

MY BROTHER, MY BROTHER

By
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While he lived, it was impossible to imagine that his energy and presence could ever cease to be. His body was lean and muscled without benefit of exercise; he was stylish, sexy, and attractive in ways very few people have ever been. His musical talent, commanding presence and great looks opened doors for him into worlds which were new and wondrous to a kid born into a common Southern family. His destiny was limitless -- he would surely break the boundaries of human existence. Like Joseph Campbell's tragic hero, he would fracture the Universe. He was my elder Brother by thirteen months. I hated and worshiped him. And he is gone.

I remember clearly the little boy my Brother was. I recall his earnestness, and honesty. I watched as the harsh treatment he received for even the pettiest of reasons turned his honesty and earnestness into deceit and manipulation.

As an older teen and adult, he enjoyed mesmerizing anyone who'd listen. Everyone did listen. He spun stories of our family and his exploits; grand embellishments were required to make the life he lived and his family worthy of him. He was convinced that he, not I, descended from Scottish Royalty. Earlier in his childhood, upon learning of our American Indian ancestry, he donned a chief's headdress, and attempted to stamp out the white man -- that would be me.

My Brother often challenged our Mother. She'd spank him, and then she would cry -- always the victim. I believe her identity was strongly influenced by that puny bitch, Melanie Hamilton Wilkes in *Gone with the Wind*. For upsetting Mother, Daddy would punish him again. By the time I was catching hell too, Mother didn't attempt to control us; she'd just tell on us when Daddy came home, and then she'd pretend Daddy wasn't crossing the line that separates parental instruction from abuse. The more that line was crossed, the further the line was stretched, until there was no demarcation between abuse and serious abuse.

My Brother had no affection for me. For a brief time, I was the little brother who could do no harm. My parents would mistreat him, and he would in-turn

mistreat me. I developed a meanness of my own. I was more devious in my approach to payback than my Brother. I seldom played my hand, but when I did, I took all the chips. A good example of this, one which haunts me still, followed a dinner at the Colemans' home.

The Colemans were an older childless couple of means who provided foundational support and leadership to the Baptist church for which Daddy served as Minister of Music. Once and only once, the Colemans invited our entire family to their big, beautiful home for dinner. I'll never forget the preparations.

Mother was a wreck -- what to wear, her hair! She couldn't possibly enter their home looking as she did. If we'd had velvet drapes, they would not have survived. Part of the ritual of Mother's fitful effort to look nice was to remind us that she had nothing to wear because she sacrificed for us -- that she'd given up getting her hair cut, buying a proper slip, a new bra, dress . . . whatever, because I needed shoes or my Brother had to see a doctor. Her embarrassment was our fault, and we were punished for it.

On the day of the dinner party, Daddy had the responsibility of cleaning the filthy boys who'd robbed their sainted mother of her dignity. I hated it when he bathed us. It wasn't just that we always did something wrong when we were near him and that he'd backhand us for our failures; he hated cleaning us, and he retaliated with extreme roughness. Every touch seemed vindictive. Ears were the worst. He'd take a wooden kitchen match, cover it with one of our almost transparent old wash clothes, and "ream out our ears." It always felt as though the match would push through into my eye socket. If I cried or complained I was bopped on the head. I did cry. I was bopped.

My Brother, even at age seven, had developed an impressive resistance to pain and a strong determination to withhold from Daddy any pleasure he might get from hurting him. I watched in amazement how he held his responses in check as Daddy tried to make him cry out as I had done. By the end of that bath, my Brother and I were so clean our skin hurt, our ears ached, and our little butts and necks were rosy red from being slapped.

Finally in the car, there we were in our starched and ironed best, feeling raggedy but clean, and excited about going to the rich people's house. The entire family were nervous. We had no idea how to behave as a family outside the privacy of our home. It was unusual for us boys to accompany our parents

anywhere except to church. Our hosts had insisted they bring us; they loved kids.

When we drove into the Colemans' expansive circular driveway, I could tell Daddy was out of his comfort zone. He initially parked right in front of the house. Our car was a heap. Mother shot Daddy a frightened look as if to say, you cannot park this pile of shit right at their front door! Daddy tried to back up to a less presumptuous location, but a tire left the driveway.

"Daddy, you're in their yard!" yelled my Brother.

Bop. Daddy was deadly accurate when hitting our heads even when we were in the back seat -- he didn't even have to look. The car bolted forward and Daddy drove to the street and back into the drive again, stopping and parking yards from the house. He turned and glared at my Brother as though all the awkwardness were his fault.

By this time, Mrs. Coleman had opened her front door. She waved hello.

"Welcome! Ya'll come on in!"

Before my parents could stop him, my Brother bolted up to Mrs. Coleman. He was completely at ease with the situation; his enthusiasm was undaunted by being poor and bopped. We were at the rich house, and he would make the most of it!

Mrs. Coleman smiled down at him as if to say "What a pleasant surprise!" He met her smile with his own winning smile, radiant even with a tooth missing. It was as though he had left us, and effortlessly escaped the Pandora's Box which held our family in suspended unhappiness. I remember thinking, "Who is this boy, I hate him!" I think my parents had a similar reaction.

The evening began stressfully for me as it likely did for my parents as well. Not knowing which fork to use was nothing compared to eating a lobster -- no one in my family had ever seen a lobster, much less eaten one. Mr. Coleman got cracking, and my Brother and I discovered our favorite food, food we'd not see again until we much older and on our own.

My family ate rabbit and squirrel or perch and brim -- food that Daddy could hunt or fish for on Saturdays when he wasn't bopping us. And, of course, we always had food from our garden, whether fresh in season or frozen from the freezer, and the occasional chicken.

I hated blackberry season. Daddy would drive us boys out of town, lead us deep into the woods, and leave us at an enormous growth of blackberry vines. He'd leave us with as many pails as we all could carry, a mason jar filled with water, and a bag lunch. Hours later he'd retrieve us and the harvest of berries, which would become a cobbler and many pints of jam.

Before dessert, I whispered to Mother that I needed to pee. She whispered back that I'd have to hold it. I figured she was afraid I'd pee on the floor or toilet seat, and she wasn't about to ask to take me to their toilet -- that would be so crude, and how could anyone pee in such a beautiful home, anyway? Mrs. Mitchell would have done me a very big favor if she'd had a character pee in *Gone with the Wind*! I almost wet my pants when Mrs. Coleman brought a Baked Alaska in from the kitchen! No child upon seeing Disneyland was ever more excited than I upon seeing this flaming dessert! Everything was so magical at the Colemans'. I didn't want to leave, even if meant needing to pee the rest of my life.

It had been such a happy evening, filled with beautiful things, smells, tastes, smiles and laughter. I all but forgot to dread impending bedtime, a particularly dangerous time for my Brother and me. Often that's when we were punished for any mistake we'd made during the day. And, so often the mistakes we'd made were unknown to us. I cannot count the number of nights my Brother and I fell asleep crying -- not only from physical pain, but because of that other more painful pain.

No one enjoyed the evening more than my Brother. He had managed a tour of the house. When Mrs. Coleman asked Mother if she'd like to see the house, before Mother could accept the invitation, my Brother had taken Mrs. Coleman's hand. She clearly adored the handsome little boy,

"Oh you want to come, too?"

He nodded and off he and Mother went with our hostess. I rose from my seat to join them, but Daddy raised his hand, and that was that. I remained behind and tried to imagine the glorious experience my Brother was enjoying.

Once the thank yous and goodbyes were said, we walked back to our car. I'd seen Mrs. Coleman whisper in my Brother's ear and slip him a banana as the rest of us gathered in the vestibule -- he was the rich lady's pet. He held the banana in his hand like a prize. It would no longer be just a banana, it would be

a very rare, special banana from a far off kingdom, and I would not be permitted to taste it.

I was only six years old, but I saw my opportunity. Once again in the car as we settled back into the reality of our lives, I announced,

"He stole a banana!"

All hell broke loose.

"Where did you get that?" Mother shrieked as though he held a snake or a bomb, not a banana.

"She gave it to me."

With that, Daddy delivered a head-splitting bop and scolded,

"Tell your Mother the truth!"

"She gave it to me, I didn't steal it!"

"Liar!"

Mother shuddered with humiliation.

"She asked me if I was still hungry an' I said I was, an--"

By now Mother was crying, and Daddy was out of the car. The backdoor opened and my Brother was snatched out like a Kleenex from a box. Daddy shook him so violently the banana fell out of his hand onto the pavement. Daddy slapped the side of his head with such force that he fell back into the car. There he met my smile as I chanted,

"Liar, liar of the family."

Daddy picked up the banana and looked toward the house -- what to do? My brother glared at me like Daddy had glared at him earlier when parking the heap. I knew my Brother would have revenge, but I didn't care -- it would be he who'd get the worst of it tonight, not me. I was pleased with my control over these people. Daddy again pulled my Brother from the back seat. He gave him the banana and instructed him to ring the doorbell, return the banana and apologize for taking it.

My Brother did just as he was told. Mrs. Coleman looked confused; she clearly didn't want the banana, but she accepted it. Her taking that damned banana proved his guilt. Later at home, Daddy broke through my Brother's hurt barrier. I did not regret what I had done, even as I heard my Brother scream and plead.

I regret it now. Oh, how I regret it now.