

My brother had squandered his talents, ruined his health, wasted his life. Or so I thought

Mayor of Denver

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It was long past midnight when the phone rang. I let my husband answer. So many nights I had awakened to late-night phone calls from my older brother, Bill, and listened to him rattle on about the books he was going to write or the countries he was going to visit. But for some reason I knew that this was the call I'd been dreading for over 20 years.

"Molly," my husband said, gently placing the receiver in my hand. "Bill's dead."

It was the Denver coroner on the line. He asked me some questions that I struggled to answer. *It's all over now*, I thought as I hung up. I wished the phone would ring again, that this time it would be the big brother I once knew, the one who'd been a father figure to me after our dad had died. The Bill who had arranged the Christmas presents under the tree, come to the student shows I'd performed in, walked me down the wedding aisle. The Bill who was always showing me his wild abstract oil paintings or his rock collection or pointing out something I'd overlooked—like

a cluster of wildflowers or the silhouette of an eagle against a glorious sunset. I had lost that brother years before that night.

It was back in the 1970s when he returned home to Florida after serving in the Navy and studying art history abroad that Mom and I first noticed something was wrong with Bill. He talked incredibly fast, his eyes darting, and was unable to sit still. The doctors simply gave him tranquilizers; back then less was known about mental illness. As his condition worsened, Bill would go on manic shopping sprees or stay out all night only to crash afterward, sleeping for hours on end. He was hospitalized repeatedly. "The worst is behind us," Mom and I assured each other every time he came home. Bill tried to go back to school for his doctorate. He worked briefly as a youth counselor. But the unexplained illness ruined each new start.

One night I was driving Bill home on our beat-up Volkswagen after his

latest hospital stay. The previous few days he hadn't stopped talking. Now he was utterly silent. He placed his hand over mine on the gearshift. An unspeakable sadness came over me. All the time we were growing up, Bill had guided and encouraged me. Now

he needed me and I couldn't do anything for him. "Why?" he asked me quietly.

"I don't know, Bill," I said, turning away from the desperation I saw in his gaze. "I wish I could help you better. I wish I could make everything all right again." I felt his hand tighten over mine.

Then, shortly after, doctors finally diagnosed Bill as manic-depressive and prescribed lithium. *Maybe now*, I thought. *Maybe now this truly will*

The future "mayor" and Molly in 1950s Denver (top); Molly today

will go back to normal.

Bill took the medicine for a while, then stopped, confident he had a handle on his life again. When it became clear he didn't, I pushed him to get back on the drug.

"It takes the edge off everything," he said. "Leaves me numb."

"Bill, don't you want to get better?"

"I'm sorry, Mol, but I just can't take that stuff."

Why was he choosing to live this way? I just didn't understand. Time and again my pleas fell on deaf ears.

He either didn't or wouldn't recognize he was sick. *God, please make him listen*, I begged. I wanted him to get well so badly. I wanted my big brother back.

One day in the early '80s I got a call informing me Bill was being detained at a county courthouse. He had sneaked out a service door used by baggage handlers at Miami International Airport, then chased a jet taxiing down the runway. At the courthouse, while making arrangements to have Bill committed yet again, I tried to shut out his screams. He was dragging a tin cup back and forth across the bars of the holding cell. As Mom tried to soothe him, the security officers looked on, shaking their heads. *He's not really like this!* I wanted to tell them. *If you only knew him before . . .* I glanced at Mom. "Hon, you just have to calm down," she kept saying to Bill. "It'll be all right."

Things were far from all right. The laws at that time restricted a family's rights to institutionalize a relative. The hospital could only hold Bill for 72 hours. His illness had become more than just bizarre—it was dangerous. This time, I told myself, we would have to make him take the medicine and get some real help. But after his release, Bill announced he was moving to Denver, where we had spent much of our childhood. I knew it was useless to argue with him. As I watched his plane take off, I felt like chasing it down the runway. Now he would be thousands of miles away. *Okay then, God, you'll have to look after him now.*

We kept in touch—letters, phone calls, holiday visits. Bill usually appeared normal when we saw him. He took a job in a library and seemed to be getting along. Then his manic behavior cost him the position. After

that, he gave up and turned to government aid. My arguments with Bill about taking his medication continued, but soon I realized he'd found a medicine of his own—alcohol—something to keep the highs high and deaden the pain of the lows.

In 1988, Bill's landlord called to tell me that Bill had locked himself in his apartment for several days. I immediately flew out to see him. At the top of a flight of stairs strewn with debris I found his apartment. He opened the door warily at the sound of my voice, then let me in. His breath reeked and his eyes were glassy. Dozens of empty liquor bottles, pans of burnt food, and yellowing newspapers were strewn across the floor. Mice rustled between chair legs. Bill cleared a place for me on the couch and sank down beside me, head in his hands.

"Bill, we've got to get you out of here," I said. I braced myself for a fight. But he simply turned to look at me and put his hand in mine. "Okay," he said. Bill too weak to argue? There was no denying it—he was slipping away. I shuddered, feeling my own strength sap as I sat in that wreck of an apartment. "Let's go," I said, helping him up. I took him to a halfway house for drug and alcohol abusers. The only requirement to live there was staying sober. Bill wasn't there for long.

I felt guilty leaving him alone in Denver, constantly faced with the fear and pity in the eyes of people who thought of him as just another drunk. But I had prayed so long for answers that didn't come. I had given all I could; he was God's responsibility now. Still, when my husband and I moved to New Jersey, I made sure Bill and I kept in touch. I told him how Mom had become ill and we had

made the painful decision to put her in a nursing home. He told me about the new apartment he had moved into in a federally subsidized housing project staffed by the Volunteers of America. Always in the back of my mind was my image of who Bill used to be, of who he could have been.

Once when he came to visit us in New Jersey, I pleaded with him, "Why don't you stay here, and maybe you can finally get your bearings?"

He said no. "Don't you want to have a life?" I asked, frustrated.

"I have a life," he responded quietly. "I belong in Denver." He got more stubborn and I got more stern. We did not talk anymore, we battled.

A few years later, Bill fell and broke his kneecap, but refused to have surgery. He got around on crutches. His impromptu visits became shorter, his behavior more unpredictable and disruptive.

The last time Bill made one of his unscheduled visits, I had a baby shower planned for my husband's niece that Saturday. I lied to Bill, telling him we'd be away for the weekend to keep him from showing up. I kept the answering machine on, listening as Bill left message after message, describing the hotel he was staying in and reminding me of his number there. As guilty as I felt, I was more afraid of seeing Bill tattered and feeble, leaning on his crutches. Finally, after our last guest had left Saturday night, I called him. He showed up at 5:00 A.M. Sunday, looking shockingly pale and weary. I agreed to drive him to the airport to catch his flight home.

"You need rest, Bill," I said as we pulled onto the highway. "Let me take you to the hospital." He looked at me then and I was reminded of that night ride in Florida 18 years earlier.

But now his eyes were no longer desperate—they were old and tired. They told me it was too late.

At the airport we stood at the gate, silent and awkward. Then, slowly, haltingly, he began to talk about old friends, about the choices he'd made, about what he had left. "Listen, Mol, all my papers, anything valuable, it's all in the icebox," he said. "You'll find everything there."

"Bill"—I felt a lump rising in my throat—"why are you telling me this?"

"I know how hard you've tried to help me," he said. "Thank you."

"We'll get it right this time, Bill. You see you need help now—you can still change things."

His flight was announced and he hugged me tight. He was so thin and frail I could almost have picked him up. I didn't want to let him go. "Bill . . ." He pulled away and waved good-bye.

That was the last time I saw him alive. Two months later, the morning after the coroner's midnight phone call, I was at that same airport gate again, headed to Denver.

During the flight I closed my eyes and tried to sleep, but the arguments of the past two decades kept swirling through my mind. All of them for nothing. *Why did you let his life go to waste, God?* I asked. *Why didn't you watch out for him?*

My first stop in Denver was the management office at Bill's apartment building. I had assumed they would be angry—Bill had died in his apartment in a fire that started after he fell



The way they were: the siblings at Molly's wedding in 1975

asleep with a lit cigarette. But when I introduced myself, the woman at the front desk immediately smiled and grasped my hand. "You're Bill's sister? I am so sorry," she said. "I just want you to know that all of us here loved him very much. He made us laugh."

Some other young volunteers appeared

and stood in a circle around me, exchanging stories about Bill. I thanked them, but inside I wondered if they really understood my brother. How could they possibly realize how special he had been?

Finally, I excused myself and went up to what was left of Bill's apartment. I walked across the ash-covered floor, thinking back to the shambles of an apartment I had rescued him from years before. Now there was nothing to salvage but his papers. I opened the blackened icebox. Yes, they were just where he'd said, tucked below a stack of TV dinners—military records, funeral arrangements, pawn shop receipts and picture postcards from his travels. On the coffee table lay a box of photographs, untouched by the fire. There were pictures of strangers, of his travels in Europe, of us as kids—and one of Bill, young and handsome, on the deck of a Navy ship, gazing into the distance. I sat and studied them for a long time. Then I carried all of it outside and stood on the sidewalk, staring up at the clear night sky, imagining Bill somewhere among those millions of beads of light.

The next day, before the funeral, I went to see him laid out in his cof-

fin. His hair was long, his teeth stained by decades of smoking, his body ravaged by alcoholism, mental illness and the flames in which he'd perished. No, this was not my brother—not Bill. He felt farther away than ever. *Lord, if I could just feel him with me again . . .*

I went to the cemetery where Bill's service was to be held by the Volunteers of America. When I arrived I found a small crowd. *Who are all these people?* I wondered.

After the sermon one of the volunteers, a young man, stepped forward. "Bill could be stubborn sometimes." *Boy, didn't I know it.* "But despite his own problems, he always had time for his friends. Every day he made the rounds, listening to us talk about our lives, giving advice. The Mayor of Denver, we called him."

One by one, people paid tribute—the lady at the cleaners, bank tellers, the kids who worked at the pawn shop, senior citizens he'd taken shopping, teens he'd helped with their homework. And to all of them he was

the Mayor of Denver! These people actually knew him. *They loved him too.*

Finally, a young social worker spoke. "Bill told me that everyone needs to slow down sometimes and enjoy the moment—without questions or regrets," she said. "He used to say that from the top of the capitol steps in Denver you can see the most glorious sunset you've ever laid eyes on. He always noticed those kinds of things."

That evening I walked up the capitol steps and watched the sun slip behind the skyline, indigo, sienna and crimson shooting out in all directions. Bill hadn't chosen to be sick; what he had chosen, despite his problems, was to reach out to the people around him. Watching the last streaks of color melt into black, I thanked God for looking after my brother, for allowing his life to touch so many others, and for showing me that as long as there are sunsets, Bill would always be with me. ◀