

Always 13 years ahead of me in life, my half-brother never quite caught my attention. I was 24 the Saturday of his funeral and, early, I spent the time in a store across the street from the church selecting a belt. I had just started dating that summer, the culmination of a 55-lb weight loss. I was in a kind of brief, beautiful insanity of perfect faces and hastily-written telephone numbers.

Bruce and I had missed each other again—for the last time.

Blonde Angel—I

A son from her previous marriage, Bruce was like a secret my mother kept. It must have been during the summers, which I always spent with my grandmother, that they took painting classes together. Flanked by two full brothers, Bruce lived with his father. My mother and I lived alone.

Our lives intersected awkwardly, in times of trouble. It was then that Bruce would surface, skinny and tall, ash blonde, and with a pixie grin that extended the width of his narrow jaw.

A very early memory is of Bruce jumping in the car seat in front of me just as my mother's Ford had started down the family's steep driveway. Six or seven, left alone in the car while my mother dropped in on her ex-husband and sons, I had climbed over to the driver's side and released the parking brake. I never saw Bruce until he was suddenly crushing me, wrenching the wheel and applying the brakes in violent gestures—angel-like, and efficient.

His maneuver ruined a hundred dollars' worth of prize rosebushes, and undoubtedly saved my life.

Risking so much, my mother persisted in keeping her sons apart, tokens of different eras and passions in her life. United in her, nevertheless she was the barrier between us, rarely breached.

Gay Boy

Always her partner but never her confidante, one Saturday morning in the car with my mom I found myself on the grounds of a sprawling military hospital. The identical, low-pitched buildings, repeated across the grounds like red-brick garages, felt meaner than school, and my mother seemed stressed and quietly anguished.

In a pitch for his father's approval, Bruce had entered the army. Demoralized and frightened beyond his sense, he went AWOL and had been located by the FBI on a tip from the parent of a high school friend. His father had managed an honorable discharge contingent on psychiatric hospitalization.

Despite the ignorance in which I was being maintained, I remember how incongruous Bruce appeared, wearing a terrycloth bathrobe in the middle of the day. We sat in a narrow room surrounded by his mural-scale paintings, one a gothic self-portrait I have today. He was smoking and talking rapidly, and I had the impression the visit was being conducted on a

level of brittle deception that I was too young to understand. Bruce was creating an elegant, impassable moat of chatter and nervous laughter, managing his mother's anxious disappointment with a zoo-keeper's art.

Something of a child prodigy, Bruce's musical talent made him a family star long before his career. My mother walked away from her first marriage with nothing but the assurance of Bruce's affection and allegiance—her trump card. A woman who loathed “queers,” her relationship with Bruce was the quintessential one between mother and gay son, obvious to everyone but her. She was 18 when he was born. The adoration Bruce gave my mother, the bright sensitivity of his personality as a child, had rescued her from within an ill-fitting marriage. Now both grown up, they conversed as allies, conspirators of chic. The same woman remained throughout my life a source of suffocating authority and pathetic resentment. Together constantly, we were never friends.

When Bruce landed a role in a well-known musical, and after his first LP appeared, his name was spoken often. Traveling between Los Angeles and New York frequently, he stopped in for overnight visits or for weeks at a time. It was during these few years that I saw him most, and how he was then is how I remember him best. He was 24 years old. I was 11.

Roommate from Hollywood

Bruce usually appeared late at night, never at a sensible hour. Each visit seemed to feature an accessory or indulgence that became the keystone in my memory. Once he appeared with a huge gray-brown Afghan hound he called “Rue.” The dog’s spine and flank, as it crouched at our cat’s food dish, extended out the back door of the apartment and into the common hallway of the building. Another time, Bruce appeared with a female friend, busty and loquacious, perpetually stoned, who was fascinated by hat boxes. To this girl’s delight, my mother produced one from her closet.

Bruce cluttered a room I ordinarily had to myself with numerous cases, oversized and finished in the extravagantly tooled leathers of that period, and a large portfolio of drawings. One piece was an old-fashioned doctor’s bag, filled to the clasp with bottles of pills and large plastic containers of yeast and herbs—all thrown on top of one another so that they clattered when I peeked in. I carelessly piled most of the stuff into my bedroom closet.

For some reason our mom wasn’t around when Bruce called me into the room. Having functioned for most of it as an only child, in my life I had never been the object of justified—and unrestrained—anger. Perhaps because my father had committed suicide when I was a baby, I was handled with care (or pity) and allowed to occupy the center of my world without very much interruption. My actions seldom had consequences.

Now I watched as Bruce lectured hysterically, picking up my own humble objects and pitching them like softballs into the small closet. I had

never been the object of a nervous riot. For the first time in my life, I was arrested by powerful emotion that was not the transient, manageable drama of a playmate or schoolyard bully. I had known what a *bitch* was, but I had never been the victim of one.

The episode wasn't altogether out of keeping with the electricity that filled the atmosphere when Bruce was present. And the smell of burning was sometimes in the air between him and our mom, who too often shoved beverage coasters and ashtrays in front of him, or roused him out of bed before noon. But there was, too, an awkward comedy about his presence, as my mom and I trundled off each day to the office and school, and a sort of joy we shared in his irreverent humor and emerging glamour.

That he was able to accommodate himself to us, that he was with us at all, was probably because he was temporarily homeless, waiting for a call from a producer, or a friend to come through with money. Soon he would disappear for several consecutive years, during which he would achieve—and precipitously lose—a bizarre fame. Then when I saw him, it would only be on television.

Little Dreamer

We had two or three moments of understanding, brief intersections.

One Christmas, in tow with my oldest half-brother, we stopped at Bruce's father's home. As a prelude to giving me a gift, Bruce took me aside

and asked me whether I still liked the vintage swing music of Glenn Miller. I denied it, just as Bruce presented me with an expensive collection of albums. It was an awkward moment, but one in which Bruce was able to express, if not his support, his empathy for my unusual tastes and personal fantasies.

During one long visit, camping out on my mother's sofa with his tablets, pencils, and cigarettes, he had written some lyrics—recorded and used later as a demo for Columbia Records—that freeze time, showing exactly what he saw as he looked at his 11-year-old half-brother:

Poor Little Dreamer
 While away the hours
 Nostalgic for the memories you never knew
 The borrowed visions of a better time
 You know you're out of tune ...

Don't turn away from me,
 You know I'll be the last to wake you from your slumbers
 Although it seems sometimes that I'm not with you
 Please don't get me wrong
 You see I gave up dreaming long ago
 One Sunday on the Moon,
 But you, Little Dreamer, dream on

Years later, lying in bed, I overheard Bruce and my mother as they stayed up late, talking. My mother was complaining about how religious I had become as a teenager, and Bruce replied, with the slack effort of an exhalation, "He'll get over it." Even then I understood that Bruce was the only person my mother could talk to about me with any hope of advice. However different our personalities, she understood there was a fundamental similarity between two of her four boys. And I always thought I could hear in his easy reply an

acceptance of the responsibility she had given him—to answer for me. To understand me.

Blonde Angel—II

I didn't see Bruce again until he was on the other side of his wild ride. Discovered at a very low point in his life, earning money as a prostitute in Los Angeles, a rock impresario cleaned him up and paraded him before the press. For *Interview* magazine he quipped, "I'm a true fairy!" He recorded two albums for an important label, and a 50-foot-square billboard in Times Square, featuring his nude torso, advertised the product to Christmas shoppers. He toured the U.S. and Europe. Then the flash career, depleted of its support and any promise, simply ended. A Faustian contract with his manager forbade him from further work under his own name for another decade.

He came home at Christmas, about two years later, and my high school and church friends crowded my mom's apartment to meet him. He delivered for the teenagers without hesitation, bringing his slender arms down in brutal, confident octaves onto the keyboard of the fragile black spinet piano in my bedroom—a natural showman incapable of self-consciousness or modesty, and a foreigner to self-loathing. His voice was a treble bouillabaisse of Fanny Brice, Ethyl Merman, and Mick Jagger.

As the last kid left, drawing in deeply on a cigarette, he said “Little Jeff is PRETTY!” He repeated it several times, impressed and somehow envious. Bruce had been so much more than a beauty in his lifetime—I thought it strange how my young friend’s face vexed him.

A snapshot of Bruce and me taken during that visit remains for the rest of my life painful documentation of how it felt for me to be around him. We are seated on the piano bench, and Bruce’s arm is hooked around my chest, drawing me towards him. But my entire body is pulling away, almost off the bench. My face is a smirk of resentment, directed toward my mother as she presses the shutter.

What he could not have known was that he was visiting someone who was inside a sort of prison. A survivor of my mother’s final, violent marriage, I had withdrawn into consecutive weeks of truancy from school (I nearly failed the year), seeking refuge in books and Jesus. Bruce’s bold and easy way with our mom (who was so embarrassed and annoyed with me), the freedom of his time and lifestyle, and his brassy self-satisfaction did nothing to help.

He had at last come within my focus, but only as yet another family member who after a holiday meal could walk out the door—a threshold, it seemed, I would never cross.

This time, he wasn’t able to save me.

A Touch Goodbye

A year or so later my mom and I went to Bruce's three-story, pyramid-shaped penthouse apartment in New York's Chelsea Hotel. It was surrounded by a small rooftop garden, and I lay tanning as my mother weeded and transplanted. For most of the weekend, Bruce was out of the apartment. After a sort of perfection together, my mother and he had passed one another like trains, and now it was she who had to run after him.

Around 4:00 or 5:00 Bruce appeared and changed into a large monk's robe. He asked whether I had seen the view of the Hudson River from a little balcony on the second level, and as he stood behind me pointing over the rooftops he drew in close, placing his chest, exposed by the open robe, up against my back. I broke the intimacy with a quick lurch and an awkward laugh.

To this day I have great difficulty remembering the incident because it represented something that had absolutely no correlation in my understanding or experience up to that point—a hieroglyph, tender but illegible.

The following day Bruce joined us in the cab as we were leaving. A few blocks before Penn Station, he saw a good friend on the sidewalk. He jumped out and excitedly ran up to her. The light changed, and my mother called out the window, "Bruce!"

I never saw him again.