Fitting Ends

There is a story about my brother Del which appears in a book called "More True Tales of the Weird and Supernatural." The piece on Del is about three pages long, full of exclamation points and supposedly eerie descriptions. It is based on what the writer calls "true facts."

The writer spends much of the first few paragraphs setting the scene, trying to make it sound spooky. "The tiny, isolated village of Pyramid, Nebraska," is what the author calls the place where I grew up. I had never thought of it as a village. It wasn't much of anything, really--it wasn't even on the map, and hadn't been since my father was a boy, when it was a stop on the Union Pacific railroad line. Back then, there was a shanty town for the railroad workers, a dancehall, a general store, a post office. By the time I was growing up, all that was left was a cluster of mostly boarded-up, run-down houses. My family--my parents and grandparents and my brother and me--lived in the only occupied buildings. There was a grain elevator, which my

grandfather had run until he retired and my father took over. "PYRAMID" was painted in peeling block letters on one of the silos.

The man who wrote the story got fixated on that elevator. He talks of it as "a menacing, hulking structure," and says it is like "Childe Roland's ancient dark tower, presiding over the barren fields and empty, sentient houses." He even goes so far as to mention "the soundless flutter of bats flying in and out of the single, eye-like window at the top of the elevator," and "the distant, melancholy calls of coyotes from the hills beyond" which are then drowned out by "the strange echoing moan of a freight train as it passes in the night."

There really are bats, of course; you find them in every country place. Personally, I never heard coyotes, though it is true they were around. I saw one once when I was about twelve. I was staring from my bedroom window late one night and there he was. He had come down from the hills and was crouched in our yard, licking drops of water off the propeller of the sprinkler. As for the trains, they passed through about every half-hour, day and night. If you lived there, you didn't even hear them--or maybe only half-heard them, the way, now that I live in a town, I might vaguely notice the bells of the nearby Catholic church at noon.

But anyway, this is how the writer sets things up. Then he

begins to tell about some of the train engineers, how they dreaded passing through this particular stretch. He quotes one man as saying he got goosebumps every time he started to come up on Pyramid. "There was just something about that place," says this man. There were a few bad accidents at the crossing--a carload of drunken teenagers who tried to beat the train, an old guy who had a heart attack as his pick-up bumped across the tracks. That sort of thing. Actually, this happens anywhere that has a railroad crossing.

Then came the sightings. An engineer would see "a figure" walking along the tracks in front of the train, just beyond the Pyramid elevator. The engineer would blow his horn, but the person, "the figure" would seem not to notice. The engineer blasted the horn several more times, more and more insistent. But the person kept walking; pretty soon the train's headlights glared onto a tall, muscular boy with shaggy dark hair and a green fatigue jacket. They tried to brake the train, but it was too late. The boy suddenly fell to his knees, and the engineer was certain he'd hit him. But of course, when the train was stopped, they could find nothing. "Not a trace," says our author. This happened to three different engineers; three different incidents in a two-year period.

You can imagine the ending, of course: that was how my brother died, a few years after these supposed sightings began.

His car had run out of gas a few miles from home, and he was walking back. He was drunk. Who knows why he was walking along the tracks? Who knows why he suddenly kneeled down? Maybe he stumbled, or had to throw up. Maybe he did it on purpose. He was killed instantly.

The whole ghost stuff came out afterward. One of the engineers who'd seen the "ghost" recognized Del's picture in the paper, and came forward or something. I always believed it was made up. It was stupid, I always thought, like a million campfire stories you'd heard or some cheesy program on TV. But the author of "True Tales of the Weird and Supernatural" found it "spine-tingling." "The strange story of the boy whose ghost appeared--two years before he died!" says a line on the back cover.

This happened when I was fourteen. My early brush with tragedy, I guess you could call it, though by the time I was twenty-one I felt I had recovered. I didn't think the incident had shaped my life in any particular way, and in fact I'd sometimes find myself telling the story, ghost and all, to girls I met at fraternity parties. I'd take a girl up to my room, show her the "True Tales..." book. We'd smoke some marijuana and talk about it, my voice taking on an intensity and heaviness that surprised both of us. From time to time, we'd end up in bed. I

remember this one girl, Lindsey, telling me how moved she was by the whole thing. It gave me, she said, a Heathcliff quality; I had turned brooding and mysterious; the wheatfields had turned to moors. "I'm not mysterious," I said, embarrassed, and later, after we'd parted ways, she agreed. "I thought you were different," she said, "deeper." She cornered me one evening when I was talking to another girl and wanted to know if I wasn't a little ashamed, using my dead brother to get laid. She said that she had come to realize that I, like Heathcliff, was just another jerk.

After that, I stopped telling the story for a while. There would be months when I wouldn't speak of my brother at all, and even when I was home in Pyramid, I could spend my whole vacation without once mentioning Del's name. My parents never spoke of him, at least not with me.

Of course, this only made him more present than ever. He hovered there as I spoke of college, my future, my life, my father barely listening. When we would argue, my father would stiffen sullenly, and I knew he was thinking of arguements he'd had with Del. I could shout at him, and nothing would happen. He'd stare as I tossed some obscene word casually toward him, and I'd feel it rattle and spin like a coin I'd flipped on the table in front of him. But he wouldn't say anything.

I actually wondered, back then, why they put up with this sort of thing.

It was surprising, even a little unnerving, especially given my father's temper when I was growing up, the old violence-promising glares that once made my bones feel like wax, the ability he formerly had to make me flinch with a gesture or a well-chosen phrase.

Now, I was their only surviving child, and I was gone--more thoroughly gone than Del was, in a way. I'd driven off to college in New York, and it was clear I wasn't ever coming back. Even my visits became shorter and

shorter--summer trimmed down from three months to less than two weeks over the course of my years at college; at Christmas, I'd stay on campus after finals, wandering the emptying passageways of my residence hall, loitering in the student center, my hands clasped behind my back, staring at the ragged bulletin boards as if they were paintings in a museum. I found excuses to keep from going back. And then, when I got there, finally, I was just another ghost.

About a year before he died, Del saved my life. It was no big deal, I thought. It was summer, trucks were coming to the grain elevator, and my brother and I had gone up to the roof to fix a hole. The elevator was flat on top, and when I was little,

I used to imagine that being up there was like being in the turret of a lighthouse. I used to stare out over the expanse of prairie, across the fields and their flotsam of machinery, cattle, men, over the rooftops of houses, along the highways and railroad tracks that trailed off into the horizon. When I was small, this would fill me with wonder. My father would stand there with me, holding my hand, and the wind would ripple our clothes.

I was thinking of this, remembering, when I suddenly started to do a little dance. I didn't know why I did such things: my father said that ever since I started Junior High school I'd been like a "-holic" of some sort, addicted to making an ass out of myself. Maybe this was true, because I started to caper around, and Del said "I'd laugh if you fell, you idiot," stern and condescending, as if I was the juvenile delinquent. I ignored him. With my back turned to him, I began to sing "Ain't No Mountain High Enough" in a deep corny voice, like my father's. I'd never been afraid of heights, and I suppose I was careless. Too close to the edge, I slipped, and my brother caught my arm.

I was never able to recall exactly what happened in that instant. I remember being surprised by the sound that came from my throat, a high scream like a rabbit's that seemed to ricochet downward, a stone rattling through a long drainpipe. I looked up and my brother's mouth was wide open, as if he'd made the sound.

The tendons on his neck stood out.

I told myself that if I'd been alone, nothing would have happened. I would've just teetered a little, then gained my balance again. But when my brother grabbed me, I lost my equilibrium, and over the edge I went. There were a dozen trucks lined up to have their loads weighed, and all the men down there heard that screech, looked up startled to see me dangling there with 200 feet between me and the ground. They all watched Del yank me back up to safety.

I was on the ground before it hit me. Harvesters were getting out of their trucks and ambling toward us, and I could see my father pushing his way through the crowd. It was then that my body took heed of what had happened. The solid earth kept opening up underneath me, and Del put his arm around me as I wobbled. Then my father loomed. He got hold of me, clenching my shoulders, shaking me. "My sore neck!" I cried out. "Dad, my neck!" The harvester's faces jittered, pressing closer, I could see a man in sunglasses with his black, glittering eyes fixed on me.

"Del pushed me," I cried out as my father's gritted teeth came toward my face. Tears slipped suddenly out of my eyes. "Del pushed me, Dad! It wasn't my fault."

My father had good reason to believe this lie, even though

he and some twelve or more others had been witness to my singing and careless prancing up there. The possiblity still existed that Del might have given me a shove from behind. My father didn't want to believe Del was was capable of such a thing. But he knew he was.

Del had only been back home for about three weeks. Prior to that, he'd spent several months in a special program for juvenile delinquents. The main reason for this was that he'd become so beligerent, so violent, that my parents didn't feel they could control him. He'd also, over the course of things, stolen a car.

For much of the time that my brother was in this program, I wore a neck brace. He'd tried to strangle me the night before he was sent away. He claimed he'd seen me smirking at him, though actually I was only thinking of something funny I'd seen on TV. Del was the furthest thing from my thoughts until he jumped on me. If my father hadn't separated us, Del probably would have choked me to death.

This was one of the things that my father must have thought of. He must have remembered the other times that Del might have killed me: the time when I was twelve and he threw a can of motor oil at my head when my back was turned; the time when I was seven and he pushed me off the tailgate of a moving pickup, where my father had let us sit when he was driving slowly down a

dirt road. My father was as used to hearing these horror stories as I was to telling them.

Though he was only three and a half years older than I, Del was much larger. He was much bigger than I'll ever be, and I was just starting to realize that. Six foot three, 220 lb. defensive back, my father used to tell people when he spoke of Del. My father used to believe that Del would get a football scholarship to the state university. Never mind that once he started high school he wouldn't even play on the team. Never mind that all he seemed to want to do was vandalize people's property and drink beer and cause problems at home. My father still talked about it like there was some hope.

When my brother got out of his program, he told us that things would be different from now on. He had changed, he said, and he swore that he would make up for the things that he'd done. I gave him a hug. He stood there before us, with his hands clasped behind his back, posed like the famous orator whose picture was in the library of our school. We all smiled, the visions of the horrible family fights wavering behind our friendly expressions.

So here was another one, on the night of my almost-death.

Before very long, my brother had started crying. I hadn't seen him actually shed tears in a very long time; he hadn't even

cried on the day he was sent away.

"He's a liar," my brother shouted. We had all been fighting and carrying on for almost an hour. I had told my version of the story five or six times, getting better at it with each repetition. I could have almost believed it myself. "You fucking liar," my brother screamed at me. "I wish I had pushed you. I'd never save your ass now." He stared at me suddenly, wild-eyed, like I was a dark shadow that was bending over his bed when he woke at night. Then he sat down at the kitchen table. He put his face in his hands, and his shoulders began to shudder.

Watching him--this giant, broad-shouldered boy, my brother, weeping--I could have almost taken it back. The whole lie, I thought, the words I spoke at first came out of nowhere, sprang to my lips as a shield against my father's red face and bared teeth, his fingernails cutting my shoulder as everyone watched. It was really my father's fault. I could have started crying myself.

But looking back on it, I have to admit that there was something else, too--a heat at the core of my stomach, spreading through my body like a stain. It made my skin throb, my face a mask of innocence and defiance. I sat there looking at him, and put my hand to my throat. After years of being on the receiving end, it wasn't in my nature to see Del as someone who could be wronged, as someone to feel pity for. This was something Del

could have done, I thought. It was not so unlikely.

At first, I thought it would end with my brother leaving, barreling out of the house with the slamming of doors and the circling whine of the fan belt in my father's old beater pick-up, the muffler retorting all the way down the long dirt road, into the night. Once, when he was drunk, my brother had tried to drive his truck off a cliff on the hill out behind our house. But the embankment wasn't steep enough, and the truck just went bump, bump down the side of the hill, all four wheels staying on the ground until it finally came to rest in the field below. Del had pointed a shotgun at my father that night, and my father was so stunned and upset that my mother thought he was having a heart attack. She was running around hysterical, calling police, ambulance, bawling. In the distance, Del went up the hill, down the hill, up, down. You could hear him revving the motor. It felt somehow like one of those slapstick moments in a comedy movie, where everything is falling down at once and all the actors run in and out of doorways. I sat, shivering, curled up on the couch while all this was going on, staring at the television.

But the night after I'd almost fallen, my brother did not try to take off. We all knew that if my parents had to call the police on him again, it would be the end. He would go to a

foster home or even back to the juvenile hall, which he said was worse than prison. So instead, he and my father were in a shoving match; there was my mother between them, screaming, "Oh, stop it I can't stand it I can't stand it," turning her deadly, red-eyed stare abruptly upon me; there was my brother crying. But he didn't try to leave. He just sat there, with his face in his hands. "God-damn all of you," he cried suddenly. "I hate all your guts. I wish I was fucking dead."

My father hit him then, hit him with the flat of his hand alongside the head, and Del tilted in his chair with the force of it. He made a small, high-pitched sound, and I watched as he folded his arms over his ears as my father descended on him, a blow, a pause, a blow, a pause. My father stood over him, breathing hard. A tear fell from Del's nose.

"Don't you ever say that," my father roared. "Don't you dare ever say that." He didn't mean the f-word--he meant wishing you were dead, the threats Del had made in the past. That was the worst thing, my father had told us once, the most terrible thing a person could do. My father's hands fell to his sides. I saw that he was crying, also.

After a time, Del lifted his head. He seemed to have calmed--everything seemed to have grown quiet, a dull, wavery throb of static. I saw that he looked at me. I slumped my shoulders, staring down at my fingernails.

"You lie," Del said softly. "You can't even look me in the face."

He got up and stumbled a few steps, as if my father would go after him again. But my father just stood there.

"Get out of my sight," he said. "Go on."

I heard Del's tennis shoes thump up the stairs, the slam of our bedroom door. But just as I felt my body start to untense, my father turned to me. He wiped the heel of his hand over his eyes, gazing at me without blinking. After all of Del's previous lies, his denials, his betrayals, you would think they would never believe his side of things again. But I could see a slowly creaking hinge of doubt behind my father's expression. I looked down.

"If I ever find out you're lying to me, boy," my father said.

He didn't ever find out. The day I almost fell was another one of those things we never got around to talking about again. It probably didn't seem very significant to my parents, in the span of events that had happened before and came after. They dwelt on other things.

On what, I never knew. My wife found this unbelievable: "Didn't they say anything after he died?" she asked me, and I had to admit that I didn't remember. They were sad, I told her.

I recalled my father crying. But they were country people. I tried to explain this to my wife, good Boston girl that she is, the sort of impossible grief that is like something gnarled and stubborn and underground. I never really believed it myself. For years, I kept expecting things to go back to normal, waiting for whatever was happening to them to finally be over.

My parents actually became quite mellow in the last years of their lives. My mother lost weight, was often ill. Eventually, shortly after her sixtieth birthday, she went deaf. Her hearing slipped away quickly, like a skin she was shedding, and all the tests proved inconclusive. That was the year that my son was born. In January, when my wife discovered that she was pregnant, my parents were in the process of buying a fancy, expensive hearing aid. By the time the baby was four months old, the world was completely soundless for my mother, hearing aid or not.

The problems of my college years had passed away by that time. I was working at a small private college in upstate New York, in alumni relations. My wife and I seldom went back to Nebraska; we couldn't afford the money or the time. But I talked to my parents regularly on the phone, once or twice a month.

We ended up going back that Christmas after Ezra was born. My mother's letters had made it almost impossible to avoid. "It breaks my heart that I can't hear my grandson's voice, now that he is making his little sounds," she had written. "But am

getting by O.K. and will begin lip-reading classes in Denver after Xmas. It will be easier for me then." She would get on the phone when I called my father. "I can't hear you talking but I love you," she'd say.

"We have to work to make her feel involved in things," my father told us as we drove from the airport, where he'd picked us up. "The worst thing is that they start feeling isolated," he told us. "We got little pads so we can write her notes." He looked over at me, strangely academic-looking in the new glasses he had for driving. In the last few years he had begun to change, his voice turning slow and gentle, as if he was watching something out in the distance beyond the window, or something sad and mysterious on TV as we talked. His former short temper had vanished away, leaving only a soft reproachfulness in its place. But even that was muted. He knew that he couldn't really make me feel guilty. "You know how she is," he said to my wife and me, though of course we did not, either one of us, really know her. "You know how she is. The hardest part is, you know, we don't want her to get depressed."

She looked terrible. Every time I saw her since I graduated from college, this stunned me. I came in, carrying my sleeping son, and she was sitting at the kitchen table, her spine curved a little bit more than the last time, thinner, so skinny that her muscles seemed to stand out against the bone. Back in New

York, I worked with alumni ladies older than she who played tennis, who dressed in trendy clothes, who walked with a casual and still sexy ease. These women wouldn't look like my mother for another twenty years, if ever. I felt my smile pull awkwardly on my face.

"Hello!" I called, but of course she didn't look up. My father flicked on the porch light. "She hates it when you surprise her," he said softly, as if there were still some possibility of her overhearing. My wife looked over at me. Her eyes said that this was going to be another holiday that was like work for her.

My mother lifted her head. Her shrewdness was still intact, at least, and she was ready for us the moment the porch light hit her consciousness. That terrrible, monkeyish dullness seemed to lift from her expression as she looked up.

"Well, howdy," she called, in the same jolly, slightly ironic way she always did when she hadn't seen me in a long time. She came over to hug us, then peered down at Ezra, who stirred a little as she pushed back his parka hood to get a better look. "Oh, what an angel," she whispered. "It's about killed me, not being able to see this boy." Then she stared down at Ezra again. How he'd grown, she told us. She thought he looked like me, she said, and I was relieved. Actually, I'd begun to think that Ezra somewhat resembled the pictures I'd seen of Del as a baby. But

my mother didn't say that, at least.

I had planned to have a serious talk with them on this trip. Or maybe "planned" is the wrong word--"considered" might be closer, though even that doesn't express the vague, unpleasantly anxious urge that I could feel at the back of my neck. I didn't really know what I wanted to know. And the truth was, these quiet, fragile, distantly tender people bore little resemblance to the mother and father in my mind. It had been ten years since I'd lived at home. Ten years!--which filled the long, snowy evenings with a numbing politeness. My father sat in his easy chair, after dinner, watching the news. My wife read. My mother and I did the dishes together, silently, nodding as the plate she had rinsed passed from her hand to mine, to be dried and put away. When a train passed, the little window above the sink vibrated, humming like a piece of celophane. But she did not notice this.

We did have a talk of sorts that trip, my father and I. It was on the third day after our arrival, a few nights before Christmas Eve. My wife and my mother were both asleep. My father and I sat out on the closed in porch, drinking beer, watching the snow drift across the yard, watching the wind send fingers of snow slithering along low to the ground. I had drunk more than he had. I saw him glance sharply at me for a second when I

came back from the refrigerator a fourth time, and popped open the can. But the look faded quickly. Outside, beyond the window, I could see the blurry shape of the elevator through the falling snow, its outlines indistinct, wavering like a mirage.

"Do you remember that time," I said, "when I almost fell off the elevator?"

It came out like that, abrupt, stupid. As I sat there in my father's silence, I realized how impossible it was, how useless to try to patch years of ellipsis into something resembling dialogue. I looked down, and he cleared his throat.

"Sure," he said at last, noncommital. "Of course I remember."

"I think about that sometimes," I said. Drunk--I felt the alcohol edge into my voice as I spoke. "It seems," I said, "significant." That was the word that came to me. "It seems significant sometimes," I said.

My father considered this for a while. He stiffened formally, as if he were being interviewed. "Well," he said. "I don't know. There were so many things like that. It was all a mess by then, anyway. Nothing could be done. It was too late for anything to be done." He looked down to his own beer, which must have gone warm by that time, and took a small sip. "It should have been taken care of earlier--when you were kids. That's where I think things must have gone wrong. I was too hard on you

both. But Del--I was harder on him. He was the oldest. Too much pressure. Expected too much."

He drifted off at that, embarrassed. We sat there, and I could not even imagine what he meant--what specifics he was referring to. What pressure? What expectations? But I didn't push any further.

"But you turned out all right," my father said. "You've done pretty

well, haven't you?"

There were no signs in our childhood, no incidents pointing the way to his eventual end. None that I could see, at least, and I thought about it quite a bit after his death. "It should have been taken care of earlier," my father said, but what was "it?" Del seemed to have been happy, at least up until high school.

Maybe things happened when they were alone together. From time to time, I remember Del coming back from helping my father in the shop with his eyes red from crying. Once, I remember our father coming into our room on a Saturday morning and cuffing the top of Del's sleeping head with the back of his hand: he had stepped in dog dirt on the lawn. The dog was Del's responsibility. Del must have been about eight or nine at the time, and I remember him kneeling on our bedroom floor in his

pajamas, crying bitterly as he cleaned off my father's boot. When I told that story later on, I was pleased by the ugly, almost fascist overtones it had. I remember recounting it to some college friends--handsome, suburban kids--lording this little bit of squalor from my childhood over them. Child abuse and family violence were enjoying a media vogue at that time, and I found I could mine this memory to good effect. In the version I told, I was the one cleaning the boots.

But the truth was, my father was never abusive in an especially spectacular way. He was more like a simple bully, easily eluded when he was in a short-tempered mood. He used to get so furious when we would avoid him. I recall how he used to grab us by the hair on the back of our necks, tilting our heads so we looked into his face. "You don't listen," he would hiss. "I want you to look at me when I talk to you." That was about the worst of it, until Del started getting into trouble. And by that time, my father's blows weren't enough. Del would laugh, he would strike back. It was then that my father finally decided to turn him over to the authorities. He had no other choice, he said.

He must have believed it. He wasn't, despite his temper, a bad man, a bad parent. He'd seemed so kindly, sometimes, so fatherly--especially with Del. I remember watching them from my window, some autumn mornings, watching them wade through the

high weeds in the stubblefield out behind our house, walking toward the hill with their shotguns pointing at the ground, their steps slow, synchronized. Once, I'd gone upstairs and heard them laughing in Del's and my bedroom. I just stood there outside the doorway, watching as my father and Del put a model ship together, sharing the job, their talk easy, happy.

This was what I thought of, that night we were talking. I thought of my own son, the innocent baby I loved so much, and it chilled me to think that things could change so much--that Del's closeness to my father could turn in on itself, transformed into the kind of closeness that thrived on their fights, on the different ways Del could push my father into a rage. That finally my father would feel he had no choices left. We looked at each other, my father and I. "What are you thinking?" I said softly, but he just shook his head.

Del and I had never been close. We had never been like friends, or even like brothers. Yet after that day on the elevator I came to realize that there had been something between us. There was been something that could be taken away.

He stopped talking to me altogether for a while. In the weeks and months that followed my lie, I doubt if we even looked at each other more than

two or three times, though we shared the same room.

For a while, I slept on the couch. I was afraid to go up to our bedroom. I can remember those first few nights, waiting in the living room for my father to go to bed, the television hissing with laughter. The furniture, the table, the floors seemed to shudder as I touched them, as if they were just waiting for the right moment to burst apart.

I'd go outside, sometimes, though that was really no better. It was the period of late summer when thunderstorms seemed to pass over every night. The wind came up. The shivering tops of trees bent in the flashes of heat lightning.

There was no way out of the situation I'd created. I could see that. Days and weeks stretched out in front of me, more than a month before school started. By that time, I thought, maybe it would all blow over. Maybe it would melt into the whole series of bad things that had happened, another layer of paint that would eventually be covered over by a new one, forgotten.

If he really had pushed me, that was what would have happened. It would have been like the time he tried to choke me, or the time he tried to drive the car off the hill. Once those incidents were over, there was always the possibility that this was the last time. There was always the hope that everything would be better, now.

In retrospect, it wouldn't have been so hard to recant. There would have been a big scene, of course. I would have been

punished, humiliated. I would have had to endure my brother's triumph, my parent's disgust. But I realize now that it wouldn't have been so bad.

I might have finally told the truth, too, if Del had reacted the way I expected. I imagined that there would be a string of confrontations in the days that followed, that he'd continue to protest with my father. I figured he wouldn't give up.

But he did. After that night, he didn't try to deny it anymore. For a while, I even thought that maybe he had begun to believe that he pushed me. He acted like a guilty person, eating his supper in silence, walking noislessly through the living room, his shoulders hunched like a traveller on a snowy road.

My parents seemed to take this as penitance. They still spoke sternly, but their tone began to be edged by gentleness, a kind of forgiveness. "Did you take out the trash?" they would ask. "Another potato?"--and they would wait for him to quickly nod. He was truly sorry, they thought. Everything was finally going to be okay. He was shaping up.

At these times, I noticed something in his eyes--a kind of sharpness, a subtle shift of the iris. He would lower his head, and the corners of his mouth would move slightly. To me, his face seemed to flicker with hidden, mysterious thoughts.

When I finally began to sleep in our room again, he

pretended I wasn't there. I would come in, almost as quiet as he himself had become, to find him sitting at our desk or on his bed, peeling off a sock with such slow concentration that it might have been his skin. It was as if there were an unspoken agreement between us--I no longer existed. He wouldn't look at me, but I could watch him for as long as I wanted. I would pull the covers over myself and just lie there, observing, as he went about doing whatever he was doing as if oblivious. He listened to a tape on his headphones; flipped through a magazine; did sit-ups; sat staring out the window; turned out the light. And all that time his face remained neutral, impassive. Once, he even chuckled to himself at a book he was reading, a paperback anthology of The Far Side cartoons.

When I was alone in the room, I found myself looking through his things, with an interest I'd never had before. I ran my fingers over his models, the monster-wheeled trucks and B-10 Bombers. I flipped through his collection of tapes. I found some literature he'd brought home from the detention center, brochures with titles like "Teens and Alcohol: What You Should Know!" and "Rap Session, Talking about Feelings." Underneath this stuff, I found the essay he'd been working on.

He had to write an essay so that they would let him back into high school. There was a letter from the guidance counselor, explaining the school's policy, and then there were several

sheets of notebook paper with his handwriting on them. He'd scratched out lots of words, sometimes whole paragraphs. In the margins, he'd written little notes to himself:"(sp.)" or "?" or "No." He wrote in scratchy block letters.

His essay told of the Outward Bound program. "I had embarked on a sixty day rehabilitation program in the form of a wilderness survival course name of Outward Bound," he had written. "THESIS: The wilderness has allowed for me to reach deep inside my inner self and grasp ahold of my morals and values that would set the standard and tell the story of the rest of my life."

I would go into our room when my brother was out and take the essay out of the drawer where he'd hidden it. He was working on it, off and on, all that month; I'd flip it open to discover new additions or deletions--whole paragraphs appearing as if overnight. I never saw him doing it.

The majority of the essay was a narrative, describing their trip. They had hiked almost 200 miles, he said. "Up by sun and down by moon," he wrote. There were obstacles they had to cross. Once, they had to climb down a 100 foot cliff. "The repelling was very exciting but also scarey," he'd written. "This was meant to teach us trust and confidence in ourselves as well as our teammates, they said. Well as I reached the peak of my climb I saw to my despair that the smallest fellow in the group was

guiding my safety rope. Now he was no more than one hundred and ten pounds and I was tipping the scales at about two twenty five needless to say I was reluctant."

But they made it. I remember reading this passage several times; it seemed very vivid in my mind. In my imagination, I was in the place of the little guy holding the safety rope. I saw my brother hopping lightly, bit by bit, down the sheer face of the cliff to the ground below, as if he could fly, as if there were no gravity anymore.

"My experience with the Outward Bound program opened my eyes to such values as friendship, trust, responsibility and sharing," Del wrote in his conclusion. "Without the understanding of these I would not exist as I do now but would probably instead be another statistic. With these values I will purely succeed. Without I would surely fail." Next to this he'd written: "Sounds like bullshit (?)"

I don't know that I recognized that distinct ache that I felt on reading
this, or understood why his sudden distance, the silent, moody aura he trailed after him in those weeks should have affected me in such a way. Years later, I would recall that feeling--standing over my son's crib, a dark shape leaning over him as he stirred with dreams--waiting at the window for the

headlights of my wife's car to turn into our driveway. That sad, trembly feeling was a species of love--or at least a symptom of it.

I thought of this a long time after the fact. I loved my brother, I thought. Briefly.

None of this lasted. By the time he died, a year later, he'd worked his way back to his normal self, or a slightly modified, moodier version. Just like before, money had begun to disappear from my mother's purse; my parents searched his room for drugs. He and my father had been argued that morning about the friends he was hanging around with, about his wanting to take the car every night. Del claimed that he was dating a girl, said he only wanted to see a movie in town. He'd used that one before, often lying ridiculously when he was asked the next day about the plot of the film. I remember him telling my mother that the war film "Apocalypse Now" was set in the future, which I knew was not true from an article I'd read in the paper. I remember making some comment in reference to this as he was getting ready to go out, and he looked at me in that careful, hooded way, reminscent of the time when he was pretending I didn't exist. "Eat shit and die, Stewart," he murmured, without heat. Unfortunately, I believe that this was the last thing he ever said to me.

Afterward, his friends said that he had seemed like he was in a good mood. They had all been in his car, my father's car, driving up and down
the main street in Scottsbluff. They poured a little rum into their cans of Coke, cruising from one end of town to the other, calling out the window at a carful of passing teenage girls, revving the engine at the stoplights. He wasn't that drunk, they said.

I used to imagine that there was a specific moment when he realized that he was going to die. I don't believe he knew it when he left our house, or even at the beginning of his car ride with his friends. If that were true, I have to assume that there would have been a sign, some gesture or expression, something one of us would have noticed. If it was planned, then why on that particular, insignificant day?

Yet I wondered. I used to think of him, in his friend Sully's car, listening to his buddies laughing, making dumb jokes, running red lights. It might have been sometime around then, I thought. Time seemed to slow down. He would sense a long, billowing delay in the spaces between words; the laughing faces of the girls in a passing car would seem to pull by forever, their expressions frozen.

Or I thought about his driving home. I could see the heavy, fog-like darkness of those country roads, the shadows of weeds

springing up when the headlights touched them, I could imagine the halt and sputter of the old pickup as the gas ran out, that moment when you can feel the power lift up out of the machine like a spirit. It's vivid enough in my mind that it's almost as if I was with him as the pickup rolled lifelessly on--slowing, then stopping at last on the shoulder where it would be found the next day, the emergency lights still blinking dimly. He and I stepped out into the thick night air, seeing the shape of the elevator in the distance, above the tall sunflowers and pigweed. And though we knew we were outdoors, it felt like we were inside something. The sky seemed to close down on us like the lid of a box.

No one in my family ever used the word suicide. When we referred to Del's death, if we referred to it, we spoke of "the accident." To the best of our knowledge, that's what it was.

There was a time, right before I left for college, when I woke from a dream to the low wail of a passing train. I could see it when I sat up in bed, through the branches of trees outside my window I could see the boxcars, shuffling through flashes of heat lightning, trailing past the elevator and into the distance, rattling, rattling.

And there was another time, my senior year in college, when I saw a kid who looked like Del coming out of a bar, a boy

melting into the crowded, carnival atmosphere of this particular strip of saloons and dance clubs where all the students went on a Saturday night. I followed this person a few blocks before I lost sight of him. All those cheerful, drunken faces seemed to loom as I passed by them, blurring together like an expressionist painting. I leaned against a wall, breathing.

And there was that night when we came to Pyramid with my infant son, the night my father and I stayed up talking. I sat there in the dark, long after he'd gone to bed, finishing another beer. I remember looking up to see my mother moving through the kitchen; at first only clearly seeing the billowy whiteness of her nightgown hovering in the dark, a shape floating slowly through the kitchen toward me. I had a moment of fear before I realized it was her. She did not know I was there. She walked slowly, delicately, thinking herself alone in this room at night. I would have had to touch her to let her know that I was there, and that would have probably startled her badly. So I didn't move. I watched as she lit a cigarette and sat down at the kitchen table, her head turned toward the window, where the snow was still falling. She watched it drift down. I heard her breathe smoke, exhaling in a long, thoughtful sigh. She was remembering something, I thought.

It was at these moments that everything seemed clear to me.

I felt that I could take all the loose ends of my life and fit them together perfectly, as easily as a writer could write a spooky story, where all the details add up and you know the end even before the last sentence. This would make a good ending, you think at such moments. You'll go on living, of course. But at the same time you recognize, in that brief flash of clarity and closure, you realize that everything is summed up. It's not really worth becoming what there is left for you to become.