

## **My Brother**

I rested my head against my knees. In front of me, the sky cast its crimson rays across the still waters. A cool wind blew refreshingly on my hot cheeks. Beneath the calm evening, an eruptive madness was spreading inside of me. How could he!?! A sob escaped my trembling lips. I tried drawing it back, covering it back up, but it was impossible. Fat, warm tears poured down my face. I wiped them away with my bare arm. Not far away, a loon called out. The lonely call echoed across the lake and into the still twilight. So lonely, just like me... I let my feet dangle from the dock and into the water, looking out at the lake: so still, so friendly, just the same as it had been for all those years before. Always there, never changing...like John. Why did things have to change? Why did he have to go?

I remembered the minutes before, the minutes that had seemed so long, like hours, stretching out one after the other. The minutes when he had told us what he had done. I remembered him standing there in front of me and Mama and Papa, standing tall and strong. His eyes used to twinkle blue even behind his glasses, almost as if they were smiling, but not then. Everything had been so quiet, so silently harsh. His lips had moved slowly, trying to form each word. He had been twitching a bit, ever so slightly, and his brown hair had fallen into his eyes. "You need a hair cut, boy!" Mama had scolded him gently the day before. Now he ran his hands through it and sighed. He looked at me and I could tell he was trying to tell me something. 'I'm sorry, Grace. I really am,' they were saying. I turned my back to him, not trying to show how sad I was.

'You can't go!' I felt like shouting. 'That's not supposed to happen to you!' I had seen it on our little TV, the boys all lined up, lines marching endlessly. I had seen it in the movies and it all seemed so far away, like it would never happen to John. But it had. It had happened. And it was so real and so close.

Across the lake, a lone canoe drifted silently across the water. Alone. I remembered the times where John and I had paddled across that same lake, laughing and telling each other stories. I remembered him teaching me how to use the paddle, how he gently showed me the twisting and pulling motions. And now, when he left, I would be alone. I felt footsteps thudding against the dock. Trying not to look up, I splashed my feet noisily. 'Go away,' I felt like saying. 'I know who you are.' The footsteps stopped

and John sat himself beside me and stared out at the lake. There was a brief silence. Neither of us wanted to be the first to talk.

“Grace,” John began, hesitantly. I nodded. “I’m sorry,” he mumbled, looking into my eyes. I looked away.

“How could you!” I almost whispered. “You’re the only brother I have!” I felt tears trying to squeeze their way out of my eyes. I closed them tightly. “I don’t want you to go!” John looked hurt. I regretted the words I had said. They were words full of self pity and selfishness. He squinted, looking into my eyes through his thick glasses.

“I’m sorry, Grace,” he said again. “But it wasn’t my choice.” I knew this was true. He would never have wanted to go somewhere away from us to kill people in a foreign country. He had never liked playing war games; he wasn’t like that. I knew as well as he did that he had nothing to do with being picked. It was just the lucky birthday draw.

“Stupid, stupid war,” I muttered.

“Come off it, Grace. All the guys are going. I just can’t *not* go.” I could see John was getting upset. This was the last thing I wanted to see. He was my brother, my only brother and he was more than that. Nothing like that could ever come between us.

“Sorry, John,” I tried to smile. “I’m really sorry.” We sat there for a while, just the two of us. The sky darkened and was dusted with stars. It reminded me of when we were little and we used to camp outdoors, when the crickets would sing in the bushes and the fireflies would dash around us. I tried not to think that we may never be able to do that again, that I would be alone to hear the crickets sing and watch the fireflies and see the heavens slowly fill up with shining stars. The air began to cool. I crossed my arms, trying not to shiver as goose bumps crawled up over them. John rubbed his hands together.

“It’s getting cold,” he said, getting up. The dock tipped a little and small water spiders began clambering up from the cracks in the wooden boards. “C’mon, let’s go inside.” He helped me up. I could barely see the outline of his face in the darkness. The moonlight was reflecting off his glasses. Together we stumbled up the bushy trail that led to our cabin. We could see the lights glowing warmly from the cabin windows, casting long shadows on the weathered clapboard siding and the small deck. I tried not to wonder

if it would be the last time we walked this path together. We clambered up the steps and opened the door. A fire was beginning to die down in the stove. Papa sat reading a paper in his favourite armchair, his glasses perched on the end of his nose. Mama was washing up a few of the remaining supper dishes. Everything was just as it should have been. Everything was normal. And yet everything was not. There was a *presence* of something that was not supposed to be. It could not be drowned out, not by the fire, not by Mama's singing, not by the normalcy of it all. It was the feeling of knowing that it was the last night together with John. It was a feeling that hung in the air like thick fog. Through all the usual rituals of good nights and sleep tights, I knew everyone was sharing the feeling I had; the feeling of dread for the morrow. I hugged John tightly before I was tucked in bed, never wanting to let go. "Good night," I said at last.

"Sleep tight," he smiled, then together we finished "And don't let the bed bugs bite!" I tried to chuckle as I usually did, but it came out sort of scratchy and more like a hiccup. He ruffled my hair, then turned off the lights. As I lay there in the darkness, I wondered if that would be the last time I would see him. "Don't let the bed bugs bite," I whispered to myself. Who would say that to me every time I went to bed when John was gone? I began to think of the loneliness without him there. The empty hours after school before Mama and Papa came home from work, the long months at the cabin without John there. I thought of Mama and Papa and how it would feel to see their only son go off to war. And I wondered if he would ever come home.

Out in the hall, the lights turned off, enveloping the house in pitch darkness. It was a lonely darkness. I felt like rushing up to John's room and asking him to comfort me, but I knew he needed to be well rested for the next day. From downstairs, I could hear a soft snoring and I realized that everyone was asleep. I was alone. Turning on the bed side lamp, I scrambled out of bed and pulled away the curtains from the window. The only thing I could see was my own reflection on a black background. I noticed how small and thin I looked. My blue eyes seemed big and my face seemed pale. I wondered if other people saw me like this, so little and so vulnerable. I wondered how I would be after John left. Would he recognize me if I changed? I got into my covers again and pulled them up to my cheeks. Before long, I fell asleep.

The sky was still dark. The sun's rays had not yet broken through. Something stirred in the house. Quickly I opened my eyes and jumped out of bed. Darting down the stairs, I hoped it was John that I had heard. I wondered if we could sit by the dock once more and just talk about stuff. I arrived in time to see John closing his bedroom door fully dressed with a big pack on his back. Outside I could hear a faint rumbling of the starting of an engine. "John," I said, all thoughts of sleep vanishing from my mind. "Are you going now?" He smiled half-heartedly.

"Yup," he said. "Dad's got the old truck warmed up. It's time to say good-bye."

"Au revoir, you mean," I tried to smile back.

"Yeah, au revoir, I guess," he said. I hugged him tightly and burrowed my nose into his shirt. It smelt like outdoors and camp fire. "I'll miss you, Grace," he told me seriously. I nodded.

"So will I." I watched him walk out the screen door and open the car door. I heard the slam and then the sound of the big rubber wheels against the dirt road. But I couldn't bring myself to see it.

The day wore on. It was sunny and hot outside and the sky was a deep blue with hardly a wisp of cloud. I sat on the dock for several hours, alone, just thinking about John. Mama and Papa had both driven in to Boston with him and left me alone until they came back late that night. I wondered if he was thinking of me. I wondered if he knew how much I would miss him. I thought of our conversation the night before and how I deeply regretted the mean things I had said then. But it had all been true. I had spoken nothing but the truth, the selfish truth. I wondered what he was doing. Had he already lined up for the tests? Was he already saying good-bye to Mama and Papa? I let the sun scorch my back and felt it burning my unprotected skin. I splashed the cool water on my face and legs, watching the little beads tumble down my skin, soothing and refreshing it. Time wore on. The early morning turned to late afternoon. I heard the loon call out once again through the stillness of the summer evening. I wondered if John would ever hear that haunting loon call again. Once again the sun set playing out its splendid colours in the sky. But I hardly noticed it. Nothing was the same as it had been, everything was so different. Would it always be like this? My only brother was gone, my best friend was

gone. I felt lost and afraid of what would happen to me. But that, I realized too late, was another selfish thought. Soon darkness spread over the vast Massachusetts sky. An owl hooted from a nearby tree, the lake waters were still. I felt a thump on the deck. Thinking it was a squirrel, I looked away. The thumping came closer. I turned around. Some figure shifted by the edge of the dock. Through the shadows I could see the outline of a head, of arms and legs. I could see a mass of unruly hair, and a smile and, although I couldn't see it, I knew that there were behind the darkness two twinkling blue eyes staring back at me. Smiling, I got up quickly. "Mom's right," I said. "You need a hair cut." The figure laughed. It was John and he was back. For good.

We walked back to the cabin, quiet, just happy to be together. I took his big hand in mine. All my loneliness had fled away. I was filled with comfort and happiness. My brother wasn't gone; he was here and he would stay.

"I'm a pretty lucky boy," he chuckled slightly. He told me of getting to Boston and going to a big building where hundreds of boys and men were lined up, being tested before they were told where they'd go and when they'd leave. "The whole room was choking in heat and sweating bodies. And the waiting was the worst. We had to wait, for hours. Some of these guys were carrying piles of papers recording sport injuries so that they wouldn't have to go. But that didn't really matter. And then, they called my name and they took me into this room. They gave me a series of tests and everything was going as planned, and then they gave me a sight test." He stopped for a while and chewed on a blade of grass.

"What happened then?" I asked eagerly. He began walking again. I tried my best to not drag behind.

"Then they took me aside. I had failed the sight test! I guess you can't have someone as blind as a bat groping around in the jungle!" I waited for him to continue. "So they said I couldn't fight." I smiled to myself.

"Aren't you going to miss it? The fighting and all that?" John shook his head gravely.

"I couldn't bring myself to point a tree stick at someone, how could I bring myself to pull the trigger of a real gun?"

We continued up the narrow dirt path. John walked up to the cottage door and held it open for me. I blinked in the light and walked in. Papa was already reading the newspaper in his favourite armchair; his glasses perched on the tip of his nose. Mama was singing to herself as she flew about the kitchen. John smiled at me. Everything was as it should be. Everything was normal again. I smiled back.