

My Brother Bill

2940 words

I did not hear Bill get up in the night, get dressed and leave home for good. He must have packed his things the day before, and that night when we were both lying on opposite sides of the bedroom he must have already known it would be the last time he'd be speaking to me. That night I told him about the new game I'd downloaded and he said he'd like to see it, but he must have known he never would. And when I said we should get tickets for *The Commoners*, he agreed, but he knew he wouldn't be going – at least not with me.

Bill and I always shared the same room. We lived in a two-bedroom house and our father said that if we ever got tired of each other, he'd have a wall built right down the middle. But we never asked for it and that's the way it stayed right through our eighteen years at home. We had a window each on opposite sides and our own wall to pin things on. We were close, Bill and I, yet it was those two walls where we stuck things up that showed just how different we were. I had posters of bands: *The Meanies*, *Lemonheads* and *Gram*, and my younger brother had drawings he'd made with felt-tipped pens; skulls, warriors and alien landscapes.

Bill had his own inner world and sometimes it didn't take much to send him there. He had a strange kind of edginess and over the years I saw that edginess grow in him like his own adolescent bones that would eventually put him centimetres above me. Any kind of mild crisis, a word badly placed or a promise loosely kept would send him instantly into his own private realm. Sometimes deep in the night I'd hear his muffled dream-talk and it was as if he was dealing with a crowd of unsettled spirits pulling him this way and that. Maybe those spirits wanted out and in the end they just carried him far away from the ordinary life we had in Heidelberg.

I should have seen it coming; all those mornings I'd noticed him standing at the bedroom window gazing down the slope of the backyard. He'd just stand there with his arms crossed in his own particular way – he didn't actually *cross* them, he just put one forearm along the other as though cradling something, a thought perhaps. One day when he finally walked away from that bedroom window I took up the same position. But all I saw was the chickens pecking the concrete under the flapping clothesline and some kind of bird running under the rose trellis. Besides that there was nothing, just a square of yard hedged in with low-pitched rooves and the sound of our neighbour's mower flicking stones against the palings.

A few weeks later, I asked Bill why he wasn't going on to uni. We were watching something on TV and Bill was stretched out, his socked feet up on the coffee table. He had a rubber band stretched between his fingers and he was plucking it like a stringed instrument.

"A bad gig," is all he said. I was already in Second Year Science and it had never occurred to me that my younger brother might have formed a dim view of my decision to go on.

"What else then?" I didn't look at him; Bill would clam up tight if he felt any kind of pressure.

"Don't know," he said and stretched his long frame out even further. "All I know is it won't take a whole lot of uni years to get me there."

That same week he turned eighteen and bought an old Honda motorbike. Two weeks later I woke to find him gone.

Our parents didn't seem worried at all. Naturally they were disappointed that he'd left like that, without warning, but they figured he could look after himself and that soon he'd be back. But I knew he wouldn't; there was no note: *Dear family, got to be on my own for a while, don't worry, I'll write soon, love Bill*. I spent hours looking for a note like that; in my desk or

maybe sticking out of one of my uni books. But all I found was his house keys and at first I thought that maybe he hadn't gone far at all. Then I realised that the keys lying there in his top drawer and no note meant he had no intention of ever coming back. And then ten years elapsed; a whole decade without a word.

Bill was born in 1975 when our father was in Port Moresby. That was the year Papua New Guinea got its independence and Dad was an attaché with Foreign Affairs. It was a critical time for relations between Australia and PNG and Dad got stuck in New Guinea for sixteen weeks straight. Bill was three months old before our father set eyes on him – and then he went back again for another long stay. When things finally settled down around 1980 he came home for good, but somehow that distance never disappeared and our father remained a stranger in the house, like an uncle from a side of the family we hardly knew.

Almost every weekend, Dad would go fishing. He'd hook up his little trailer-boat and off he'd go. I can't remember him ever asking us to join him – but then again Bill and I were never interested in boats or hauling flathead out of the bay. It was even an effort to eat them. No-one in our family liked fish and over the years Mum compiled a handwritten book of recipes in an effort to put some variety into our father's catch.

It is fair to say that we never really knew our father. But at least I could exchange some words with him whereas Bill never seemed to have any connection at all. It was almost as if the two didn't recognise each other as father and son. Not that Bill and I were best buddies but at least we were on the same side – well I thought we were, maybe he thought differently.

There was one incident that might very well mark the exact day Bill turned; the day he might have got it in his head to go. I was walking past the Banksia Street shops with Sarina Ferranti. I was eighteen then and Sari was my first serious girlfriend. Just as we passed Wylie's

Cafe I looked in and saw Bill on the pinball machine with another kid from school. I stopped dead in my tracks: Bill was wearing a dark blue zipper jacket exactly like mine. At first I didn't believe it could be my own favourite jacket but when he turned I saw the five-point star on the back. I was livid. I didn't mind lending anything to Bill but I would *never* lend that dark blue jacket. Sari and I just walked on but I couldn't get the vision of it out of my head. For some reason we started arguing – I can't remember the context but it can't have been much. Suddenly my girlfriend stopped right there on the street and said there was something else she'd been meaning to say: she didn't want to see me anymore.

I got home late that night in a foul mood and the first thing I noticed was that Bill didn't have the jacket on. I went to our bedroom and marched straight to my wardrobe. And there it was hanging just like I left it. I thought of Sari again and how I'd offered that jacket to her one night when it rained. For a month I could still smell her faint scent around the collar. She loved me then.

I heard footsteps outside and a moment later Bill came into the room. I was well-aware that he could go into a spin over the slightest thing so I knew this would be a big one.

"I *saw* you today," I said.

Bill didn't answer; he just pulled open a drawer and got out his Walkman.

"I saw you down at Wylie's. And I saw you with *my jacket on!*"

"No you didn't. It wasn't your jacket."

"You bloody liar!" I screamed. "You know damn well it was!"

I grabbed hold of his shirt and pushed him onto the bed. He bounced right back and we went into a furious clinch. It surprised me how strong he was and I could feel his hard sinewy frame resisting every effort to throw him. And I realised something else as well, something as

alarming and solid as Bill's own body: we'd known each other all of our lives but this was the first time I could remember actually touching him. Even now I think of all the things we did together, the holidays at Metung, the hours travelling in the back of the car, movies we'd seen, the time we were both kept back at school for stealing two bikes on Anzac Day. But not once in all that time could I remember a single bodily contact.

How can you live with someone for eighteen years, share the same room and yet never touch them? I think of the 'personal space' we are supposed to need, how we try to keep at arm's length and how two people in a lift or a bus always take up opposite corners. What could have happened to create such distancing? Bill and I were brothers, yet the only time we broke that stand-apart convention and brought our bodies into contact was in a disagreement; a conflict we couldn't control.

We wrestled each other this way and that and finally I slammed him against the wall where he just stood, not looking at me but somewhere else; at a space that seemed unrelated to the room. Then, without a word, he moved sideways to the door and left. I stood there, my heart bouncing, my neck sore where Bill had grazed it. A lump formed in the pit of my stomach and a wave of despair rolled in like a dark cloud, a real sense that I'd put a bomb under something important, lit the fuse and blew it to pieces.

I listened for Bill but he must have gone outside. Then I thought, stuff it, if he wants the damn jacket he can have it! I took it out, still on its hanger and marched across to Bill's side of the room. And there in his wardrobe I found another jacket exactly like mine; same colour, same logo on the sleeve, same star on the back.

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It's been ten years now since that brother of mine slipped away quietly in the night. And maybe everything would have continued just like that if there hadn't been the accident in March this year. I was about to turn thirty and I was supposed to go home for dinner, but just two days before my birthday, our father suddenly died. He'd been out in his little fishing boat all night and was driving back from Dromana when he fell asleep at the wheel. The car and trailer went right over an embankment and the little aluminium dinghy flipped. Dad must have crawled out of the car and they found him underneath that little boat. My mother said that at least he'd gone out doing what he liked to do – he had six snapper in an esky. But the way she took the news without emotion I began to see what steely reserves she had and how she could set her mind to block out any kind of adversity. For my own part I felt something – but I think it was more disappointment than anything else; disappointment that I never really knew my father and that we weren't a different kind of family. And disappointment that my brother wasn't there at the funeral.

I stared at the coffin, but all I could think about was Bill. Where was he? Maybe he was living in some foreign country, maybe he was settled in Cairns with a wife and two kids. Maybe he owned an apple orchard in Tasmania. The only vision I had of him was standing by some window looking out with his arms folded in that strange Billy manner.

And I wondered whether my parents ever speculated about where he might be. I'd been living in my own flat for years, but when I went back to Grant Street the subject never came up. No doubt it was always on their mind, especially Mum's, but the only thing she would say on the matter was that she was sure he'd contact her when the time was right. But why hadn't he? Why not send a note: *I'm OK Mum, don't worry, just leading a different life. Love Bill.* But no note ever came and that fact alone got me worrying that something serious had happened. Had he

gone overseas and lost his passport? Maybe he was tangled in some drugs issue and jailed in some foreign country.

That day at the funeral I decided to try and find him. I'd hire a Private Investigator and to hell with Bill's choice of a life away from us. I was working for Promitech as a senior software programmer and I could afford the best. "We'll find him," the PI's said, "Alive or dead, we can track anybody."

Six weeks later they reported that they'd traced Bill to an address in Perth where he'd been living eight years earlier, then nothing. "The trail has gone dead," they said and presented me with the bill. And that's when I got the idea for an internet contact. That afternoon I created a website and titled it *William Raymond Palmer* and I linked it to a lot of other sites. Now all I needed was for Bill to Google his own name. I posted some info on the site that only he knew and I talked about our father's death and that Mum was living alone. I said I was in my own flat in Lennox Street, Richmond. I just wanted to make it all sound benign, to let him know that there was no reason to stay away from us, that we had no real opinion on the matter one way or the other. It would be the only way Bill would respond.

A month went by and nothing, then a second month and a third. What seemed like an easy solution suddenly seemed absurd and the longer there was no message the more I got to thinking he was in trouble or even dead. One night about a month ago I woke to find myself sobbing in my sleep. I hadn't even cried at my father's funeral, and now in dreams I seemed to be going over every bad thing that had ever happened – not the events but all the things we never said, the opportunities lost, the mistakes we'd made as a family. Suddenly my whole existence felt hollow and empty like an old house abandoned in some forgotten suburb.

Then last Friday I went home at lunchtime. I can work more efficiently at home and I've made an arrangement with Promitech to write up the technical data on a company laptop. I was sitting there at the kitchen table staring at the screen when I heard a motorbike. Maybe twenty motorbikes go past my place every day but for some reason I sat up and listened to this one. I went to the window and looked down on the street – I'm on the second floor and have a clear view of everything. The bike had gone well past but it slowed right down near the corner, turned around and pulled up two doors away on the other side. The rider did not get off. He just sat there in his leather jacket, helmet and dark glasses and I tried to see Billy under all that gear. It was a different bike, a big BMW, but there was something about the way that rider sat there that set my heart pounding. Then he turned his head and looked directly up at the flats. Should I run downstairs and go out to greet him? What if it wasn't Bill at all? Just then the rider took out a pack of cigarettes and lit one. It wasn't Bill. I was sure he would never smoke and I began to see the humorous side, the idea that my long lost brother would come riding around to my place and knock on the door.

But at that moment something happened: the rider folded his arms, not just any old way but exactly as Billy did, a way that signalled something to me as clearly as a nametag pinned to his chest. I grabbed a pair of shoes and tried to put them on as I went down the stairs. I heard the bike engine start as I hit the foyer and as I opened the front door the rider was already disappearing up the street.

It might be a while but he'll be back; he'll eventually come to me. In the dead of night, wherever he sleeps, he will remember those eighteen years we had together, sharing the same room, breathing the same air, talking across the dark space on sleepless nights. We're blood and he feels it in his gut the same me. That much I know about my brother Bill for sure. END