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NON-FICTION | FALL 2017

## The Pull of Gravity

By Janet Cincotta

I don't remember getting sick. I don't recall complaining about a sore throat, or swollen glands, or thick, foul pus collecting in the back of my throat, symptoms I now know herald the onset of strep throat. Still, Mother must have known something was wrong. Perhaps I'd kept her awake all night, fussing for no apparent reason. Maybe I'd stopped eating or drinking because it hurt to swallow. Still, it didn't alarm her until soaring fever and tectonic chills set in. And even then, she didn't call the doctor until the rash appeared, meaning that the sore throat I no longer remember had morphed into a case of rheumatic fever.

Which would explain why nothing helped—not popsicles, not Mother's homemade soup, not the honey and lemon concoction she believed could cure anything, even after she spiked it with a good stiff shot of whiskey. And because this occurred when penicillin was little more than a glimmer on the pharmaceutical horizon, the doctor was worried about my heart.

I don't recall that part of the story, but that's what I've been told.

I do, however, remember when reality set in. When, on a cold, blustery day in March, Mother and Father bundled me off to the hospital. The year was 1952, memorable for the raw wind and stubborn snowflakes that defied the arrival of spring that year. I remember sitting on my mother's lap, bundled against the cold on our way into the city, my father's eyes riveted to the road, my mother gazing at my face as if wondering what else could go wrong.

As fate would have it, she soon found out. Even though I never saw him there, a few days later I learned that my brother, Peter, had also taken ill and that he was somewhere in the

same hospital with the same symptoms—down the hall or around the corner, perhaps. Because I had no reason to believe otherwise, I assumed he was bedridden in a grim ward just like mine, a children’s ward whose walls were blank except for a lone crucifix above the door that proclaimed, “Pain to all who enter here.” A ward where unrelenting monotony was interrupted only by suffering or the anticipation of it. Where shadows prowled the halls at night and the silence was broken only by the whimpering and wailing of children with nothing but the agony of Christ for consolation.

Because I was too young to know otherwise, I imagined everything was the same for my brother, so when the ordeal ended for me, I assumed it was over for him. When the doctor announced that I was well enough to go home, I expected him to go home, too. But, for reasons I didn’t understand, we left him behind. No one told me why. No one ever spoke of it, and I was too young to ask.

Fifty years passed before Peter and I shared our thoughts about that time in our young lives. We’d drifted apart over the years. I stayed up north; he moved south. I studied medicine; he studied engineering. I bore three children; he raised two. Separated, as life would have it, by time, distance, and happenstance, we’d become strangers.

It wasn’t until Mother’s health, and with it, her memory failed that my brother and I reunited in order to share the decisions we needed to make regarding her care. It wasn’t until after we’d settled her in a nearby nursing facility, and put the old house up for sale, that we finally spoke.

We’d spent the week sorting through her possessions, and with them, our childhood memories. We packed away the bone china she brought out just for company, the silverware she polished by hand and stored in blue velvet bags, and the lace doilies she’d crocheted by

hand. We repotted the violets that thrived on the eastern windowsill in the kitchen because there, she insisted, she could talk to them during the day. We paged through tattered photo albums of relatives we didn't know and places we didn't recognize. Finally, we boxed everything up and ordered it all into storage like warm woolen coats with the arrival of spring.

At the end of the week, we sat on the front steps of our empty childhood home and popped open a bottle of good red wine. We raised our glasses and congratulated ourselves on a tough job well done. Peter took a sip, rested his head against the splintered railing, and there he broke his silence.

I don't remember what got us started, but something sent us back in time. Perhaps we'd found a photo of us together as children—Peter looking thin and frail, me standing tall and strong. Maybe it was the piece of Wedgewood with the chip in it, and Peter's reluctant confession that took us back. Perhaps the thought of turning another page in the Book of Life sent us back to revisit an earlier chapter.

Not until that night did I learn how gravely ill my brother had been when we were in the hospital together, how close to death he'd come, and how he'd suffered through all of his childhood and all of his adult life because of what had happened there.

On the porch steps that evening, he told me how he'd coughed up blood when he was sick. He was sure that he was going to die when the doctors ordered Mother out of his room. The nurse took her by the arm and led her away, pleading to stay, weeping with fear. He was certain that he was about to die because no one said a word to him about it. He could read the alarm in their eyes, and hear the panic in their voices, but no one explained to him how something like that could happen, or what it might mean, and he was afraid to ask. Instead, he suffered in silence, in confusion, in terror, and he never let it show.

Until my brother spoke to me that night, no one knew what it was like for him when he was alone with his thoughts as a child, when he was left to wonder how long he had to live, why no one prepared him for death, why no one seemed to care. None of us knew how fear and dread were chiseled into his heart like the epitaph he believed would appear on his gravestone the day I left the hospital without him.

As the sun set behind us that night, my brother described the relief that washed over him like a passing shower on a summer day when his cough subsided and his breathing improved until he was well enough to leave the hospital. He told me how relief turned to ash when he learned that he would be kept in bed, in the dark, on his back, without visitors for a full year in order to rest his weakened heart when he came home.

As darkness fell that night, my brother told me how relief had turned to disappointment, disappointment to sorrow, and sorrow to despair. To sadness, like the pull of gravity. Down.

He stayed down when the doctor allowed him to sit up in bed and Mother opened the blinds so that sunlight flooded his room for the first time. When he went outdoors for the first time, felt sunshine on his face, and inhaled fresh air, sweet and heavy with lilac and honeysuckle, he stayed down. When he returned to school where the bullies taunted him because he couldn't run, or throw a ball, or make it up a flight of stairs by himself, he stayed down.

The way he explained it to me that night, part of him never emerged from the depths of despair, confusion, and fear he felt as a child because he didn't understand what was happening to him. He taught me how mindful you must be when you care for children who are ill. You may not discover until it is too late that something you said, or something you did,

or that something you failed to say or do, left your young patient with an enduring sense of dread, an expectation of impending doom.

Until Peter told me about it, no one knew what it was like for him to have been in and out of recovery, in and out of therapy, and on and off medication all of his adult life because of what happened to him in the hospital when he was only five-years old, and I was only four. I was too young to have understood it then, too little to have helped. And, now that I know, it's too late.

Peter and I grew up in the same family. We lived in the same house, ate at the same kitchen table, and played in the same back yard. How is it, then, that memories of the same illness, at the same time, in the same place followed Peter through life like a swarm of angry bees while mine took flight like a balloon on a breeze?

Are our lives at the mercy of mysterious, random forces as indifferent as fate, or luck, or chance? How is it decreed who will be the victim, who the victor, and why? Who will be the patient, who the healer, and why? Are we simply abandoned without hope to contemplate the purpose of pain, to question the reason for suffering, and to pay the price of silence?

How are we to understand the forces that propelled one of us into the lifelong study of medicine, the other into a lifelong quest for healing?

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