

NONFICTION

HONORABLE MENTION

Daniel S. Riley



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Carrying

BY DANIEL S. RILEY

Colorado. 1988.

The school bell rings, followed immediately by the sound of chairs scraping backward across the black-and-white checkered floor. Two dozen second graders ricochet off one another as we compete for access to our cubbies. I pull on my mittens and then thread my hands through each arm of my coat. Our teacher holds the door open for us, stamping her feet to keep warm.

The volume of the world is turned down in winter. Every sound is muffled by the whispers of snowflakes. Every smell is made clean and crisp. A Colorado winter smells of pinesap and ozone, but there is an earthy undertone that is barely detectable if you inhale deeply enough. It's the petrichor scent of frozen earth. In the neighborhood across the playground, tendrils of blue smoke ascend from people's chimneys permuting the air with the bittersweet odor of creosote.

I follow the sidewalk around the low-slung brick building and wait at the front of the school for my little brother, Jimmy. I spot him toward the back of the other kindergarteners, his blue coat flapping open at his sides. "Can you zip me up?" he asks. I pull off a mitten with my teeth, zip his coat, and we start walking home. It's only a half-mile, but we're buffeted by winds pushing across the eastern plains.

Our house is an unadorned rectangle with a door centered between a pair of symmetrical windows. The entire country is populated with little rectangular homes just like ours. Winter is waning, but our front yard remains blanketed in snow, and our willow tree stands in skeletal silence against a gray monochromatic sky. We stomp the snow off our boots and open the front door. To our surprise, Dad is standing at the top of the stairs waiting for us. He asks if we want to go meet our new brother.

"Momma had the baby?" Jimmy asks excitedly. Then, more sullenly,

“Why didn’t you come get us from school? I wanted to see it.” *It*—meaning the birth. Jimmy has always been intrigued by anything involving blood and gore. In our room, he has a jar containing a human finger suspended in formaldehyde and a vial of gallstones that look like little oblong meteorites—ersatz gifts from our grandfather who is the Chief of Medicine at a hospital in the Pacific Northwest. Jimmy’s prized possession is a textbook of medical maladies. It’s full of patients with little black rectangles over their eyes to disguise their identities. An army of invalid Zorros, some have disfiguring skin conditions, others have suffered botched third-world medical operations. Jimmy calls this book *Near-Gruesome*. As in: *Do you want to go look at Near-Gruesome? Or: Elephantiasis makes your body swell up—I saw a picture of it in Near-Gruesome.*

It’s a short drive to the hospital. Inside, everything is clean and bright. Antiseptic. When we arrive at our mother’s room, I stop in the doorway in shock. She has tubes and wires attached to different parts of her body. Glistening sacks of fluid are suspended at her bedside, and machinery hums faintly. Her face is etiolated, and in my child’s mind, I think suddenly that the slightest puff of air could blow her away like a dead leaf. I have never seen her look so weak, and the image terrifies me.

It had been a difficult delivery. The umbilical cord was wrapped under the baby’s armpit, and every time doctors tried to rotate him, he would clench his arms together, pinching off the cord and depriving himself of oxygen. The doctors watched the zigzagging lines of the fetal heart monitor like augurs reading the future from the flight of birds.

The baby’s heartbeat was growing irregular. The baby was dying. Moving swiftly, doctors had made the decision to cut a horizontal opening across my mother’s belly, so the baby could be rescued. She lost a lot of blood, but the baby is alive.

Dad waves me forward as Mom tries to say something. Her voice is coming from far away, like the faint rustle of a radio broadcast cutting through static at the edge of its range. Her lips pucker open-and-closed like a goldfish, but the only word

I can understand is *boys*. Her eyes are glassy and half-closed; her voice is just static.

A nurse enters the room, and Dad tells her that Jimmy and I want to hold our brother. She sternly replies that the baby is sleeping and that Jimmy and I are too young to hold him anyway. The pitch of my father’s voice lowers, and through clenched teeth, he makes it clear that this is not a request—it is a demand.

“My boys are very responsible,” he adds. It’s the first time my dad has ever called me responsible, and I smile with pride. The nurse isn’t pleased, but she turns wordlessly and opens a cabinet, removing two light blue hospital gowns and handing them to Dad before marching out of the room. Dad helps us into our gowns, and he’s just finishing tying the draw string on the back of Jimmy’s gown when the nurse returns wheeling a crib.

She motions for me to sit in a chair in the corner of the room and then reaches into the crib and removes a little package wrapped in pale

blue cloth, no bigger than a football. She brings it toward me and kneels at my side. Cradling the package in one arm, she uses her free arm to position my hands so they overlap at the wrists with my palms up. She gently slides the package into my arms and touches my elbow, nudging my arms closer together, so my hold is firm.

It’s my baby brother. His eyes are wide and watery, gazing directly at me. His eyebrows are furrowed, giving him a look of stoic contemplation—or maybe skepticism. I inhale deeply, because he exudes a slightly sweet smell. It’s enchanting and pleasant. I look into his dark ocean-colored eyes, and he continues staring at me intently without blinking. He doesn’t cry or make any noise at all. He just stares.

The nurse gently takes him from me, and she repeats the same ritual hand-off to Jimmy. Then she returns the baby to the crib and wheels him out of the room without a word. We stay with Mom for a time before Dad explains that she and the baby need to rest.

A few days later, the newspaper prints the week’s birth announcements. There are rows of black-and-white babies’ faces, and all are dozing peacefully. All except one. In the center of the

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page is a baby whose eyes are wide open, and he stares out from the photo with a quizzical expression. The caption reads: Sean Phillip Riley, b. 02/03/1988.

Washington. 2015.

The Pacific Northwest is beautiful in summer, but it's a beauty that is earned with months of gray rain-drenched penance. I am walking aimlessly around a vineyard when I hear the crunch of footsteps on gravel and turn to see Jimmy approaching. He's wearing a gray suit, and I'm suddenly struck with the realization that this is the first time I've ever seen him in a jacket and tie. I never knew how handsome he is. He is tall and blonde with a confident but unreadable aspect. With his close-cropped hair, he has the kind of face that would be perfectly at home on a pedestal in a museum along with the busts of Roman generals.

"Hey," he flicks his chin upward in recognition.

I nod, and we embrace in a short awkward hug. This will become a theme of the evening—everyone reaching out to touch one another to ensure ourselves that we're all still here. As we break off the embrace, I explain that there's free wine at the nearby patio.

Jimmy heads in that direction, and I retreat to the tasting room, knowing it will be less crowded than the patio. The bartender loudly describes the winery's offerings in the overdressed argot of his trade, and I pick something at random. He pours my glass and without segue asks, "You're here for the funeral, right? Hey, we have a bet going. Was this the guy who was killed on TV?"

I know the story he's referring to—a murder during a live newscast days earlier in Virginia. "No," I say. The bartender calls out to some unseen person in the cellar, "It wasn't that camera-man." Barely dropping the volume of his voice, he turns back to me, asking, "So did you know him?"

"He was my brother," I answer. Sean would have loved the absurdity of this conversation. I take my glass of wine and leave without saying another word. As I exit the tasting room, I see the patio is now filled with people.

Someone I don't recognize calls out that we're about to begin the service. He's tall and looks to be in his late fifties. He has a white handlebar mustache, and he's wearing jeans, a corduroy jacket, and cowboy boots. This must be the preacher my mother hired for the occasion. Nothing about him seems authentic. He's not a cowboy. He's someone's *idea* of a cowboy, but only if that idea was formed entirely from reading Louis L'Amour books.

As I take a seat, the preacher holds the microphone close under his lips and begins to warble:

*Amazing grace, how sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me*

His voice flutters wildly out of key, but he attacks the song with such solemnity that the effect is darkly comedic. He even adopts a

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faux-southern drawl.

*I once was lost, but now I see
'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear
And grace my fears relieved*

People raise their heads, anticipating the song's end, but the preacher unexpectedly continues into the second verse. Sitting at the back of the space, I can see people awkwardly glancing at one another before bowing their heads and shuddering with aborted laughter.

*How precious did that grace appear
The hour I first believed
When we've been there ten thousand years
Bright shining as the sun*

The preacher opens his eyes and lowers the microphone almost imperceptibly. Again, the crowd prematurely lifts their heads only for him to launch without abandon into the third and fourth verses. He's practically yelling now with a wild look in his eyes.

*We've no less days to sing God's praise
Then when we first began
Amazing grace, how sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me
I once was lost, but now am found
Was blind, but now I see*

Jimmy and I exchange bemused glances. Brothers can communicate with expressions alone, and from the upturned eyebrows and pursed lips, I know exactly what Jimmy is thinking: Don't laugh, or I'll join you.

After the services, Jimmy stays behind to talk with friends and family, so Dad and I drive to the funeral home alone. The normality of the lobby is what makes it so disconcerting. We sit in the most unusual of circumstances on a normal couch in a normal waiting room filled with normal office chatter. Dad picks absentmindedly at cloth pills on his sleeve. He hasn't said much, but what is there to say? When you love your child, that love is the shape of your whole world. His world is changed now—reorganized—reduced. There is no language for this.

After a time, the funeral director arrives and escorts us back to his excessively normal office. "My condolences," he offers per-

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functorily as he inspects a collection of small white boxes on his desk, each with a receipt taped to the top. With dawning horror, I realize these are people's ashes and that Sean is somewhere among them. They look like little cake boxes, I think to myself, and then I immediately recall hearing somewhere a story about a woman who baked her mother's ashes into a cake and ate them. "Ah, here we are," the director announces triumphantly as he selects one of the boxes and peels the receipt from its lid. He hands it to my father. "Debit or credit for the balance?"

Outside, Dad finally speaks. "It's our Sean," is all he says, and we begin weeping in paroxysms of grief. We walk to the car, and once inside, Dad hands me the box, and I cradle it in my lap.

When Sean was a newborn, I'd sneak into his room just to hold him. His second winter, Jimmy and I built an igloo in the backyard, and we bundled him in layers of thick clothes and carried him out to our little ice fortress. The three of us sat inside until nightfall.

Our family took a trip to the ocean when Sean was a toddler. He was too unsteady on his feet to navigate the rocky shore, so I carried him out to the tidal pools, and he would poke the sea anemones and giggle as they puckered closed around his finger. Sean, Jimmy, and I were the kind of brothers who never wanted to leave one another's sides, so sometimes Sean would try to stay up late with us playing video games, but he'd always fall asleep, and I would have to carry him back to his own room. He was getting older and heavier then, but I kept carrying him.

Now I sit in my father's car carrying him on my lap in a little white box, lighter now than on the day he was born. I carry the box, and I carry the regrets of all the things left unsaid. And some that were. I carry his memory, and I'm afraid of setting it down.

I look down then and notice a label affixed to the top of the box. It reads: Sean Phillip Riley, d. 08/24/2015. 