Inseparable

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Recommended Citation
Fitzgerald, Benjamin (2012) "Inseparable," The Promethean: Vol. 20 : Iss. 1 , Article 32.
Available at: http://commons.cu-portland.edu/promethean/vol20/iss1/32

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Inseparable

Benjamin Fitzgerald

I am sixteen, and he is fifteen. Our older brother Matt recently returned from Florida with his newly-christened fiancée in tow. Everything they do is obnoxious – they’re so damn ‘lovey-dovey’ make-out-in-the-living-room-cause-we’re-so-attractive-together, and Sam and I are sick of it. However, there is not a thing he or I can do about the situation, so we sit on the back porch and drink Diet Coke out of our twelve-ounce yellow plastic glasses and complain. “What the hell is with their stupid bird pecks?” “Why doesn’t he just shove his tongue down her throat? It would be less annoying!”

I am twenty-one, and Iron and Wine plays over the stereo. I’m sitting on the front porch; the door is open. It is after one a.m., and a big furry dog sits on the porch at my feet. A yellow twelve-ounce plastic cup sits next to me, filled with requisite diet pop. I wish that Sam were with me right now, because I’ve got a lot on my mind, and he’s always been a good person to unburden myself to. I can see him, as Hamlet says, in my mind’s eye, sitting in the blue lawn chair across from me. It’s comforting to know that I can still see him here with me, if only I make believe.

We are nine now – that is, I am nine, he eight – and the living room is strewn with all manner of stuffed animals: mostly bears, but there are also rabbits, dogs, raccoons, a tiger, my ninja frog, and a stubby walrus named Taylor. There are at least fifty animals littering the floor. A terrible war is raging, and all the animals (stuffedies, we call them) have chosen sides. The faction leaders are Big Teddy and Muscle Bear, the largest and fiercest of all the animals. (As we know, might makes right in kingdom animalia.) Once friends, years of strife have turned them against one another, and despite their mutual respect, they grudgingly lead their two armies into battle.

I am twenty, sitting in my cozy living room in Northeast Portland. I’m feeling discouraged, so I’ve brought Winnie the Pooh along for moral support – I am lonely, and he keeps me company. I’ve a blanket wrapped over me as I browse through Netflix on the Wii, and though I will most likely settle upon That ‘70s Show or 3rd Rock from the Sun, because comedies cheer me up, the choice barely matters to me. I am searching only for a distraction, and television makes a good one.

We’re ten and eleven, and our older brother, sixteen, has kicked us out of the bedroom we once shared and usurped it as his own domain. Now we sleep on two pathetic gray mats, about two inches thick, laid out on the living room floor. It’s late summer in Sacramento, and though it is evening, our ineffectual air conditioner means the air in the house is still at least 85°. Despite this, the injustice of the move burns deeper than the stuffy night. It’s Tuesday, we’re watching Smallville, and BAM! the room is all Matt’s now. Although we no longer share a bed, Sam and I are so accustomed to sleeping side by side that we’ve pushed the mats together on the floor. We lie in bed and whisper battle plans to one another when Dad pounds on the wall: “Be quiet out there!” We’ve woken the sleeping giant.

Twenty-one again. I lie on the mattress sitting on the floor of my basement bedroom. Scattered on the bed are mostly bears, but also a dog, a raccoon, a gorilla, an armadillo, my ninja frog, and a massive dragon named Neoterikos. Big Teddy is temporarily functioning as my pillow, and Muscle Bear hugs me as I try to sleep. The night is surprisingly muggy for Portland, Oregon, especially for this basement, which is usually frigid. I toss and turn and throw my blankets about, but can’t get to sleep. My roommate has already passed out, not plagued by the insomnia which is harassing me, so I can’t even share in his conversation as dreams continue to evade my weary mind.

It is summer. I am twelve or thirteen, I really don’t remember. So much of my childhood runs together in my mind, and I can’t separate sometimes things that happened at nine from things that happened at thirteen. Sam and I are the essence of boys, and we’ve been digging around in our backyard. We’ve dug a big cut in the ground that we mislabel a trench. We have little plastic cowboys and Indians that we bought at Raley’s down the street for a couple of bucks. The ditch has been filled with water, and it func-
tions as a river for our game. Pebbles have been gathered, the cowboys and Indians assembled as opposing teams. Now, we throw the rocks at the enemy pieces, hoping to knock them all down. The first team to kill all their opponents wins!

This time I'm twenty. I am visiting a friend of mine who lives on the college campus. It is the three-year anniversary of her brother's death, so I bought her a pie to comfort her. It is marionberry, the same sort of pie that Sam and I ate at Thanksgiving last year. Brianna and I sit together at the island in her kitchen, and we share stories of our brothers. She tells me how her brother Ryan always lived on the edge, how he made everyone around him laugh. "He was always so full of life, and everyone who knew him loved him." She shows me videos of him goofing around at the office where they used to work; he had cut holes in a box, and a friend inside was playing the office robot. I tell her about the trench warfare that Sam and I used to do, and how, on Google Earth, you can see the scars we left in our backyard. So we punch in the address, look up my old house on Decathlon Circle, and sadly discover that whoever lives there now has fixed the backyard up. The battleground is gone.

I don't remember how old I was. Sam and I are sitting on the back porch, a favorite hangout spot of ours on those hot August nights. I'm rocking back and forth on a gross tan-colored plastic chair. I don't know why, but Sam decides it's a good idea to shove me while I'm leaning back. I fall; my head cracks against the pavement. While I don't think I'm crying, because I'm old enough to know better, I am definitely yelling, because I'm freaking pissed. "Sam, you jackass! What did you do that for?" I later discover that I cracked my tooth on impact, and I bring this up often to make him feel guilty - because I am a jackass.

I am twenty-one, and Paul McCartney has replaced Iron and Wine on the stereo. I have filled up nearly six pages of my journal writing this account, stopping only to pour myself another glass of diet generic cola into the old plastic cup and send a couple of emails. It is now almost three a.m., and Denali the dog has gone inside. My tears have dried, and the torrent of emotions has subsided. I am once again a man in control of my feelings (which, I believe, is the only way a man ever wishes to be). I can still see Sam sitting across from me. I picture him vividly in my mind: his dirty bare feet, tight jeans, a gray wife beater, the necklace he wore when we walked to Jack in the Box after Christmas in 2009. ("Dude, you look like a douche. That necklace makes you look like a complete tool." "You're a jerk. And you look like a redneck, like a Luke Danes wannabe.") I can see his brown goatee, the moustache that grows so much like mine, his wry, friendly smile, the brown hair that mops thickly across his forehead. (I have always been jealous of how much body his hair has.)

How I wish he was here with me now - not just in the memories of the past, but here in late August 2011, sitting and sharing a two liter bottle of diet soda, talking about life and God and border collies, Star Trek and Hercules - here in the flesh: mortal; alive. But his flesh is gone, transformed into cinder and smoke, burned up in the flame of a crematorium, his ashes spread somewhere I'll never know. I couldn't even stay in Sacramento for the memorial service, because I had to fly home and return to work. I declined to visit his body at the morgue, because I wished to remember him as he was the last time I saw him, with his smile, his full brown hair, his big giant heart - before he boarded Southwest Airlines on November 26th, 2010 for home. I still see him, sitting inside of me. He is a part of me, and a parcel of my self was burned up with him, consumed in the ash and dust to which all return. We have always been inseparable.