, calling her grandmother in a sharp, frightened voice. Suddenly she stood in front of us. Mother. Grandmother. "I think it was right here," she said, "the kitchen door. They didn't put the bathroom in until Granddaddy got sick, but it was over there. Your grandmother used an outside pump her whole life. And she never got around to hanging drapes. She just gave up on things. Carpets. Nice furnishings. They didn't have to have bare floors, but she never liked this place. That's my theory. Granddaddy's parents built it to be close to the Latter Day Saints because they'd lost a child and they thought they could get in contact with him that way. Of course it was never any good. Did you find the lake?"

"No. Nothing."

"They dried up then. Or got drained off."

"I found a chimney."

"Those were for campers. So they could cook their fish."

"Not for the house?"

"They never had a fireplace!"

"Shall we go on back? Get some tea someplace?"

"Whenever you're ready."

So we began in Providence and ended up in the same place. As a family. The last time I saw my brother, he taught me how to cut flowers, diagonally, holding the stems under running water. We had driven out to Walden Pond and talked about hiking in. We had argued about the merits of tomato sauce. We had gone to a fruit market and bought bags full of good things to eat, and I had thought: this is something my people do. We buy food and carry it around with us wherever we are. But I was surprised by the flowers. They were for his daughter and they were as beautiful and impractical as the fruit was
edible and ripe. Maybe the flowers were not part of the good news or the bad news, but outside of all that. Only the good die young, my mother used to tell me. But it's easier to be good when you're young, before things happen to you. There is no life without change; the trouble with death is its changeless innocence. The hard part of life is to stay connected in the face of that. And Independence. To find how empty it is.