

The Center of Another Universe

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I'm driving a little too fast through a whomping electrical storm, fighting an urge to roll down all my windows. It's my big brother's fault, my thunder and lightning-loving, long-gone brother. He would see one brewing and jump in the car and be gone, driving around in the rain, doing godknowswhat. I have this mental image of a dark, brooding storm out my upstairs bedroom window, and below, the shadow of him sprinting to his old yellow Chevy, roaring away just to roar.

Rick, the only boy in a gaggle of Rutledge girls, was 19 when it happened. Home from his freshman year at Vanderbilt, big college man, he'd grown into my father's looks. It was the summer after my freshman year, too, in high school, and I'd just gotten my learner's driving permit. I'd ridden with my mother all the way from our tiny Texas town to Nashville in our brand-new Buick to bring him home, driving some stretches of highway myself. When you're 15, and your mother has let you drive on actual highways, all you can think about is cars, cars, and more cars. I watched my brother's every move as he drove us back home. So, during the first summer storm in June, when he went running for his car, I did, too, and he let me ride along, slip-sliding away. This is my memory of him, hands on the wheel, smart-ass grin, riding in the rain. With me. He had a date for a July 4th party in nearby Dallas, so he washed and waxed that midnight-blue Buick to a high sheen. It would have been much more appropriate if it had been a bolt of lightning that killed him. Instead, he died that clear sky night on the way home, fell asleep at the wheel and drove into the concrete embankment of a highway overpass.

In the wee-hour dark after midnight, as the phone began to ring and the cars began to pull into the driveway, their headlights flashing through the house's dark rooms like white sirens, I learned how long it can be until dawn. My aunt and uncle were there to be with us while our parents endured all the minutiae that must be handled when someone dies, no matter how young, no matter how world-shattering. But my little sisters needed more "with" time than I did. I was caught somewhere in between, and I recall the feeling as a sense of floating. I won't see my parents for hours, and when I do, I notice that they cannot look at me. I see myself standing, sitting, waiting, in the dark, being shuffled here, there, long gaps of time with no sound. I hear whispering. I feel out of place, in any place, wrong, in just being alive.

Somehow the dark turned into day, and the images blur with the view from the top of the staircase where I perched all morning:

The house full of church ladies carrying casserole dishes for a mourning feast only

they will eat.

Our Baptist pastor straining a stomach muscle to say something profound and failing. All the coming and going through the front hallway, screen door slapping.

The sensation of feeling every slap as if it were across my face.

And the rough epiphany of the whispers floating up to me, that adults know next to nothing, and the ones who don't know they don't know are the ones who'll teach you comfort theology. And in that place at the top of the stairs, I stayed and stayed and stayed, so I wouldn't have to mind my manners with the church people discussing "God's will." Even then, I knew God was bigger than that, harder than that, and miles more mysterious than that, knew it suddenly and irrevocably and young.

Sometime during the day, my friends will visit, caught up in the drama. One will tell me that her tough, railroad mechanic father, after volunteer-fireman duty helping with the wreck, had stood in her bedroom's doorframe and mumbled: "It was the Rutledge boy." Another will tell me that she heard it on the radio, as if that were exciting, as if he had gained celebrity the hard way. I will be relieved when they go, watching them from my upstairs window.

With visions of firemen and radio bulletins, I recall picking up a joke book and reading it, to be anywhere but there, even for a moment. And I am strangely embarrassed by the memory, now, as if it were somehow wrong not to be mature enough to weep and wail—to be old enough to know what was happening but too young to know exactly what to do with it.

Later that day, "viewing time" was announced. For the funeral, the casket would be closed; for the family viewing time, though, it would be open. The adults began to move toward the door and then remembered us.

"Shall we let the girls go?" my father mumbled.

"No. Not the way he looks," my mother answered.

Hearing that, I recall freezing up, imagining the way my brother looked, then not being able to stop imagining.

"Lynda...."

Mother was staring at me, about to give me the grown-up choice. I didn't want it. I knew, if I went, it would be my memory of him. I also knew I would do anything they asked me to.

Then, suddenly, they made the decision for me and were gone.

I can see my parents in that freeze-frame moment, poised at the door, dressed in their best black. How old were they? If I count up the years, the parents looking back at me were in their forties. Whatever their age, though, they were much older than they were the day before.

After that moment, I have no other memories of my parents that day. In fact, I have no memory of my sisters, either, nor they of me. I know that my older sister and her new husband had driven in; I know that my little sisters were in the house. I can't picture any of them. It was as if we were all on our own, revolving somehow around the center of something that had been knocked out of orbit, and taking us all with it, careening wildly, silently into the darkness.

I once read that scientists cannot prove that each of us is not the center of the universe. While we know logically that such a thing can't be true, science cannot prove it in any systematic or cosmological way, since there is nowhere you can go that you aren't there. So even someone else's death can seem to be all about you, almost as if the center of another universe, even a collapsing one, still has you in its gravitational pull.

Over the years since Rick's death, my imagination has never quite escaped the haunting wonder of what might have been, my mind roaming the infinite possibilities of a life with my brother in it:

We became close; I followed him east to college instead of my sister south. We fought over something big and hadn't spoken in years. He introduced me to a man who broke my heart; I introduced him to his first and third wives. He made a killing in the stock market; I let him bankroll my Peace Corps phase. He teased me mercilessly about my love life; I disrespected his serial monogamy. He named his firstborn after me; I returned the favor. The daydreams reel here, there, everywhere, because they can, because the specific universe that included us both no longer has a center.

Throughout my adult life, I have had a recurring dream about my brother—that we find him miraculously, but that he's not quite "right," that he doesn't recognize us, that he acts bizarre. The dream has tapered off with the years but not its impact. A few weeks ago, with Rick on my mind, I decided finally to tell the dream to my psychologist sister. "So," I asked, "what do you think?"

She answered in the roundabout way to the truth of all psychologists: "Well, all I can say is that the dream is not about Rick but about you."

Perhaps that was it. The Rick we found was never quite right because my family was never again quite right. And nothing, not even a re-appearance of my brother, could

change it back. In the South, after a death in the family, drapes were once placed over each clock face throughout the house. I understand that gesture now. Time stopped, even as it continued on.

Before leaving my perch on the upstairs landing that morning after Rick's accident, I had heard one last vivid pair of voices, floating up from downstairs.

"How can you go on?" I heard a church friend say to my mother.

"I have to," came my mother's brusque reply. "I have to be strong for the children."

Then I heard the church friend finally murmur, "Yes. Life goes on."

I got my driver's license the next month. A month after that, I saw a very used car on the Chevrolet dealership's car lot, a dented convertible Corvair with only 100,000 miles, and I began visiting it often. Within another month, it was mine and it became a sort of rolling sanctuary. Therapy is anything that works. Their therapy was silence and space and maybe, momentarily, buying something that made a daughter smile again. My therapy was driving, top-down, movement as solace, the wind more soothing than a mother's hand and a thousand sermons, the roads connecting somewhere which connected to somewhere else, highways, slipping through nature, strangely lifting my spirits, making some crooked sense when nothing else did. And I wonder if my lifelong wanderlust may have begun there, for whatever reasons such things begin.

And then there were the thunderstorms. Another sister whose lightning-loving brother had died might have made a point to avoid stormy weather at all costs. But I wanted to hear something, anything, but silence. Because I was still here; because we were all still here.

So when the first thunderstorm appeared after Rick was gone, I recall watching it form in the west, slowly moving toward me where I stood by my beat-up convertible in our driveway. I could hear the clean, deadly, charged sound of lightning in the distance like clear, clean voices. It sounded like my soul felt. For the rest of my life, wherever my wanderlust lands me, the sound will follow, always taking me back to this memory, this storm, as if it were the last intimate moment, somehow, with my big brother. And as the storm came roaring toward me through the house's treetops, I started my little car, and roared, to up, toward it.

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