Death and His Brother, Sleep

Martha Skyrms*

*Iowa State University

Copyright ©1975 by the authors. *Sketch* is produced by The Berkeley Electronic Press (bepress). http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/sketch
I GUESS I’ve known Bruce and his family all my life. That is, I can’t remember a time when I didn’t know them. It is the same with the Brodnick family and the Midstokkes and the Kaneys. It is a matter of having spent lots of Christmases and vacations together.

Always in the cold, crisp days just before Christmas, we bundle up warm and dash chattering out into the icy air. We sing carols and sometimes it snows and the flakes are thick and wet on our red faces and we sing in all colors of mittens and hats in the soft night. It is very gentle and Christmas then. We race home through the white soft night and drink hot cider. There is a fire and we eat too many Christmas cookies. The house is warm and chattering happy beneath a sparkling, a shimmering tree.

And always in the muggy heat of August we pack up cars with swim suits and fish poles and take off for camp. I don’t know just how many summers we have spent there, but always the same families go and we are very close and it is very fine.

The camp is a beautiful place. Serene and silent, unmoved by the noisy splashing and happy laughing that echoes across the water. She is old, that lake, eternal. The trees grow right down to the water, tall pines and silvery birches. The smell of the place is rich, thick with pine needles and the light scent of birches and clean water, but mostly with the smell of trees and the soft, needles, rotting floor of the forest.

In the morning it is always chilly until noon, and the sun dances blue on the water. We spend these hours fishing or canoeing across the lake into the swamp. Our mothers try to find a sunny place to spend these morning hours, playing Perquacky or bridge, and our fathers relax in the boats and read. At noon, the bell rings for lunch. We
all gather in the lodge and one of us says grace. It is a very pleasant time. Afternoons are spent long and lovely on the beach, swimming or floating on rubber rafts. Always, if there is any wind at all, the bright yellow sails of the little boats bob for hours out on the sparkling water. As the afternoon progresses the sun gets lazy and we are all warm and lying on the dock and there is the murmur of a bridge game and an occasional yell and splash from the raft. One of our fathers goes up to the lodge and brings down Pepsis and candy bars. We are very close, and it is very fine.

Perhaps the best summer was the one following ninth grade. There were five of us, later called the fabulous five, who spent our long, lazy days together, sitting on the dock, pushing each other off the raft, dunking each other, playing cards and listening to the radio. How our parents must have smiled at us then, for we were young, and flirted with intensity. One night after supper, when the evening was just beginning to be dusky, we all went out in a rowboat. Bruce sat in the stern with a megaphone shouting directions to Barb on the right oar and me on the left. Scott and Paul lounged in the bow, laughing. Our laughter rang across the lake, and we were splashy and silly and rowing in circles with Bruce standing in the stern waving his arms and shouting.

"Avast ye maties, pirate island next right. No, next right. Right at the stop light, my mates."

And once after dinner, our parents were so tired of noisy children that they sent us to the dump in the camp truck to see the bears. The fabulous five sat together and made a terrible racket so that no bears could possibly have been brave enough to venture out. On the ride home we all snuggled together because it was cold, and we sang. They were quiet songs that we had learned as campers,

"'Gonna ask my brother to come with me..."

The trees brushed the side of the truck softly as we drove. The truck rocked us back and forth, sleepy. And one night the five of us had a campfire on the beach. The water was still, it is always very still at night, and the stars were out. We talked all quiet of things that were important to us
then. The fire burned down to embers and we were
snuggled close and safe; our parents were there and we
were there and would always be there and together.

It was near the end of May last year that they told me
that Bruce had been taken to Mayo’s and that what was
wrong was possibly very wrong. He was having trouble
seeing, my mother said, tunnel vision and blacking out.
He hadn’t told anyone for a long time, until it was very
serious. She tried to be gentle, and she tried to be kind, but
her voice wasn’t right, and something in my throat sank
heavy to my stomach and sat there for a very long time. I
bit my tongue, and everything in me tightened against the
world.

A few days later I came home from school for the
summer. That night after dinner, we were sitting on the
porch, and it was lovely. The trees in the back yard were
full and rich and green and blowing quietly. The evening
was just beginning to be soft. Mr. Knecht came over. He
was just out walking, he said. I got him some iced tea.

“How’s Bruce?”

“Well, he’s fine. You know he’s quitting smoking, and
he’s down to one cigarette a day now. I’m going up
tomorrow. Marilyn got an apartment right by the
hospital. We don’t know how long he’ll be there, but he’s
real cheerful and he can do about anything he wants to
do.”

“That’s fine.”

“Yes, and the doctors are very kind. They’re just
wonderful, and they don’t know anything yet, but they
took a brain scan, and they’ll take another one in about
three months, and then they’ll know just how bad things
are.”

He looked small and tired. He hadn’t touched his iced
tea.

“You know, Bruce passed all his courses. He passed
them. He had to read every word separately, one at a
time, covering all the other words on the page so he could
focus on that one word, and he passed.”

Victory.
"Bruce always was determined."
"Yes."
"I remember when we used to tie him in his crib at night and then one or two hours later, out he would march, the little blond rascal, without his pajama pants, but out of the crib just the same."
I could see that.
"He was always determined; once he wanted something, he got it."
"Yes."
"I remember ... and I remember ... and yes." He talked for a long time and he was far away.
The brain tumor was inoperable. They put in a shunt which drained the liquid off, and Bruce began to be better. He could see again. He got to come home, and it was fine and happy. We put up a sign that said, Welcome Home, Bruce, and he was very happy to be home.
The summer sped after that. Bruce was working at the airport, and I was busy with work and a college theatre production. It was a lovely sunny and hot summer. A golfing and swimming summer.
We were all going to be at camp again. Greg Brodnick was coming from Boston, and Steve Knecht was coming from California. We would all be there. The Knechts were coming late because their youngest son, David, had a baseball game. Bruce and Scott and Paul were leaving early for school. There had been a few days when we didn't think that Bruce would be able to go to camp or to school. That was his goal, to go back to school. If he could do that, then he would win another victory. He got an infection and they sent him back to Mayo's. I was angry then.
"My God, mother, you just assume the worst is going to happen. You talk about praying. You hope he'll get well. But you don't believe it. You have no faith. How can you talk about praying when you have no faith?"
"Now honey, there are things you come to accept when you are older. When I was young I lost several of my friends in the war. They were young, and they had their
lives ahead of them. God gives us strength to stand these things."

"Well hell, Bruce is going to be all right."

"I hope so."

The next day the infection was gone and Bruce was home again. I’d known it. He was going to camp and to school and I knew, I knew, I knew that it would be all right in the end.

Camp was perhaps even more beautiful than before. The days were all sunny and sparkling and warm. We had beautiful sailing and swimming weather. The nights were long and warm around a campfire or in the lodge. Those days in that place were sweet and rich. I cherished each moment as it melted toward the time when we would leave again.

We were lying on the dock just after lunch. It was a perfect day. We were warm and drowsy, and our mothers were already chattering over their bridge game and the youngest of us were already splashing in the blue water. The trees were deep green and softly blowing. We found someone to drive the boat and lined up to go skiing. The water was cold, cold when we jumped from the dock and splashed to the raft. While waiting for our turn to ski, we threw each other off the raft and our bodies were strong and slick with suntan oil and cold water. We skied triple, crossing back and forth and changing ropes and finally letting someone else take a turn. We splashed back to the raft, and Bruce was there in his suit waiting to ski. We hadn’t seen him in his suit before. He was thin and pale. His shaved head made him seem even thinner. His bones were all too big, and he was so clean and white. And my God, he was dying. He put on his skis with thin arms and shivering from the cold he jumped into the water and Mrs. Knecht was watching and trying not to watch. And we were all brown and chunky and healthy and the boat took off and he was up and oh thank God but his white legs were shaking and he fell and then he was too weak to get up again. Mrs. Knecht swallowed and kept playing bridge. And Bruce said he guessed he was just too weak still but
the water sure felt good. And he went to change his clothes and his mother said be sure and put on something warm and he said oh yea.

He could fool you and he did. I suppose when I first saw him at camp I knew he was ill. His shaved head made his eyes much more blue and intense. He was thin, but he had been in the hospital for so long. He was sharp though. He was as quick as we were with charades and password and bridge. But, his body didn’t lie. And my God, he knew it. He’d never ski again and never be at camp again and soon would not be with us and still his parents played bridge and sent him to school and played the game his way.

Then he came to say goodbye and we were still lying motionless in the sun. David was splashing around in an innertube.

"Hey, Dave."
"Yea."
"Listen, behave yourself, OK?"
"Yea, sure."
"Don’t you talk back to Mom or Dad. And hey, help them out once in a while, huh?"
"Well . . ."
"Listen Dave, don’t mess around too much either, get some good grades. School is pretty important ya know."
"Yeah."
"I’ll bet you that I get better grades than you."
"OK what’ll ya bet?"
"One super big chocolate milkshake."
"Yea, OK."
"You better remember this and make good when I come back."
"I will."
"OK."

They shook hands. I had never seen them do that before.

He was fine at school. He went to class and made the best grades. He worked at the airport and judged the fly-in. He was very busy. When his mother went down to see
him, she stayed an extra day because Bruce was too busy to spend time with her. And then it was fine and it was going to be all right again. We won. We had won. I knew it would turn out all right.

Except his roommates were feeding him dry bread before meals to help him keep food down. Sometimes they couldn’t wake him up and sometimes it took his a long time to walk home from class. His father went down for father’s weekend and the next Monday Bruce was at Mayo’s again. He stayed only a day and went back to school. His father spoke to his roommates alone.

“‘The tumor is malignant and Bruce, well, well you’ve seen him at his best.’”

Silence.

“‘He will still be going to class and working as much as he can if I know Bruce, but it will be harder for him. We want him to stay here as long as he wants to.’”

Silence.

“‘We hope,’” he paused and his eldest son was gripping his shoulder and the roommates were huddled close together and touching, “‘we hope he’ll be able to finish the semester. His grandparents will be coming then. Thank you for being good to Bruce.’”

And his roommates called home that night, needing their parents, needing someone to make everything all right again. And they sobbed on the phone, young and breaking. Then they were strong again.

They brought him home from school last night. He’d been sleeping for three days. He ate a little bit when he got home and went to bed. They had to help him get into the house. Mom said isn’t he glad to be home and Mrs. Knecht said, yes, yes, he is so very glad, so very glad to be home again.

I am home for Thanksgiving and I go to see him. He is asleep and I don’t want to wake him. It is fine this, it is easy and we are thankful that he won’t lie all sterile in the hospital with tubes. He’s weak, he doesn’t know the things his body can no longer do. He lies in his room, withered and pale. Records we have played together are stacked
neatly by his stereo and there is no pile of discarded blue jeans on the floor. His shaved head makes him seem young, very young.

I sit by the bed until it is late and the golden rosy light of late afternoon comes in the window. It is not fair. I am against the world bitter, and would break it for them, would smash it for them, for Bruce being able to waterski, for his being able to finish the semester, for his parents and roommates that they could weep and scream and cry in bitterness, that they could stop being strong. But there is nothing to do but sit and watch the lazy sun, aware of the aborted promise and to bend and press my damp face against his and know that he doesn’t hear me say the things I say, to shiver with the warmth of his body, knowing I cannot feel it again, and to walk home slow through the fallen leaves, swearing that I will never, I will never be resigned, I will never, God damn it, never.