

## [Storms of the Circus World](#) [1]

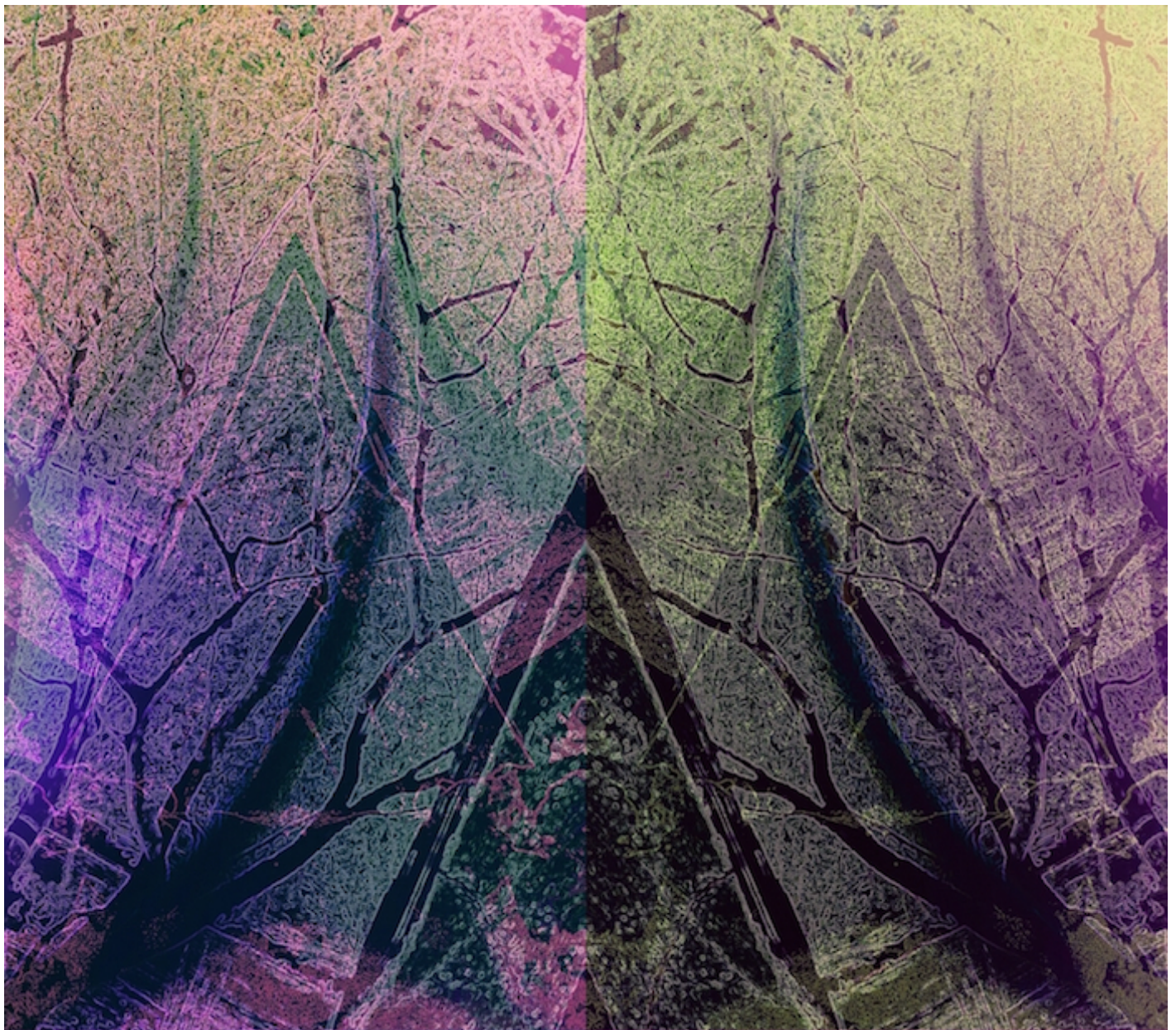
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### **Essay by Lorri McDole**

**Finalist for the 2016 Talking Writing Prize for Personal Essay**



## Lightning

We never know what the weather will be, but every Labor Day weekend my family vacations at a rustic resort on Orcas Island, located in the northwestern corner of Washington state. This evening, we build a fire on the beach, betting that the rain is at least an hour away. While my husband goes next door to the country store for marshmallows, my dad and I line up chocolate and graham crackers. My children, ages seven and ten, watch my brother sharpen branches into roasting sticks, the taste of burnt sugar already on their tongues.

Suddenly, my brother stops whittling.

*I hope you know*, he says, working a cigarette to the side of his mouth and looking into my children's faces, *that the only thing wrong with drugs are the narcs and the collectors*.

And just like that, the storm is on us.

## The First Long Driveway

My brother ran away every day the year he was two. Mom would settle in to nurse our baby sister, and he'd slip out the screen door, kicking up gravel as he ran down our driveway. Caught between loyalty and obedience, I'd watch until he seemed in danger of disappearing altogether before running to tell her: *Randy gone*.

I don't really remember—I wasn't quite four—and yet this is the oldest memory my brother and I share, sewn into our psyches by Mom's stories. My brother, the would-be escape artist, and me, his reluctant savior.

## Gathering Dark

When Randy and our cousin Steve were fourteen, they pushed a raft of stolen dynamite out into the middle of Plummer Lake in Centralia, Washington, our hometown. The explosion blew out the windows of several lake houses, racking up \$3,000 in damages, a \$500 fine, and several days in juvie for both boys. Because my brother was a few months older than Steve, everyone in our extended family blamed him.

A few years later, Steve was out with a school friend and drunk-drove his Jeep into a tree. Both boys died flying through the windshield.

When Randy heard that Steve's shoes were found on the floorboard of the car, as they often are in accidents, he collapsed into Dad's arms. *They should have been my shoes*, he sobbed. *It should have been me*.

## An Idea

*Your son is doing drugs*, Mom said to Dad.

*Hush, Nancy, you'll put ideas in his head*.

She pointed to the dirty ashtray in Randy's bathroom.

*There's an idea for you*.

## What Randy's Good At

Taking care of pets, hunting wild game, building things with his hands, gardening, telling stories. *I rode shotgun! The*

*biggest gun in the West! I bet you didn't know there was such a gun, but I'm here to tell you: There is!* My sister tries to bring him down after one sentence—we've got to keep him in this world, she says—but I am mesmerized, surfing the ledge with him while he weaves his singular metaphors through our shared, storied landscape.

## A Clue

One clear fall day when we're teenagers, I found my brother standing in the front yard, holding a leaf and staring up at the sky.

*What are you doing?* I asked.

*Wondering how I ended up here.*

*In the yard?*

*In the world. In the world yard. Everyone thinks there's a million yards in the world, but maybe it's the other way around.*

But no matter how anyone looks at it, we still don't have a clear idea: Which came first, the drugs or the schizophrenia?

## A Mystery

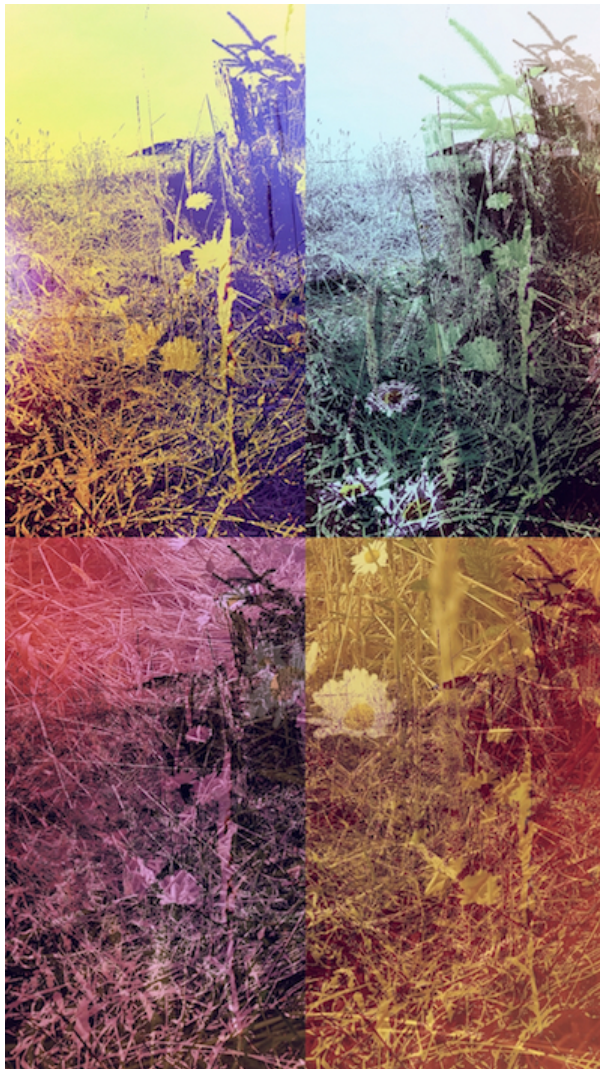
Randy used to run with a boy who was later found on the Fords Prairie railroad tracks in Centralia with his arms and legs tied behind him, a deal-gone-bad bullet to the brain.

Questions of grief over my brother's wasted life—*why him? why us?*—changed for a time to guilty relief. At least he didn't do it. At least he wasn't the one on the tracks.

But soon enough, we were back to the questions: How can a person gunning so hard for himself dodge so many bullets?

## The Big List, Alphabetically Speaking

- acid
- alcohol
- car wrecks (four?)



- children he barely knows (three)
- cigarettes
- cocaine
- Dad's charred bedroom
- death threats (received and delivered)
- ex-girlfriend's restraining order
- fights (three facial bones broken and hearing ruined in his right ear)
- glue
- halfway houses and the state hospital (five extended stays between them)
- jail (several stints)
- knife slashes and bullet grazes (some inflicted by other people)
- leaps from the roofs of trucks and houses (broken and sprained ankles)
- Lithium (when he takes it)
- middle-of-the-night lurches (countless) down the hall while Dad tried to hold him up
- middle-of-the-night pleas (countless): *Don't tell my sisters. Please don't tell my sisters.*
- Mom's finger-bruised neck
- mushrooms
- overdoses (stomach pumped twice)
- pot
- psychiatrists (three)
- schizophrenia (we finally figured out)
- things I don't know
- what I will never tell

## Why Randy Lives with Dad

The government has stolen his money, millions they first denied taking and have now misplaced. He's too weak to leave, but after he stockpiles enough protein drinks (260 cans bought with his disability pay, and counting), he'll be ready. A lot of women want to marry him, their disembodied voices whispering relentlessly in his good ear, but he can't choose.

Occasionally, Randy makes it to the T of Dad's long gravel driveway, but then the government scrambles his internal GPS, and he doesn't know which way to turn.

## Why He Really Lives with Dad

We've tried a few halfway houses and sent him through the state hospital system, but they were temporary fixes to a permanent problem. Besides, despite well-meaning clamors from all sides over the years for Dad to kick Randy out, a tough-love pill that treats mental illness has yet to be invented.

## What I Don't Sleep About

Thirty years ago, when Dad asked me to bail Randy out of jail with my college money, I refused with a clear conscience.

What will I say now if he asks me to take Randy in when the time comes? Now that Mom has died and Dad is 78, when we have to sell Dad's house to pay off the mortgages, where will my brother go?

Nothing is clear anymore.

## Listen

The man on this page is the man my brother became, but this man is not my brother. My brother couldn't pass me in the hall without kissing me on the cheek and thought I looked like every princess he saw on TV. My brother always invited me to play baseball with his friends, even though I sucked, and he once slammed the door on a friend who asked him to take the blanket off me while I was watching TV in my nightgown. My brother heard tires screech in the night and went out with soap and water to scrub what was left of our cat off the road so the rest of us wouldn't have to see it in the morning.

## Confession

That time up on Orcas Island, after Randy told our kids about the narcs and collectors—but before my husband and I made the ultimatum that banned him from our trips for several years—I watched him stretch out over the end of the dock to pull up one of his makeshift crab pots. He lay there forever, it seemed, and I fantasized about him not getting up. I imagined him sliding, seal-like, beneath the surface, while I just watched him go without saying a word.

## In a Boat in the Circus of the World

After four months of excruciating pain and endless tests, Dad has been diagnosed with a “non-specific virus.” Gone is his part-time job and his ability to drive and cook. He can't cut up food, write out checks, clip his nails, zip his pants.



As a Christian, he believes it's wrong to take a life, even if it's his own. But on the nights he can walk, he paces, crying and rubbing his hands, not sure he can live like this.

While my sister and I run around in the background, handling insurance and the VA, paying bills out of Dad's social security and wringing *our* hands, my brother trims Dad's beard and hair and nails. He mows the acre of grass and keeps the fire going all night so the house is never cold. He empties the bedpan, lifts Dad into the bathtub, makes and feeds him dinner, times all medicines to the minute, and collaborates with the visiting nurses about how to get Dad to gain weight.

*I haven't been trained on how to run budgets, he says nervously on the phone one day, but I know that one less bottle of beer for me is one more can of Instant Breakfast for Dad. Every time I'm at the store, my brain gets exercised with the calisthenics of calculation!*

The last time we visited from Seattle, my sister went straight in to Dad, while I stopped on the porch with Randy. I made small talk, wondering anxiously which topic, or planet, we'd land on. He sat quietly for several minutes, courteously blowing his cigarette smoke away from me, and then jumped up.

*Did I ever tell you about the first time I gave Dad a shower?*

Uh-oh, I thought, where's *this* going? I shook my head.

*I tried to get him to wait. The visiting nurse was going to be here any minute, but Dad didn't want to be dirty when she*

*got here. I was like, well, Dad, what are you going to do, marry her?*

He gave a nervous giggle, his voice revving low before vibrating to a higher octave: not the laugh you'd expect from a six-foot-two bearded man in a plaid quilted jacket. *But he was bound and determined, and I couldn't figure out how to help him except to get in with him, clothes and all. And Dad goes, well, Randy, you're getting all wet! And I go, well, Dad, so are you!*

We were both near tears then, laughing.

*By the time the nurse got here, we were done and dry, and then in Dad goes again with her. Only she stayed outside the shower, this isn't that kind of story.* He giggled again. *Anyway, now we've got it down. But that first time, it was like we were in the same boat! Which, of course, we've been in the same boat all these years. But now, well, now it's different, since I'm steering.*

I wondered if he was thinking about all the times Dad had guided him down the hall at 3:00 a.m., back before Mom got fed up with everything and left Dad to do everything alone. But all I said was, *Steering and rowing.*

Randy startled. *I guess you're right! You always were the smart one. But I must be doing okay, because we haven't done any capsizing that I know of. Of course, we don't talk about it. We just keep traveling around in this same boat, going in circles, our own little circus. It's something else, this circus of a world. I've seen a lot of things, and I'm telling you, I've never seen a damn thing like it.*

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### Art Information

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Lorri McDole's writing has appeared or is forthcoming in various publications, including *The Offing*, *Eclectica*, *New Madrid*, *Epiphany*, *Flash Nonfiction Funny*, *matchbook*, and *Brain, Child*. She has also been published in several anthologies, including *A Cup of Comfort for Writers*, and been named a finalist in several contests. She lives in the Pacific Northwest with her husband, children, and grandson.

"My stories come from the impulse to create but also from the need to puzzle something out," Lorri notes in a recent email. Of this essay, she adds:

I'd been taking notes about my brother for years, how I experienced living with his mental illness, but it wasn't until Randy became Dad's caregiver that I figured out how I wanted to tell this story. I liked the symmetry of

beginning with my metaphor (the storm) and ending with his (the circus) because it echoes the idea that the landscape we've always shared is language. Then it was a matter of editing and ordering the other notes I'd collected, all of which I'd given subheads to.

I often use subheads as an organizing tool, and sometimes they become an integral part of the story. Subheads can function as transitions (especially important in a story that moves between conversations, anecdotes, and collected observations), which frees me to dive in to the topic at hand. This, in turn, curbs my tendency to overwrite. If I can tell my story through straightforward sentences and paragraphs, there's less chance of overwhelming readers with my emotion and more space for them to respond with their own.

I write about family quite a bit, and my constant challenge is to tell a true, resonating story that reveals as much about me as it does about other people. So, while I allude to the possibilities that Randy's early substance abuse contributed to his mental illness and that my dad underrated the severity of his challenges early on, I also share uncomfortable things about myself—for example, my fantasy about Randy disappearing over the end of the dock.

In the end, I admire and love my brother *and* find him challenging to live with. I wanted this story to communicate both ideas without one seeming to cancel the other out.

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