THE SIBLING EFFECT
WHAT THE BONDS AMONG BROTHERS AND SISTERS REVEAL ABOUT US
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ONE

Band of Brothers—and Sisters

At the time, it seemed like a good idea to put my baby brother Bruce in the fuse box. Technically speaking, it wasn't a fuse box—it was more of a fuse cabinet, something larger than a medicine chest and much deeper, made of the same 1950s knotty pine that covered the rest of our playroom. Technically speaking again, my brother wasn't a baby. He was four years old—but to me, two years older than he was, that seemed pretty close to babyhood.

In any event, Bruce was small enough to fit inside the fuse cabinet, and if he scrunched up tight, there was just enough clearance for the door to be closed and latched behind him. Whether locking a four-year-old in a cabinet next to a panel of high-voltage, old-style, unscrewable fuses really was wise was something I honestly had not thought much about. The way I saw it then, he was probably safer inside than out.

I wasn't the only one who believed that putting Bruce inside the fuse cabinet was a smart plan. So did my other two other brothers; in
fact, the oldest, Steve, was the one who came up with the idea. Steve was good at thinking on his feet.

Steve was just over eight years old at the time; I was six and Garry was five. The spacing between children got shorter as my parents went along, until, at the end, there was only a thirteen-month gap between Garry and Bruce. That thirteen months made a difference, though. Garry was an unusually pretty child, with extravagantly long eyelashes and almost absurdly perfect features. But he found a way to compensate for his elegant appearance with a sort of alley-cat toughness that belied his looks—a toughness that I was sure he would not hesitate to call on when he needed it. Bruce was another matter. By the time he was three he was already nearsighted enough to have begun wearing glasses; they had tortoiseshell frames, which went nicely with his fair skin and red hair, giving him an incongruously academic look. He had not lost his baby-belly entirely and thus often wore his pants hiked well above his waistline, in the manner of a retiree whose belt can no longer accommodate his shape. Like the rest of us, he wore his hair in a velvety semi-crew cut, but his was offset by a small tuft of red curls at the front. I might have been just a child myself, but I recognized adorable and I recognized vulnerable, and I reckoned he was both. That was the reason that he, more than any of us, needed the protection of the fuse cabinet.

Our mother wasn’t aware of what we were up to when we decided where to stash Bruce. Our father didn’t know, either—and the fact is, our father’s not knowing was precisely the point. My brothers and I were by no means battered children. We never suffered the hard and regular beatings that can wreck minds and scar bodies and lay waste to whole childhoods. But we did get hit—often enough and hard enough that, even during periods of peace, we were always aware of a distant, angry danger. It was a danger posed mostly by our father.
A smart, funny, hotheaded man, our father was just twenty-two years old when he got married and twenty-four when he had his first son. I thought of him as tall, though at five feet seven, he was nothing of the kind. He wore black-framed glasses, had what seemed to be a permanent shadow of whiskers, and smoked L&Ms—a great, great many L&Ms, enough that they would kill him when he was only sixty-seven, though, as a child, I had no way of suspecting that. Long before his cigarettes claimed his health, they claimed the clarity of his voice, and even as a young man he spoke in a rasp. When he found something funny, which he did quite often, the rasp gave his laugh a particularly happy, full-throated sound. When he was angry and shouting—something that happened quite often, too—that rasp became a roar.

I didn’t know the source of my father’s temper, and I still don’t. Some of it, I suspect, was born of frustration. The son of a wealthy Manhattan businessman who’d made his bankroll during World War II, my father had gone to the University of Pennsylvania with the understanding that when he was finished, he would help run his father’s various business interests. Shortly before graduation, however, my grandfather liquidated his assets, parked them in his own portfolios, and announced that he would spend the rest of his life investing and reinvesting them.

My father’s plan B was decidedly less glamorous: he got married; moved to Baltimore, my mother’s hometown; and opened a wholesale toy business. My brothers and I—who were often the happy beneficiaries of the surplus swag he brought home from his stockroom—could imagine no better profession for a man, and we naturally assumed our father delighted in his work. But I suspect he stewed in it, too.

A week’s worth of such slow-cooked anger had to blow at some point, and it generally blew on weekends. Whatever my father might
have imagined his Saturday and Sunday mornings would be like after the fourth of his rambunctious sons was born, he could not have realistically assumed they’d be quiet. My brothers and I played boisterously, fought frequently, and broke things constantly. We’d jump on beds until the frames collapsed. We’d split into pairs and climb onto dressers to play a game we called “wrapping up and falling,” which, as its name suggests, involved nothing more than wrapping up in a shared blanket and falling—loudly—to the floor. The appeal is elusive now; it wasn’t then.

Most weekend mornings, we’d confine ourselves to the downstairs playroom, a perfectly appropriate choice, except for the fact that it was directly below my parents’ bedroom. My mother was a heavy sleeper—thanks, perhaps, to the early stages of a prescription-drug habit, which we knew nothing about at the time, but would come to know very well later—and did not seem disturbed by the din that always came from below. My father was another matter. He could be awakened easily—and stirred to anger quickly. And when he was, he became a frightening man.

The first indication we’d have that trouble was coming was the sound of pounding footsteps from above. Though the thumping started directly over our heads, the only way our father could reach us was by walking along a hallway outside the bedrooms, then down a short flight of stairs to the living room, turning through the kitchen and descending a half flight to the playroom level. That would take about a minute for an adult walking at a normal pace—less for an angrily striding one. To us, it seemed to take a whole lot longer.

When my father would finally reach the playroom, where we’d all be frozen in more or less the same spots in which we’d been standing when we first heard the footsteps, there was nothing disciplined or
systematic about his hitting. He would lash out at whoever was there, landing opportunistic blows rather than planned ones. He did not aim for our faces as far as I knew, but I don’t recall him taking pains to avoid them, either. I do recall him picking me up once by the front of my pajama top, his fisted hand holding a wad of fabric just under my chin, and being vaguely aware that I’d seen that move many times in cartoons, and that it always looked effortless on the screen. In real life, it was awkward and extremely scary. I also remember raising my hand once to protect myself, causing my father’s incoming blow to land squarely on a new wristwatch he had given me not long before. It seemed ironic to me that he would be the one to break a gift he himself had bought, but the watch was a Timex, and it took the punishment.

The hitting never lasted long and we would reliably quiet down afterward. But the memory of the episode and the fear of the next one would leave us shaken, so much so that we—Steve, really—decided we needed a plan. From now on, in the forty-five to sixty seconds it took our father to reach us in the morning, we would all conceal ourselves in different corners of the playroom. Garry would dive into a window-seat toy chest and close the lid. Steve would slide under the couch. I would duck into the playroom closet and climb to a shelf about midway up the wall. Bruce would get the fuse box. He balked at first when we suggested the plan, but we encouraged him.

“It’s a space capsule!” we said. “Just like Alan Shepard’s!” We had all watched Shepard’s Mercury flight on TV not long before and had been thrilled by it. Bruce went in willingly when we drew the comparison.

We practiced our scatter drill now and then to improve our stealth and timing. When we first put it into practice during a real Sunday emergency, I don’t recall how well it worked, but I suspect any memo-
ries I have now are conflated with how we wanted it to work. In my recollections—and certainly in my brothers’ and my retellings—our father would appear at the playroom door, look around confusedly, and begin calling our names, getting angrier and more frustrated at the silence that would greet him. We, of course, would preserve that silence perfectly, and he, mystified, would eventually turn and leave, mumbling and scratching his head. In our tellings, too, this worked weekend after weekend.

I doubt things ever played out this sit-comically. I suspect our father quickly caught on to what we were doing or we quickly gave ourselves away, and the hitting probably followed. We may not have even tried the stunt more than a few times—and, mercifully, we always collected Bruce safely from the fuse box afterward. It was only in later years that I would go a little cold, thinking about the deadly danger we courted on those mornings, squeezing a small child and high voltage so close to each other.

But if my memories of those episodes are murky, my brothers and I did take from them something clear and hard and fine: a deep and primal appreciation of the life-giving—and lifesaving—bond that we shared. The four of us, we came to know at a very deep level, were a unit—a loud, messy, brawling, loyal, loving, lasting unit. We felt much, much stronger that way than we did as individuals. And whenever the need arose, we knew we’d be able to call on that strength. Even now, several decades on, we still can.
The author (second from left) with his brothers Steve, Garry, and Bruce—many summers ago.

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