MIMI LIPSON

Tornado

On the morning of Saturday, June 15, 2013, my brother Sam sent me a link to an AP wire service story. The headline said, "Rangers Rescue Hiker Hit by Fallen Tree in Smokies," and the hiker was identified as "Nathan Lipsom." They'd misspelled our last name, but it was close enough that someone Sam worked with had forwarded it to him, asking if this person was any relation.

"Nathan Lipsom of Cambridge, Mass., was hiking on Low Gap Trail on Thursday when the storm hit around 4 p.m," the story said. "A ranger discovered the injured hiker around 11:30 a.m. on Friday."

That was how my family learned that my brother Nate had been caught in a freak tornado. By the time we were reading about it, two days had passed.

Sam called the ranger station mentioned in the article and got through to a Ranger St. Clair. Apparently, Nate had only been on the trail for a few hours when the weather turned. He was trapped in a gully with nowhere to shelter when the forest began bowing and twisting, and one of the big trees fell on him. He managed to drag himself out from under the tree and crawl several yards in the direction of the trail. He pulled out his sleeping bag and lay awake all night with five crushed vertebrae and a broken shinbone sticking through the side of his foot, and that was where he was found eighteen hours later by a ranger who was checking the trail for damage.

After several hours of trying to clear a path through the downed trees, the park rescue team called for a National Guard helicopter. Nate was strapped to a stretcher and lifted up through a hole in the dense forest canopy, the line swinging so wildly in the wind that his face smashed into the metal on the edge of the hatch door. The operation had taken from 11:30 Friday morning, when he was discovered, until 6:45 that evening. Ranger St. Clair told Sam that Nate had stopped by the ranger station on his way into the park and left my mother's phone number in case of emergency, along with his planned route. Several times during the seven-hour rescue they asked for permission to call her, and each time he'd said no.

We knew he'd planned an ambitious solo hike. Going into the woods was what he did when he was feeling overwhelmed by life. He had been diagnosed with bipolar disorder while in his twenties. That spring he'd been rattled by a disturbance in the building where he lived with our mother, and a manic episode had been gathering steam ever since. After many weeks of fitful preparation, he'd borrowed her Civic hatchback and driven from Cambridge down to Tennessee.

According to the article, he'd been taken to Mission Hospital in Asheville, North Carolina. While Sam spoke with the ranger, I was on the phone with a hospital switchboard operator, who told me there was no Nathan Lipson (or Lipsom) in the patient registry.

I asked if there was another hospital in town.

"Sometimes," the operator said, "a patient does not give permission to be listed in the registry. Even if he's here. In the hospital."

I flew into Knoxville on Wednesday and took a hiker's shuttle to the Cosby ranger station to retrieve my mother's Honda. Ranger St. Clair was waiting for me with Nate's pack and the car key, which he'd found in an outside pocket. He looked exactly like a park ranger: solid, bald, and kind, with a Smokey Bear patch on his short-sleeved shirt. He spread a map out on his desk, marking in ballpoint pen the place on Low Gap Trail where they'd found Nate, and then he showed me the conveyance with which they'd first tried to evacuate him: a sort of plastic toboggan, with wheelbarrow handles and a big front wheel. Imagining Nate bumping down the trail over stones and roots, I was grateful for all those fallen trees. The X-rays at the emergency room had revealed shards of bone in such dangerous proximity to his spinal cord that he'd been put into a medical coma to keep him from moving around. He'd been that close to becoming a paraplegic.

When I got to Asheville, Nate was still unconscious. His face was obscured by a plastic splint; he'd broken some bones when he slammed into the helicopter. Bags dripped fluids into his body, and other fluids drained out into other bags. His injured foot was skewered like a kebab by long metal rods and suspended in the center of a jungle-gym contraption.

My mother, who had been at the hospital for a few days already, was camped out in an armchair in Nate's room. She whispered updates to me while nurses came and went, making notes on a whiteboard and checking his IV lines. In rooms up and down the hall, in adjoining ICU twilights, more families camped, surrounded by bewildering machines.

A room had been provided for us at Rathbun House, a short-term residence run by a hospital charity. This turned out to be a compound of newly constructed Victorian-style houses at the end of a long wooded lane, an uncanny valley of rocking-chair porches and mulched landscaping. There was a decorative wishing well and a gazebo made from pressure-treated lumber. Inside: a welcome desk, a kitchen, an electric kettle, a fridge full of takeout containers labeled with sharpies and masking tape. A great room with high cathedral windows. Couches, games, magazines, and everywhere, religious pamphlets. Our room had two twin beds and a rollaway cot. I lay awake for a while, absorbing the gravity of Nate's condition as measured in Christian kindness.

The next morning I saw that the lane we'd driven up in the dark was lined with some sort of flowering southern tree. At the hospital, Nate was still under sedation between surgeries. My mother returned to her chair, and, feeling useless, I decided to clean out her car.

I drove out of the hospital lot, up and down the suburban parkways, until I spotted an unattended dumpster behind a motel. Anyone peering through the windshield would have guessed that a homeless person had been living in the Civic. In the few days it had taken Nate to get from Cambridge to Tennessee, he had crammed it with clothes, camping supplies, Styrofoam ramen cups, jars of cocktail peanuts, free road maps, shaving cream, Ace bandages—all of it pressed into geological strata demarked by thick sheaths of unused plastic Walmart bags that he must have surreptitiously grabbed at the register. As I pulled everything out onto the pavement, I saw that he'd bought and rebought the same items. I found three camping hatchets, the one in the bottommost layer still in its blister pack. Sorting through the midden, I felt like I was examining the contents of his disordered mind.

I'M THE YOUNGEST of four. I was born in Ithaca, New York, where my father taught Russian at Cornell. We moved to Cambridge a few years later, so I don't remember Ithaca except in the unreliable way you remember scenes from a photo album, or events in family stories that have been told and retold.

There's a story about a family outing to Treman State Park, five miles outside of town. It was a popular swimming spot, with a natural rock pool at the base of a waterfall, outdoor grills, and picnic tables. On this occasion, Nate wandered off by himself up the gorge trail that climbed above the falls. He already loved the woods, so that wasn't unusual. I

imagine him kneeling in a patch of moss, peeling apart tissue-thin layers of mica, turning over logs in search of newts, studying the geometry of the sedimentary rock.

When it was time to leave, my father walked up the trail calling for him, and he retreated farther into the trees. I see a flash of his striped T-shirt, visible from the path.

"We're leaving now," my father yelled into the forest. "With or without you."

"Go ahead," Nate yelled back.

"I mean it."

"So do I."

My father indeed meant it. He packed everyone else up in the car and left. As I remember hearing the story, he returned to the house without Nate, and my mother drove off to look for him. She found him a mile or so from the park, stomping angrily along the breakdown lane. I used to tell this story to show how Nate had been *born* Nate, willful and independent, and how untroubled my father was by conventional ideas about parenting. I told it as a funny story, but also with pride. Secretly, it was a story about my family's specialness.

"What do you think my father was like?" I asked a friend recently. "Just say the first thing that comes to mind." My father died a long time ago, and I've sometimes wondered what impression my stories make on people who never met him.

"Your father was Sergeant Bilko."

I remember watching *Phil Silvers Show* reruns on our black-and-white TV. It's not a bad comparison. My father had Bilko's charm, his fondness for a scam. He was a popular teacher, always at war with his department heads, whose students hung around our living room. He began offering tours of the Soviet Union in 1965, when such things were barely conceivable: dodging Intourist guides and transporting his followers from campground to campground in rented microbuses like a Slavophile Ken Kesey. They were mostly college students—willing to sleep rough, and too starstruck to complain about having to subsist on black bread and sausages.

Such was my father's talent for turning the thing that was most convenient for him into the thing you wanted most. I was well into adulthood before I realized that he'd conned my siblings and me into premature self-sufficiency.

My mother left on Friday morning. Her upstairs tenants, the ones who had caused the disturbance that sent Nate down to the Smokies, had vacated the apartment and left a mess that she had to clean up before renting it again. I would be picking up my sister, Sonia, at the airport the following day, so I was alone with Nate when the order came for him to be awakened. The ventilator tube was removed, and I sat in the armchair watching for signs that the sedative was wearing off.

He had been on the ICU for a week, unconscious, while various medical procedures were performed on him. I'd learned the words "extubate" and "zygomatic fracture," and that he would have a removable cast for his back called a turtle casing. His ankle, it turned out, was a bigger problem. The foot surgeon had been unable to close up the wound until it healed more on its own, so he had a sucking device, a "wound vac," fitted over the place where the shinbone had broken through the skin. There would be a graft and eventually a total ankle reconstruction. While he slept on, I reported everything I could remember to my family. We coordinated airline miles and vacation days in long, branching email chains.

Nate began stirring. I watched him thrash around for an hour or so. The nurse had warned me that he wouldn't remember what had happened, at least not at first. The best thing was to let him ask questions. I hoped he remembered nothing of the eighteen hours he'd lain on the trail, not knowing if an animal would come, or if another tree would fall on him. When his eyes opened, I approached cautiously.

Sonia is the oldest. She was born in 1957. Then, two and a half years later, came Nate. Sam was born when Sonia was seven, and she claimed him as hers. Sam was Sonia's baby, to carry around and take care of. A year and a half later I was born, and I was Nate's. That was how I understood it. Growing up, I always knew I was Nate's, even if he wasn't around.

He often wasn't around. He had been going off on his own for as long as I could remember, and this was part of his allure as an older brother.

He told Sam and me that, every Groundhog Day, he crawled through a tunnel to an underground river, something like the River Styx, where a boat would take him to meet the Groundhog King. We couldn't come; he was the only human allowed.

His real nocturnal adventures began at age eleven or twelve. He

would leave the house after dark to climb buildings, break into cemeteries, explore subway passages. He dropped out of eighth grade, and then tenth. At age fifteen, he spent a winter in Chicago working on an all-night sign-painting crew, and then he went back to school and finished on schedule—registering for multiple classes in the same time slot, making sure to show up for all the tests.

Invincibility was prelude to mania. When he was in his twenties, an episode involving protracted sleeplessness, alcohol, broken glass, and threats got him hospitalized at Met State: a prisonlike public ward in Belmont with the look and feel of a nineteenth-century sanitarium. He received guests in a dayroom where grated windows looked out on a great lawn. Someone had brought him a boom box and a few cassette tapes. He changed them frequently while I sat with him and pointed out how the other patients responded to his musical selections: getting up and moving around to Dixieland, settling down again to country blues.

He received a diagnosis of bipolar disorder and had a short run on lithium, then stopped taking it. A few months later he expatriated—to Amsterdam, to Greece, to Turkey. He came home occasionally—a few months here, a year there—but for the most part he was gone. We knew of his life only what he relayed through the one-way transmission of three a.m. phone calls. He called from Greece saying he'd been falsely accused of a crime. In Moscow he was trapped in a hotel room that was being watched by Caucasian gangsters. He spent a night chained to the wall in a jail cell in Cairo. When he wasn't in extremis, he was on the verge of an entrepreneurial breakthrough: exporting Soviet motorcycles, opening laundromats in Poland, building computer networks in Latvia for the Western carpetbaggers who were arriving in droves.

He ended up in Tijuana. He'd run through his inheritance and his credit, and he was supposedly commuting to the University of San Diego, training for a career in bioinformatics. Incompletes piled up. His manias worsened, and the only thing that relieved them were long, solitary trips, over the Laguna Mountains to the desert around Anza Borrego, where he cached firewood and jugs of water here and there, to be retrieved on later excursions.

And then Tijuana became impossible. Drugs flooded the city, and his neighbors, with whom he got into regular beefs, were becoming more dangerous. He was tied to a chair during a home invasion. After an epic

mania lasting for the first several months of 2010, my mother, who was supporting his threadbare existence, decided for his safety to stop doing so. Being unwilling to apply for disability, he had no option but to move into her apartment in Cambridge. She loaned him her car as often as possible so he could drive to the mountains. Usually it was north to New Hampshire and the Whites, but this time he'd gone south.

As the sedative wore off, Nate began pulling at the things attached to him—the catheter, the IV, the feeding tube in his nose—until his wrists were strapped to the frame of the bed. After a while he coaxed a nurse into releasing him, feigning contrition, in a tone of strained reasonableness that he might have used on the Egyptian tourist police.

He looked around for Sam and Sonia. In his mind, the four of us were on an extended road trip of the southern states. Then he wanted his reading glasses. He demanded his camera, with such vehemence that I went outside to the car and rifled through his pack until I found it. He turned it over in his hands, poking impatiently at the buttons, and asked, "Where is the Internet on this?"

He wanted to know what experiments they were performing on him.

When he began trying to get out of bed, I took a photograph of his foot in its metal cage and showed it to him on my phone, but he waved it away as though it had nothing to do with him. The nurses tied his hands down again. Finally, under the influence of Haldol, he drifted off, and I went in search of a bar.

It was late when I got back to Rathbun. Through the window I could see a few people still up, working on jigsaw puzzles and watching television, so I climbed the slope to the gazebo. I sat and worried that something in Nate had broken irreparably.

What do I mean when I say that I was his?

In the sifting of family after my parents' separation, Nate and I ended up with my mother for the most part, and Sonia and Sam were mostly with my father. No one's opinion mattered to me more than Nate's. At age ten or eleven, he decided my mother's cooking wasn't up to par and that her standards around food spoilage were too lax, so he began preparing his own meals. He cut a side deal with my father for ten dollars a week, to buy his own groceries, and he tried to get me to go in on it so we could pool our money.

"You're five years old and you can't even make your own dinner," he said. "What would you do if we all died?"

One day, when I found myself alone, I poured a box of spaghetti into a colander and lit a burner under it. I expected the spaghetti to turn soft and edible, but instead, it began smoking. I burned my hand trying to get the colander into the sink.

I became his literally, in a sense, after a later reorganization. Our mother had gone off to Ontario to try a self-sustained rural existence and, after some moving around, I ended up with my father. Then he was diagnosed with terminal kidney cancer. Nate and Sonia left their respective colleges, and the four Lipson kids ended up living together for the first time in twelve years. I was not quite fifteen and Nate was not quite twenty-one when our father died. Sonia became Sam's legal guardian, and Nate became mine—a relationship that we treated as ironic.

On Saturday, while I was picking up Sonia at the airport, Nate was moved to a room on the regular trauma unit. He seemed unsurprised to see Sonia. He kept looking at her slyly and chuckling. When she left the room, he beckoned me to his bedside and told me she had been off performing in a "blue movie." He kept fussing with the feeding tube in his nose. The nurse said he could have it taken out when he started eating, so he requested (one eyebrow cocked with refinement) "a small portion of pasta." He ignored it when it arrived. No matter how many times we told him we were in a hospital in Asheville, North Carolina, he would not believe us—not even when I showed him the glowing blue dot on the map on my phone.

As the light faded in his hospital window, he became restless, and the nurses returned. He fell into a Haldol sleep, with Sonia in the chair next to him all night.

He'd calmed down enough the next day to remain untied. A physical therapist came by to help him try on the turtle casing and sit him up in a chair for a few minutes.

"Excuse me, sir," Nate asked. "Could you tell me where we are?"

"We're in Asheville," the physical therapist said.

"Ah," Nate said, looking at me defiantly. "But what state?"

Sonia left on Monday, and Nate and I were alone again when his mind quietly returned. It seemed to happen over the course of a few minutes. He asked me for the hundredth time where he was, and I told him, as I had told him a hundred times, that he was in Asheville.

This time, though, he asked, "Where in Asheville?"

I said we were in a hospital, and he looked straight ahead—not meeting my eye—and I could see that he understood I was telling him the truth. He asked what had happened.

I told him everything I knew about the accident and the rescue, and about his injuries. And then he began describing to me the night he'd spent on the trail. He remembered pulling his sleeping bag out of its sack to cover himself, and how, when the sun came up, he discovered that he was directly beneath an opening in the leafy canopy. A sunbeam hit his face in the late morning. He was lying there, parched, thinking about how he could splint his ankle and get to water somehow, when he heard voices on the trail.

I learned why he'd demanded his camera in the ICU. When the sun went down a few hours after his accident, fireflies had begun sparking around him. As it grew darker, they gathered in stunning profusion, low on the ground; and then their blinks began to synchronize. He got his camera out of his pack and tried to capture on video how the forest would glow for a brief moment, go dark, and then light up again.

The surgeon came by and answered Nate's questions about his recovery. He spoke in terms of months when Nate had perhaps been imagining weeks, and when we were alone again, I saw that he was crushed.

I asked if he wanted me to read to him. I had found a book of Nathaniel Hawthorne stories at a downtown Asheville bookstore and bought it, remembering how he'd read them to me when we were kids in his dolorous Hawthorne voice.

He stopped me after a few sentences. "Read me something you wrote," he said.

When I got back to Rathbun, I Googled "synchronous fireflies." It had sounded to me like a lingering trace of ICU delirium, but I saw that it was true. *Photinus carolinus*: a species of firefly known for its synchronous flashing behavior in the Smokies in the late spring every year, the display reaching its peak in mid-June.

This is a difficult thing to admit. Part of me was grateful for Nate's accident. I had not felt so close to him in decades. He'd become something like a hermit since giving up his apartment in Tijuana and moving in with my mother. Even before that, he'd kept us at arm's length. He would send group emails, or make a round of international

phone calls, telling us about some new emergency: a broken jaw, a motorcycle accident. He would seem to want help, but then he would treat it contemptuously when it was offered.

"I should never speak with anyone on the phone when I'm so drunk," he wrote from Mexico, "about a thing that can wait until tomorrow, if not longer."

What he had wanted was to know that we were still out there.

In the opening pages of *The Year of Magical Thinking*, Joan Didion's memoir about the aftermath of her husband's fatal heart attack, she comments on a tendency to emphasize the ordinariness of the moment before a disaster: "the clear blue sky from which the plane fell, the routine errand that ended on the shoulder with the car in flames, the swings where the children were playing as usual when the rattlesnake struck from the ivy."

When I read this well-known passage recently, my first thought was: No. The moments before Nate's accident had not been ordinary, and the sky had not been blue or clear. News of the tornado was shocking, especially in the way it came—through an AP wire story—but beneath the shock had been an undertow of inevitability. Nate had sought out such an extreme life that some part of me, I now understood, had been preparing for a disaster for the past thirty years.

And then there were the troubles in my mother's building, which had sent him down to the Smokies in the first place.

The troubles had been bombs, two of them, set off at the Boston Marathon by Tamerlan and Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, who were my mother's third-floor tenants.

The Tsarnaev family had lived upstairs, in various combinations spanning three generations, since they'd emigrated from Kyrgyzstan eleven years earlier. Four days after the bombing, in the wee hours of the morning, Tamerlan and Dzhokhar were identified as suspects, and Nate woke to an ATF raid. Then came a deluge of news vans and reporters outside the house, the phone ringing, notes slipped under the door. Nate saw a black SUV circling the block at night.

He stopped sleeping and began drinking, his mind spinning faster and faster as he planned his escape to the woods. It took him almost two months to get on the road and arrive at the tornado: a bookend, an answering bomb.

After five and a half weeks in the hospital, Nate was discharged, and Operation Get-Nate-Home kicked into gear. His back injury

was the limiting factor: he would only be able to sit upright for a few hours. Commercial flights were out, and medical transport would be a ruinous expense, not covered by his insurance, so Sonia flew to Asheville and drove him to the Charlotte train station in a rental car. They traveled overnight in a handicapped-accessible sleeper car. In Philadelphia, a friend and I helped him into the back of a van, where he lay on two futons for the rest of the journey.

For the next month he recuperated in Sonia's coach house, piles of trash accumulating around his bed. Visitors were given shopping lists. "But Nate, you already have three cans of Progresso Italian wedding soup," I'd say, and he would scowl and snatch the list out of my hand. And then he was back in his room at my mother's house.

I received an email in early October. The subject line "Around June 19, 2013":

> Impurities in the air of the funky, humid Asheville, NC hospital room created an iridescent film on any surface of the right topological form that I chose to focus upon. With some effort I could get the film to rise from the surface, in a ribbon of varying width. Ha! On these ribbons of film I could read a weather report, the New York Times, even the Internet, which I was deprived of by the unthinking hospital personnel. I informed Sonia, only of the first discovery, but she wasn't amused. "You are hallucinating!" she snorted, contemptuous. If Mimi were here, she would understand, even if she couldn't see it herself. But I couldn't remember seeing Mimi since we were hanging out in Asheville, FL. I had spent time with Sonia in Asheville, AZ (or was it Asheville AR?) but she pretended not to remember. No wonder: she wouldn't want anyone back home to know what she had been up to there.

There had been times, over the years, when I'd failed to perform some remote task, when I'd avoided his phone calls or disappointed him in some way, and I would be disowned. "Never again, you selfish bitch," he wrote to me on the back of a postcard of a Greek island.

"With the money I save on transatlantic calls I can fly my Israeli girlfriend to London." In the middle of the epic mania that brought his Tijuana period to a close, he'd told me, "I don't have a sister." Then he'd returned to Cambridge and retreated into himself—emerging from his room grudgingly, talking to me infrequently.

It felt like I had my brother back: the one to whom I'd belonged as a kid. "If Mimi were here, she would understand."

About a year after Nate's accident, we all went to see *Grand Hotel Budapest*: Nate, Sam, Sonia, my mother, and me. It was my idea. I thought everyone would enjoy a silly movie about the glory days of a grand hotel in an imaginary Carpathian landscape—the kind of place my father might have visited in its shabby communist-era incarnation. But my mother was annoyed by the Wes Anderson frivolity. It had been a hard year for her, and not much was making her laugh.

We all went out for a beer after the movie, and I asked her about the time Nate was left behind at Treman State Park. How old was he? Seven? I was writing about it, and I wanted to make sure I got his age right.

"No, he was six."

Six was what Nate remembered as well.

And what did she think when Dad showed up at the house without him?

"No," she said, "I was at the park."

"*You* were there?"

"Of course I was there," she said. "Why is that so surprising?"

"I'm just. . . I wouldn't have thought you'd leave without Nate," I said. "That seems like something Dad would have done, but not you."

"What was I supposed to do?"

"I think a lot of people would have stayed at the park."

"And let your father take the baby home?" (I, of course, was the baby.)

"I was thinking you might have insisted everyone stay until you got Nate in the car."

"I knew how to get home," Nate said.

Now I was on the defensive. "I just wanted to get the story straight," I said.

"I don't know why any of this matters," my mother said.

"Because it's an interesting story."

I'd hurt her feelings, and she wouldn't concede that the story was interesting. In the ensuing argument (was Treman five miles from the house, as I'd said, or only two?), I made a fumbling reference to "today's parenting standards"—as though the incident would not have raised eyebrows in 1965; as though the idea of a standard applied. I'd ended up on the outside of the conversation, someone to whom my own upbringing had to be explained.

The journalist Masha Gessen wrote a book about the Marathon bombing called *The Brothers*. She describes my mother helping the Tsarnaev children with their homework and acting on behalf of their parents as a liaison with their teachers. Translating, advising, helping the Tsarnaevs navigate bureaucracies, and doing them countless other kindnesses. Gessen calls her "the Tsarnaevs' miracle," and, possibly by way of explanation, describes her as an "odd beautiful bird." Gary Indiana, reviewing *The Brothers* in the *London Review of Books*, says: "[the parents] Anzor and Zubeidat sound too narcissistic, too skilled in extracting sympathy and favours from new acquaintances, to compromise much with American reality." He is obviously referring to my mother.

Like the tornado, the Tsarnaevs had felt inevitable. There was the fact that my mother speaks Russian, her natural affinity for the underdog, her memories of being priced out of one Cambridge apartment after another with her own children in the years between my parents' separation and her flight to Ontario. There was the symmetry of the four Tsarnaev kids: two girls and two boys, as in our family. There was the odd fact that in 1965, while pregnant with me, she'd joined my father on his first Soviet trip and traveled to Central Asia, where the Tsarnaevs were from. They'd toured colonial Tashkent and Almaty, the beautiful Silk Road cities of Bukhara and Samarkand.

Ultimately, I can't think about the Tsarnaevs and their dependence on my mother without thinking about our independence. In the first conversation she and I had after learning about Nate's accident, we got into a fight about who would retrieve her car at the Cosby ranger station, and then who would drive it back to Cambridge, and finally, what kind of assistance she would accept in dispensing with the furniture and other belongings that, two months after the bombing and long since the Tsarnaevs' old apartment had ceased to be a crime scene, were preventing her from renting it out.

"Why should you help me?" she screamed into the phone. "I never helped you." In her inverted economy of favors, this was a grievance.

The Tsarnaevs, on the other hand, came to her as a blank slate—ready to receive her sympathy and her favors, with an uncomplicated sense of entitlement.

The spring after Nate's accident, much sooner than anyone expected, he was hiking again. He wore a foot brace to stabilize his ankle

and couldn't scramble to the peaks anymore, but still, he sent us selfies from the White Mountains, posed in one of the three or four camping hammocks he owned. Arthritis set in, and he started using crutches, but he could still walk well-graded trails and somehow even ride a bicycle.

As the pain in his foot steadily worsened, he emerged from his room less and less. Inactivity, nicotine, and alcohol took a toll. One morning, three years after the accident, he found himself unable to stand up. A clot was detected in his leg, and he was put on a blood thinner. There were subsequent episodes of confusion: he was found in a snowbank once. Another time, he got lost, and a neighbor had to bring him home.

He was more or less housebound during the spring and summer of 2017. In August, my siblings and I and a group of our friends went to a campground in Truro, Massachusetts, where Cape Cod's wrist bends toward the fist of Provincetown. It was an end-of-summer tradition. The weather was fine, and all week Nate slept in a hammock strung between two trees on Sam's site. We visited with him, sitting around in camp chairs, fetching him drinks and snacks, but his mood was bad and his frustration palpable. A year earlier, he'd been riding his bike up and down Route 6A and on the trails that crisscross the dunes of the Provincelands.

On our last night on the Cape, Nate got out of his hammock for a beach fire. We dumped firewood and coolers, blankets, guitars, and beach chairs as close as possible to the parking lot so he wouldn't have to drag his foot brace and crutches too far in the sand. He looks surprisingly happy in a photo from that evening: sitting on a cooler, regarding with amusement the box from a Scattergories game someone thought to bring to the beach. But after Sam dropped him off at my mother's apartment the next day, he began drinking heavily.

A few days later, at around three a.m., my mother heard him crashing around in his room. She lay in bed wondering if she should check on him, weighing her worry against his need for privacy. After a while she fell asleep. Late the next morning she knocked on his door, called his name out, hesitated, then pushed it open. She found him face down on the floor, dead from an apparent stroke.

ANOTHER CHILDHOOD STORY: I am five and Nate is eleven. He tells me I have been granted a wish. And then, right away, he tells me he's sick. What am I going to do with my wish?

"I'm dying! You can save me with your wish!"

I said I wished he would not die.

He gave me another wish, and then again he was dying and I had to spend my wish to keep him alive. This happened over and over. Finally, exasperated, I said, "I wish you wouldn't die, and that you would never die."

He said: "That's two wishes."

THE EMS CREW had upended Nate's mattress getting him out, adding a grace note to the chaos of his room. He'd hit his head on the corner of his desk when he fell, and blood had pooled under him. Sam got a bucket and some rubber gloves and mopped up the blood while I sifted through the clothes, library books, dirty dishes, nicotine patches, maps, prescription pill bottles, mismatched hiking gaiters, Walmart bags, and half-eaten boxes of crackers that formed a slope under the bay window. Every drawer and shelf was crammed with more patches and pills and bits of paper, matchbooks, business cards, and tchotchkes from all over: Tijuana, Cairo, Riga, Moscow. I found a broom and dustpan under the first layer of mess—evidence of a stalled effort to put things to order. And then, a few layers down, another broom and dustpan, and then a third. I was still sorting and filling trash bags when Sam left. I quit around dinnertime and went back to it the next day.

"You always do this," my mother said from the hall.

"What do I always do?"

"You're always cleaning up after a disaster."

"I guess that's because it's something I can do."

That didn't seem trivial. Nate couldn't manage it, not with three dustpans and three brooms.