

The Night I Said Goodbye to Jon

My brother Eric's face was worn with exhaustion when he arrived home from college in his shiny green track jacket. He had driven all day in a borrowed car. I had been playing house and eating chicken patties with ketchup at my friend Daniel's house since Jon's accident.

It had happened a week earlier, around 5:30 p.m. on an ordinary Tuesday in September. My older brother Jon was riding his 10-speed bike home from soccer practice. He stopped at the Monroe Street railroad crossing, just blocks from our house, and waited for the westbound commuter train to pass. Maybe it was the sun—there's something about the sunlight that time of year that makes it hard to see—it hovers just above the horizon in the late afternoon, peeking through the trees. Maybe he was in a hurry—maybe soccer practice went long and he was worried he'd get in trouble if he were late for dinner. Maybe it was because his glasses were in the repair shop—maybe if Jon's glasses weren't broken it wouldn't have happened. He waited for the last train car to pass. Then, for whatever reason, Jon ignored the flashing lights and clanging bells and veered around the lowered gates. A second eastbound train hit him and everything changed in that one instant.

Our family piled in the blue mini-van and drove to the hospital to see Jon. Pastor Don and his wife followed in their car. I thought we were going to the hospital to bring my brother Jon home, and if I was good, my dad might take us to McDonalds for ice cream afterwards.

After the elevator let us off on the pediatric ICU floor, I watched our reflections in the polished white linoleum lead us down the hall. Long rows of fluorescent lights shone bleakly through the rectangular plastic fixtures overhead, giving off a glow that was anything but warm. Nurses were rushing around in their pastel colored scrubs and ugly white shoes, but somehow everything was in slow motion. I worked up the nerve to peek inside one of the hospital rooms we passed and clung to the hem of my mother's pant leg when I saw the little boy inside.

What was Jon doing in a place like this? Jon won't look like that, I assured myself.

When I first walked into Jon's room, I couldn't see him. A white sheet-like curtain hanging from round metal hooks on a track in the ceiling blocked my view. My eyes wandered from the mermaid-shaped stain on the top of the curtain to the white ceiling tiles that looked like craters on the moon.

When mom pulled the curtain back I saw Jon lying perfectly still under a white blanket. I'd never seen Jon so still before. I watched the cylindrical ventilator machine he was hooked up to inflating and deflating like an accordion. His hair was all patchy and shaved off in some spots. There were clear plastic tubes going up his nose, tubes coming out of his head, another tube in his throat, and long IV tubes pumping fluid into his bony arms.

Jon was a scrawny kid, a beanpole really. He wore his soccer uniform and cleats even on days he didn't have games or practices. He wore big brown glasses, and when he felt the plastic frames slip down his nose, he wouldn't push

them back up the normal way. Instead he would make a series of facial movements, slowly inching his glasses back up by scrunching his nose up and stretching out his face, eventually returning his glasses to their proper place without using his hands. My older brothers Eric and Pete would roll their eyes, but I thought it was cool. Jon came to the dinner table every night with stories about the trouble he and his fifth grade classmates Preston Bokos and Justin Amato got into that day, never slowing down to chew his food or pause between stories. He would beg our parents to let him stay up later by any means possible. “But it’s a special!” he would say about completely ordinary television programming.

Jon was five years older than me and I always wanted to be doing whatever he was doing. “Get lost!” he’d tell me whenever his friends were around, but this rarely deterred me from tagging along. He and his friends from boy scouts assembled a zip line that started at a thick branch near the top of the climbing tree in our front yard and ended at another tree in our side yard. This was one of several zip lines, rope bridges, and rope ladders Jon had made all over our property—not as any sort of practical way to get from one place to another, just so Jon could boast his knowledge of knot tying. I was the first to test the zip line. Jon gave me a big push and my hand got caught between the handle bar and the rope. I finally crashed into the tree at the end of the zip line backwards. I hung suspended at a height I wasn’t quite comfortable jumping. Jon thought this was all hilarious.

Jon was my idol, despite the standard older brother torture he put me through. Jon and I would walk to school together and sometimes he'd put his arm around me and call himself my protector.

Sometimes late at night, after my parents shut their bedroom door, I would crawl out from under my pink floral covers, leap off of my trundle bed, and tip-toe down the hall to Jon's room. Most nights I'd find him lying on his stomach, sketching elaborate battle scenes with tanks and guns, making sound effects as he drew. It was these nights that I had Jon all to myself that I treasure most.

Pastor Don asked a nurse for a rocking chair and rocked me in the long white hall. He had a kind face and soft, soothing voice. I was only six and it was well past my bedtime. Visiting hours were almost over when mom finally came out into the hallway; her puffy eyes stained with tears. She pulled out a soggy tissue from her pocket and blew her nose.

"You want to come say goodbye to Jon?"

"Because we're leaving or because he's going to die?"

"Because he's going to die."

I entered my brother's hospital room, and lost myself in the whiteness.

Jon didn't die. That night in the ICU was just a preview of endless hospital visits, surgeries, and constant care Jon would need. The massive brain injury he sustained left him with the mental functioning of a three month old. Jon sits in a wheelchair, is fed through a feeding tube and wears diapers. I had to learn first to mourn for a brother who was not dead but gone, and then accept him as a stranger into the family. He doesn't recognize my voice anymore. I stopped

singing him Beach Boys songs a long time ago and I avoid the visits that might keep my voice familiar. He should've told my boyfriends that he'd break their legs if they broke my heart; he should have been there when I graduated, be a groomsman at my wedding, and a godfather to my children. He should've grown up, graduated college, gotten married, and had his own family. We'll never know the man Jon should've been because of one stupid decision he made when he was 11.