



DUNCAN GREEN

A Boy Named Candy

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WEST WHATELY CHAPEL is a stone's throw from my childhood home. It sits in front of an earthen dike that holds back the old reservoir, which used to serve Northampton. Growing up, my siblings and I were aware of the enormous volume of water contained there. We knew that if the dam broke, our house would be swept away. It was tangible evidence of something we already felt: that we were never really safe.

There is a new reservoir now, much larger, and a new dam, huge and modern, made of stone and concrete. But the old reservoir is still there, placid and dark. The simple white chapel, with its stained-glass windows, potbellied stove (the only heat source in winter), and boarded-up, old-fashioned john, is used mostly for weddings and funerals. Both my sister Dereka and I got married there, and we're having our brother Brian's funeral there today.

One March day a few years ago (coincidentally on the thirtieth anniversary of my mother's death) I went to the funeral of a friend at West Whately Chapel. There was a freak blizzard that morning. En route, I took Ambien and drank vodka, and I blacked out at the podium and fell. Later I stole some pills from a neighbor's house and nearly died of an overdose. I remember nothing but fragments of it, splinters of being at the chapel and shards of the ambulance ride, then larger pieces of waking on a gurney at the hospital, and finally the shame, whole and complete, buckets of it, like the dirty snow piled up in the hospital parking lot. Some of the same people will be present today at Brian's funeral, and I am hoping to redeem myself in some small way.

I get off to a poor start. My daughter and I arrive late. The chapel is full, but there are seats saved for us up front. People are standing next to the potbellied stove in back. My sister Dereka is at the podium.

It is a modern service, no minister or Bible to be found. This is how some of us grieve at the beginning of the twenty-first century: no God, just memories of the deceased, proclamations of earthly love, and half-formed ideas of what lies beyond. (Light, mostly.) It is almost pagan. We burned Brian with a picture of his children and a pack of Camels. We would have sent him off with his tools, but they weren't allowed in the crematory.

Many of the mourners are from the commune Brian joined when he was twenty-two and left when he was thirty. As far as I can tell, that was the peak of his existence, the most productive time of his life. After he left the commune, he had ten more pretty-good years, and then it was all downhill.

I am glad the commune members are here, for their memories of my brother hearten me and help me remember what stunning raw material he was. The other mourners are mostly family, and we are more jaded, for we saw the downward slide. Still, we reach back and remember.

I have managed so far to contain my tears, which have been abundant these last couple of weeks. I'm going to read a poem, and I don't want my eye makeup to run. But then my sister Tamar stands and shares this memory:

One day when Brian was six and she was about three, they ran away. She thinks it was because my mother told them they

couldn't have spaghetti for supper, but there must have been something more than that, because they walked three miles, Brian pulling Tammy (we always called her Tammy then; she hates that name now) in a little red wagon. The road was dirt, and the wheels must have bumped over the loose rocks. Brian carried his belongings in a bandanna tied to a stick, just like a hobo. He brought a can of tuna fish and a knife.

What Tammy remembers most, she says, is that she cast in her lot with Brian without reservation; she trusted him utterly, because he took care of her. Our mother was too tired and too overwhelmed, always wondering where the next meal was coming from. By then she had four children: Dereka, Brian, Tamar, and me, the baby — a fussy, floppy baby. (And homely, my mother used to say. Her first homely baby.) So Brian became Tammy's mother. He fed her. He washed her face. He even changed her. And for some reason, she doesn't know why, she called him Candy.

I hadn't known that. It pierces my heart. Candy. Of course. Because Candy was the best thing in the world. We seldom had it, because our mother said sugar was bad for our teeth. But it tasted so good. So sweet. The best thing. Candy.

Eye makeup or no, the tears come. My daughter pats my shoulder and holds my hand, but she's sensible about such things and doesn't try to stop me — which is good, because there is no stopping it. It's like the reservoir in spring, when the water used to rise over the lip of concrete and roar into the spillway.

More people get up and share their memories. A man from the commune tells of being assigned to help shingle the roof of a dormitory. He was a city kid, and being so high up gave him the willies. He was holding on for dear life when he looked up and saw a maniac dancing down the ridgeline with a bale of shingles on his shoulder, laughing and singing. That was Brian.

Another man tells how he and Brian were in a boat off the coast of Maine when a fog rolled in, and they suddenly had no idea in which direction the shore lay. They hadn't brought a radio and were at least five miles from land, but Brian didn't panic. Somehow he figured out which way to go. Maybe it was how the waves broke, or the wind. What this man remembers is that Brian showed no fear, just calm acceptance.

IN BRIAN'S LAST FIVE YEARS, I often wished he were dead. By then he was an end-stage alcoholic, and they are nothing but trouble. He'd been hospitalized numerous times, had lost part of a lung, had overdosed, had gotten pneumonia, and, five months before he died, had washed up at my sister's house in Arlington, Virginia, still smoking, still drinking (drunk, in fact), half dead with pneumonia and pulmonary disease and wanting her to help him finish the job. She called me, the nurse in the family, and I explained how to make him comfortable. I reminded my sister that she had both Ativan and Vicodin in her medicine cabinet. (Because I am the family's medical consultant, my siblings always tell me what they've been prescribed, and because I'm an addict, I always listen carefully.) She gave him both pills, and he calmed down and slept. When he awoke,

he decided he didn't want to die just then, so my sister took him to a doctor, who gave him Ativan to try to get him off the booze. My sister emptied her house of alcohol, but Brian drank Listerine and then went to the nearby store for beer.

Finally Brian's long-suffering girlfriend came down from Massachusetts to help out, and he did get sober for a few months and even went to South Carolina to work. I don't know much about those last months, only that I was glad he was far away from me. There was nothing to be done, I felt. All the words had been said, the rehabs paid for, the bail put up, the calls taken, the tears shed, the prayers uttered. If it was time for him to return to the soil, so be it.

He did get through to me once on the phone, right before I left to go on vacation. He was sick and needed medical advice. He said he couldn't eat, his urine was the color of Coca-Cola, and his stool was white. I wasn't sure right away what his constellation of symptoms meant. (I've been strictly a psychiatric nurse for a while.) At first I thought, *Liver*; but Brian said the doctor had told him his liver was OK. I said that if it wasn't his liver, then he'd better have his pancreas checked.

Before we hung up, I reached deep down to try to find the bountiful love I'd had for him as a girl, but I could not find it. So, being a nurse, I said, "Take care of yourself. Stay off the booze. Eat good food. But stay off the booze — that's the most important thing." He assented weakly. At the time I thought he was sober.

Then I went on my vacation, and one of the places my boyfriend Peter and I stopped was at the home of an old friend of my parents. V. had been in a commune with my parents back in 1946, in Jamaica, Vermont. Some of the people in the commune had trust funds, and some did not. Some had to live off the food from their gardens, and some did not. My parents and V. did not have trust funds.

I am always seeking to untangle the mystery of my family's pain, so when I meet people who knew my parents before I was born, I pump them for information, trying to understand what may have occurred to damage them — and us — so severely. V. said my mother was continually leaving my father, storming down the road with her children trailing along at her heels. Mother would tell V. how she was going to move to New York, or Boston, or Tierra del Fuego. At first V. took it seriously, but soon she realized this was a pattern; that the next time she saw her, my mother would be back with my father, smiling as if all were well.

V. also felt that my mother and father had always shut Brian out. She speculated that it had been mostly my father's doing: when it became clear that he did not accept his son, my mother, too, rejected Brian, to keep her husband pacified.

My brother was born at home with a country doctor in attendance, and family lore has it that when Brian slid from my mother's body, and his penis came into view, my father said aloud, to no one in particular, "I can't be a father to a son."

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