

## *Michael Milburn*

---

### My Brother, the Writer

Summer 1974: This was always going to begin here, in a blue Fiat parked between a horse pasture and a potholed tennis court. Beside me in the driver's seat, my brother Frank lights a cigarette and unstraps the leather brace from his bad knee, sweating onto the upholstery. We have just finished our daily tennis match on the court near our grandparents' horse farm, and as Frank gulps air and smoke in alternate lungfuls he jokes that that's enough healthy living for one day. When the unfiltered cigarette burns close to his fingers, he flicks it out the window and starts the car. There's no hurrying this ritual, which I recognize as his way of calming the anxiety that has plagued him since his return home that June.

I'm only sixteen, twelve years younger than Frank, but sense that I will one day write about this scene and that my words will have the nature of an elegy because he will die before me and too young. As Paul Valéry said of his fellow poet, Stéphane Mallarmé, "Near him while he was still alive, I thought of his destiny as already realized." A few weeks earlier, Frank had arrived at our parents' house on Long Island after two years in Utah—obese, chain-smoking, and so crippled by phobias that he couldn't drive himself across the Triborough Bridge to reach his psychiatrist's office in Manhattan. As his constant companion since then, I can't conceive of him having many happy, healthy years ahead.

Or healthy, at least, since Frank always seems happy. In every photograph I have of him, some taken at the bleakest times of his life, he smiles mirthfully, as if preparing to tell one of his characteristic self-deprecating jokes. In the car that day he mocks his desperation for a cigarette after the smokeless hour on the tennis court, and narrates the unwrapping of his knee brace like a sportscaster saluting an aging athlete. Even when directed toward others, his humor is softened by empathy. Years later in his hospital room I'll laugh as he speculates about the dieting failures of a baseball pitcher waddling across the TV screen. Frank had also been overweight as a young man, and except for a brief period of fitness during his Army service, struggled with obesity until his final illness.

During my childhood, my five older siblings and I formed two distinct units within our family. The first comprised my three brothers, born early in my parents' marriage and referred to as "the boys," and the second my two sisters and me. My brothers went off to St. Paul's School in New Hampshire when I was still an infant, so I never spent significant time with any of them until Frank moved back from Utah. By then I was at St. Paul's, and arrived home that summer after

my junior year to find him re-settled in his childhood room. Having grown up in the company of my sisters, I must have been hungry for a male role model, and Frank fit the part—he was old enough for me to look up to, but as the youngest of “the boys,” he knew what it was like to feel overshadowed by siblings.

Frank’s life up to that point was largely a mystery to me. I knew him mainly as the chubby boy standing alongside his slender older brothers in family photographs taken before I was born. I knew that he had been kicked out of St. Paul’s, from which his brothers had recently graduated. After receiving his diploma from a boarding school in Colorado, he served two years in the Army before enrolling at Franconia, a tiny counter-culture college founded in New Hampshire in 1963. I also knew that he was a writer, a vocation that I aspired to as well. The combination of his literary bent and deviation from our traditional family path made him glamorous in my eyes.

Franconia was a good fit for Frank, offering individualized instruction and written evaluations in place of grades. Accompanied by Smokey, a large black lab that had proven too rambunctious for my parents, he moved into an off-campus apartment and began a novel based on his Army experience. When he arrived home for Christmas, my father threatened to bar him from the house unless he trimmed the shoulder-length hair that had replaced his Army buzz cut. My mother was told to convey this ultimatum, and I listened from a hallway as Frank scoffed at her words. Eventually my father relented—our Christmas photograph from that year shows Frank holding Smokey and looking handsome with his black hair unshorn, while my father stands next to them, beaming in his benevolent host mode. I kneel in front with a big smile, as if delighted with the family drama that has enlivened my vacation, and with Frank’s courage in standing up for himself. I’m only twelve, but already recognize him as a useful model for my future rebellions.

According to my mother, Frank had gone out to Utah after Franconia to pursue a graduate degree in creative writing at the state university in Salt Lake City. I must have doubted this—my mother tended to burnish her accounts of her children’s endeavors until they resembled what she wished were true—because I wrote a short story in my English class at St. Paul’s in which the narrator wonders what his writer brother is really up to out west. At the end of the story, the mother announces that the writer has finished his novel and is coming back east to meet with New York publishers—the same respectable reason my mother gave for Frank’s homecoming.

The first time I saw Frank after his return from Utah I was watching television with my sister Nancy when he entered the living room. Nancy and I looked at each other in disbelief that this massive man was our brother. In college, Frank had managed to control his weight, if not maintain his military trimness, but now he appeared to have inhabited a much larger, older body. He lumbered between his bedroom, the kitchen, and the living room TV, leaving ashtrays full of smoked-down Lucky Strikes. Yet he still displayed the flashing humor and curiosity that I remembered from my brief encounters with him growing up.

Each weeknight Frank would call me downstairs to watch Johnny Carson’s monologue, praising the latter’s timing and dapper appearance. Carson could really “wear a suit” Frank would say, as if wistful for his own vanished fitness. I was in training for the upcoming football season and Frank admired my ability to stick to a daily workout regimen. From his first day back from Utah he flattered me with his interest in my life. My bedroom was located in the servants wing of our enormous house and my oldest brothers and even my father rarely ventured down the long hallway to visit it. But Frank came often to browse through my record collection and sit on my bed talking to me about school and my writing.

During one such visit, my short story about him lay out on my desk. I don’t remember if I assumed he would read it or perhaps wanted him to, but I went to answer the phone in the hallway, and when I hung up he was standing next to me. He said that he had come home to deal with some health issues and that whatever my mother had been saying about him was, in his

word, “bullshit.” The only other time he mentioned Utah was when I told him about discovering my fear of heights on a climbing trip at St. Paul’s. He said that one of his jobs in Salt Lake City had entailed climbing a water tower, which caused him severe panic attacks. I wondered if these had precipitated his other phobias or even a breakdown that had forced him to come home. He clearly hadn’t been studying writing. Sitting beside him in the den one night I read in a literary magazine that one of my favorite poets taught at the University of Utah. When I asked Frank if their paths had crossed, he said he had never heard of the man.

I never found out exactly what was wrong with Frank. I knew that he drove his Fiat into Manhattan every weekday to see his psychiatrist, both because my father complained about the cost of his treatment and because Frank had told me about fighting the urge to drive off the Triborough Bridge. I also learned that he had been prescribed Valium for his anxiety because he once joked about increasing his dosage after a contentious family meal. Spotting the bottle on his dresser one evening, I furtively shook out a pill and swallowed it. All through dinner I waited for the tension caused by my parents’ discord to melt away.

Otherwise, Frank’s demeanor revealed little evidence of his turmoil, or perhaps I was just too oblivious to notice. We got along well, and since both of my sisters were away that summer I was grateful for his company watching TV, playing tennis, and weathering the verbal abuse that my father aimed at my mother across the dinner table. Only once did I sense that Frank’s cheerfulness reflected anything but his state of mind. I had bounded into the living room, hurrying him to our tennis game, when he replied wearily that he simply couldn’t face it that day. In retrospect I can see that my presence served as a kind of therapy for him, getting him out of his room or the house, but demanded more willpower than he let on.

When Frank had been home for almost a year, my parents took Nancy and me to Bermuda for our spring vacation. In our tiny beach cottage Nancy told me something that not only illuminated Frank’s condition, but changed the way I looked at my own life. She knew no more than I did about what had happened out west, but had somehow learned that Frank’s anxiety was rooted in our parents’ conflict throughout his childhood. His attempts to remove himself from the house had only exacerbated the trauma. Now, unable to work and in need of expensive psychiatric care, he was forced to live at home and, disastrously I thought, once again witness the nightly scenes. Much later, on the eve of my own flight for a year in Europe, Frank would implore me to stay home and confront this toxic influence in person.

At the end of Frank O’Connor’s short story “Guests of the Nation,” the narrator says, “Anything that happened to me afterwards, I never felt the same about again.” Nancy’s news was that transformative for me. My parents’ antagonism—my father would viciously and often drunkenly belittle my mother while she, with a look of exasperation, apologized and promised to do better—was a constant of our family life. For as long as I could remember he had criticized her and she had endured it, sighing, falling mute, and then returning for more. I had never known him to act civilly toward her, and according to my oldest brother Dev, born in the first year of their marriage, he never had.

Their interactions followed a pattern. My father would complain about something my mother had said or done, deploring either its effect upon him or its general incompetence. He called her stupid, ignorant, and lazy with such regularity that the insults ceased to shock any of us, including her. I can hear them now with all the vividness of a tape recording: “How could you be so stupid?” “How could you do such a thing?” My mother tended to weather these attacks silently, with a stricken look, and only occasionally offered quiet rebuttals. “I only took the suits that you left out to the cleaners; I didn’t know I was supposed to look in your closet.”

My father had a disarming way of enlisting his children’s support. Often his criticisms so rattled my mother, and his mockery so undermined her confidence, that she made incorrect responses. As soon as one of us pointed out an error or laughed at her ineptness, my father

claimed us as accomplices: "You see, your children can't believe it either." My mother would purse her lips and shrug meekly, or give an exaggerated smile and say, "I'm awfully stupid, aren't I?" We should have defended her or urged her to defend herself, but the opportunity to feel superior to an adult, especially a parent, is a heady temptation for a child.

My parents' relationship upset me, but until my sister connected it to Frank's illness, it never occurred to me that all marriages weren't like theirs. The knowledge that their behavior had damaged Frank didn't make it any easier to endure, but it explained and to a small degree relieved my own chronic anxiety. Sharing a house with my parents was like living with two antagonistic dogs; the possibility was always present that my father's barely curbed animosity would erupt.

Even though Frank spent long periods in his bedroom, I knew he wasn't writing; his Olivetti typewriter remained in its case next to his desk, untouched since his return. Nor had he mentioned any new projects. Unlike my other siblings and me, Frank was often forthcoming about his passions, even in the perilous company of my father, who loved to wield his wit at his children's expense. No sooner would one of us confide an ambition or insecurity than he would begin to track it with smug negativity. Upon returning home from work he would quiz me about the timing and distance of my daily training runs, shaking his head over any lapses.

Once Frank announced his intention to work on his novel while on vacation at our summer house. He not only negotiated to use my father's detached office for several hours a day, but emerged for dinner each night with a detailed progress report. I was astonished by his candor as he confessed his difficulty in completing a chapter or developing a character, my father nodding impassively. I couldn't conceive of telling my parents anything personal at that time, much less sharing with them the particulars of my writing. To me, this kind of openness begged for my father's scorn. Inevitably, at the first slip in Frank's self-discipline or inspiration—a skipped writing session; a tone of discouragement—my father would begin to taunt him.

Yet Frank was always persistent in trying to engage my father, soliciting his opinion on books, emulating his appreciation for good food and appraisals of wine labels, and eventually writing a history of our family's most distinguished legacy, the sport of polo. The rest of us courted our father's approval in other ways, by sharing his love of riding, choosing careers in the law, or, in my case, mailing him my published poems and essays as an adult. But Frank, in many ways the least conformist of us all, was also the most determined to please him.

As my only sibling at home that summer, Frank served as a welcome buffer against my parents, deflecting their rancor by making fun of it. He loved to infantilize them. Many of my father's complaints centered on food and his efforts to lose his basketball-sized belly. He berated my mother for tempting him with fattening dishes in violation of whichever new paperback diet he had adopted. As he launched into one of his harangues and my mother nodded and smiled grimly across the table, Frank would turn to me and announce that one or the other needed to be escorted upstairs and put to bed. Too consumed by their feud to take offense, they would each act as if the joke was on the other, and join in the ridicule. Though I am sure that Frank employed his wit primarily in self-defense, I was grateful to him for lightening the dark mood of those dinners, and wonder if he also meant to shield me from the conflict that had proved so harmful to his own youthful psyche.

I always assumed that Frank's sense of humor had emerged in adulthood, after he escaped the shadows of his older brothers. How could the pudgy, troubled child I knew from photographs and family stories not have suffered from an inferiority complex? Growing up, I only saw the three boys together on school vacations, and remember Frank as the butt of his older brothers' teasing. But the week after his death a letter arrived from his best friend from grade school, reporting that Frank's playful side had been evident from an early age.

I remember Frank as if it were yesterday. As kids both of us were labeled "robust" size for clothes we were forced to wear from DePinna's department store. As a result we bonded and enjoyed each other's frequent company. Frank of course had two older brothers and one younger sister for many of our childhood years until Nancy came along and well before Michael arrived. Accordingly, he frequently was enjoying or fueling the sibling rivalries.

The letter brought back one of my earliest memories of Frank's mischievousness. After his discharge from the Navy, my oldest brother Dev also began to struggle with his weight. Once when Dev had embarked on a new diet, Frank snuck into his bedroom and scribbled the phrase "Be all you can be—eat!" inside the closet door. When I snuck in myself to inspect the crime, I discovered that over the years Frank had filled the wall with teasing graffiti. I can still see him shaking with glee when Dev stormed into the living room after this latest incursion, saying, "You know, you're really not funny."

For me, such incidents kept our family life congenial despite the noxious marriage at its core. After my talk with Nancy, I became aware of a solidarity among my siblings, an acknowledgement that our parents' friction surpassed normal marital bickering and that we had grown up in a destructive environment. Most of my conversations with my siblings consisted of commiseration. One evening Frank entered the living room as I watched the carping married couple played by Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor in the movie "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf." After a few minutes he patted my shoulder and said, "Familiar, isn't it?"

I took comfort in this camaraderie, though for me it would turn into an insularity that I found difficult to break free of. Even though I had left home at fourteen and was faring well at St. Paul's, I was extremely reserved in company other than my family's. Both in class and in the dining hall I felt most comfortable watching and listening. I assumed that Frank, so sensitive to the emotional weather at home, also observed a split between his public and domestic selves. I felt disappointed and a bit betrayed when he turned out to be as personable outside the house as when making faces at me across the dinner table.

After Frank had been home for about a year, he had progressed enough in his treatment to take on two part-time jobs, one as a writer for a reference book company and one as a courier in Manhattan. When the publisher offered him a full-time position, I took over his courier route for the summer after my graduation from St. Paul's. I passed my time between deliveries reading in the office where the dispatchers, two gregarious men in their late twenties, bantered with the other couriers. They often asked me about Frank, and once one of them observed, not unkindly, how different my brother and I were in temperament. He explained that Frank had been the life of the office, entertaining everyone with jokes and stories, and sharing take-out food from the deli downstairs.

I have always been frustrated by my reserve in public, attributing it more to a lack of self-esteem instilled by my father than to my true nature. Hearing about Frank's sociability, I wondered if our family had damaged me even more than it had him. I only seemed capable of expressing myself with my siblings and in the poems and stories I had begun to write at St. Paul's. I had not shown Frank any of these, except for the story he had glimpsed in my bedroom, but he had unwittingly encouraged my writing. Soon after his return from Utah, I found a bundle of his manuscripts packed into one of my parents' old steamer trunks in the attic. For several days afterward, I waited until he had left for his psychiatrist appointment, then went back upstairs to read through the draft of the novel he had begun at Franconia.

The Frank that I encountered in those pages wasn't radically different from the one who sat across from me at dinner or returned my serve on the tennis court, but his literary voice was a revelation to me. I doubt that I could have articulated what I meant by originality at that age, but

I thrilled to it in those manuscripts, in their electric language and self-assured storytelling. Like Frank's, my writing was autobiographical, and provided me with an outlet for my pain and confusion at living in such a troubled household. I worried that these qualities made it amateurish, a kind of glorified whining. My encounter with Frank's work taught me that writing about oneself could be an act not just of catharsis, but of artistry as well.

My literary debt to Frank had actually begun a few years earlier, when he returned home after graduating from Franconia. He stored his books on cheap metal shelves in our parents' basement. I hardly knew him then—he had gone from boarding school to the Army to Franconia, and would soon depart again for Utah—but that makeshift library sparked my interest in reading. The basement was my refuge in the house; I spent hours shooting hockey pucks and kicking soccer balls against its concrete walls. In between imaginary goal-scoring sprees I sat on a discarded sofa browsing through Frank's collection of contemporary novels and biographies. At fourteen, I was too young and sports-obsessed to want to finish any of them, but the fact that Frank had done so, copiously annotating and underlining, was not lost on me.

Even as a child I had associated Frank with books, which he invariably gave as presents. One Christmas, I had just begun unwrapping the new English edition of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* when he launched into an explanation of the merits and pitfalls of that novel for my sensibility. By evening, he had retrieved the book from the living room clutter and begun to reread it himself. At first, the books he picked out for me were too grown-up, but when the gifts resumed after his return from Utah, I found his choices more interesting than my high school English assignments. Over the next few years, we became each other's literary sounding boards. Frank had begun writing again and submitting his novel to publishers while I sent my poems to journals. We commiserated about our rejection letters, each grateful for the other's interest and sympathetic ear.

Two years of intensive therapy had improved Frank's life dramatically: in addition to writing and continuing to work at the reference book company, he had moved into an apartment in New York City with Maria, an Argentinian lawyer he had met through our cousins and would eventually marry. I even detected subtle changes in his personality. One night after my sophomore year of college, I had dinner with Frank and Maria in New York. We emerged from the restaurant onto the sidewalk, where I assumed we'd linger before I headed off to catch a train back to Long Island. Given that Frank and I had grown up being bossed around by older siblings, it wasn't in either of our natures to act decisively, so I was surprised when he swept past me and strode into the street to hail a cab.

I would have passed this off as a gallant gesture intended for Maria had Frank not also motioned me into the cab, saying we'd all be going back to their apartment for coffee. I was used to obeying my other siblings, but not Frank and not when ordered in such an imperious way. Still, it was hard to begrudge him his new assertiveness. The Frank standing by the cab was almost unrecognizable from the one who had trudged into our parents' living room two years earlier; he had conquered his phobias and lost much of the weight he had put on in Utah.

Frank also had a motive in bringing me to his apartment—to dissuade me from spending the coming year in Europe. As I sat on his sofa wondering when the last train left for Long Island, Frank asked about my college classes and Europe itinerary before arriving at the real reason for my visit. He argued that I was avoiding dealing with our corrosive family life in the same way that had led to his breakdown. Without specifically advising me to seek therapy, he said he wished he had addressed his troubles at my age, concluding, "I lost my youth."

Frank also developed an interest in socializing at this time that was at odds with our family's dedicated misanthropy. For all of his popularity in the courier office, he had never been outgoing. After his return from Utah, he hadn't visited any old friends or sought new ones, and for months only ventured outside to see his psychiatrist or play tennis with me. He could be

counted on to join the rest of the family in ridiculing outsiders and grumbling at the prospect of guests. This was standard anti-social behavior in our house, and when Frank began to deviate from it, we all noticed. Where one of my other brothers might boast about avoiding an old friend's phone calls, Frank would mention a reception he had attended with Maria's colleagues. He spoke excitedly about new people he had met, and—unheard of in our family—delighted in proclaiming and showing his love for his spouse.

We attributed these changes to his therapy, and wondered if they were genuine or if he had simply adopted a façade. The fact that he was physically and emotionally healthier than he had ever been didn't stop us from making fun of him out of his hearing. I suspect that we did this partly out of jealousy—on some level my siblings and I would have liked to live in a house where sociability and demonstrativeness were acceptable, and we secretly admired Frank for flouting those family taboos. But we were our father's children, bred for contempt, so we mocked this new version of Frank the way we did everyone who threatened our world.

My father was particularly critical of Frank, even as he supported him in important ways, financing his therapy and later using his connections to get Frank's first novel read by an editor at Doubleday, which published it in 1983. His nickname for Frank was "the wounded bird," coined to taunt my mother for rising to Frank's defense whenever my father teased him. Although I was too young to have witnessed Frank's boarding school failures, I sensed that they, along with his youthful heaviness and lack of athletic ability, had caused my father to write him off as a son to be proud of. I can imagine the mood in the family car as my parents drove Frank home in disgrace when he flunked out of St. Paul's, his brothers' and father's alma mater.

My father was a paradox: while promoting reclusiveness at home, he loved golfing with his country club cronies and lunching with his fellow lawyers on Wall Street. He drank and ate to excess and boasted about it afterwards. My two oldest brothers occasionally joined him in these pursuits and my father related to them as friends; the three would disappear for long alcoholic lunches, then return home and review their consumption. Frank wasn't invited on these outings, even after he turned into an epicure himself, name-dropping Manhattan restaurants and complimenting the wine my father served. Instead of welcoming Frank's interest, my father resented him for claiming tastes he hadn't exhibited before and couldn't afford. For once I concurred with my father's judgment. I had always counted on Frank to share my disdain for our family's patrician trappings—the rigid educational and professional traditions, the preoccupation with fine wine and food.

I felt the same way about the next subject that Frank embraced: polo. My grandfather had been a world-class player—asked to name his all-time team, the polo icon Tommy Hitchcock replied, "Milburn, Milburn, Milburn and Milburn." My father and two oldest brothers had carried on his legacy. Frank hadn't played polo as a youth, yet he announced his intention of writing a history of the sport. From a literary standpoint, his plan made sense; by that time he had published two novels, and had in my father the world's leading authority on polo as played during the height of its popularity in the 1920s and 30s. No doubt the latter qualification helped persuade Sonny Mehta, editor-in-chief at Knopf and a polo player himself, to commission Frank to write the book. Mehta must have known that for anyone knowledgeable about the sport, Frank's last name on the cover would be an impeccable endorsement.

My father reacted cynically to Frank's plan. He never discouraged him to his face, and consented to be interviewed, but made it clear out of Frank's hearing that he considered him unqualified for the job. I disapproved for different reasons. I knew from scrapbooks full of yellowed *New York Times* clippings documenting my grandfather's career that in addition to being an exciting and dangerous sport, polo was the quintessential blueblood pastime. For every picture or description of a spectacular fall, there was an accompanying mention of which royal personage or heiress had observed it from the sideline. For this reason, my grandfather's

celebrity stirred in me as much ambivalence as pride. I doubted that Frank identified with this world any more than I did, yet he had appointed himself its chronicler.

That said, *Polo: The Emperor of Games* is my favorite of Frank's three books, the one truest to his wit and conversation, and the one that taught me the most about my family and about him. He managed to turn both his naiveté and my father's skepticism to his advantage:

I asked my father, Devereux Milburn, Jr., who goes back a long way in polo, if the back-breaking incident was true. I deliberately phrased the question provocatively: "Did you know that Tommy Hitchcock once pulled up a horse and broke its back?"

The question stirred him. "Goddammit," he said.

He had rarely spoken about polo since retiring from the game in the late 1950s. He was a good player and for a long time had served as chairman of the U.S. Polo Association. He was president of the Meadow Brook Club on Long Island, the cradle of American polo, for forty-one years.

"I hope you're not going to publish that story," he added.

"Why not?" I asked innocently. "It's a good story."

"Tommy never broke a horse's back in his life. X [the patriarch of the family] made it up because he was mad that Tommy didn't like his horse.

Frank was fifty when he completed this book, at the peak of his literary confidence. At family gatherings he and I always found time to sit apart and talk about writing, vehemently endorsing and dismissing books whether we had read them or not. As we walked to our cars after one of these meetings, Frank handed me a business card and asked me to send him my recent poems. Beneath his name and address on the card the word "Writer" was printed in capital letters. I thought of all he had overcome to claim that vocation, reconciling his talent, temperament and background in a way that allowed him to take pride in his accomplishments. I recalled a time thirty years earlier when he had lived at home briefly before entering the Army. Nancy and I were small children and he would baby-sit, playing with us on the front lawn. He loved to pause in the middle of a vigorous game, brush his hair off his forehead, grin, and say, "This will be the picture on my novel."

When the polo book appeared in 1994 Frank had been writing full-time for ten years. The effects of this sedentary work are visible in his progression of author photographs; each shows him heavier than the last. While he never gained back all of the weight he had lost since Utah, he ate recklessly enough in his fifties that he contracted obesity-related diabetes. Despite his books' positive reviews, he encountered disappointments with his new writing, failing to find a publisher for a novel set in Argentina. In the late nineteen-nineties he and Maria separated and he moved into his own apartment, though they remained amicable and Frank visited regularly with their two daughters. As his health deteriorated, he became more reclusive, no longer appearing at our parents' house on holidays.

I saw him only twice in this period—at our father's funeral in 2000 and again at our mother's in 2005. He looked more aged and drawn each time, and on the latter occasion had begun suffering from macular degeneration, which impaired his vision. After our mother's service, we traded e-mail addresses, and from then until he died three years later, communicated almost exclusively in this way. Though limited in his ability to write and read, he still loved to chat about books.

I have purchased most of the books you recommended, so never say I don't follow good advice. I'm also considering *The March* by Doctorow because in the end everything boils down to Lincoln and the Civil War. I have a feeling that I don't know enough about

Andrew Jackson, a crucial president, so I've bought a couple of biographies. God, there is so much to read and I feel strongly Harry Truman's dictum that the only thing new under the sun is the history we don't know. Unfortunately, my curiosity is too big for my eyesight, so I plod along at an hour a day.

As his health worsened, with myriad new symptoms compounding his diabetes, he checked into New York Hospital regularly. After one such emergency, I drove down from Connecticut—he had been avoiding people for so long that none of his siblings had seen him for over a year. When the nurse announced me, I heard his exclamation of pleased surprise. He had written that he'd lost weight since our mother's service, so his emaciated appearance didn't shock me. He was alert and curious, and we talked for half an hour. I had brought him books and CDs, but one look at his uncluttered bedside confirmed that he no longer occupied himself with either. Content to watch sports when his vision permitted, he followed a Mets game on TV as we talked, joking about the team's futility. No matter how much Frank changed over time, the quality that defined and endeared him to me, his sense of humor, never did. I needed only a few minutes in his company to spark his natural silliness.

The Mets are currently suffering from a power outage, but Pedro is on the mound tonight. The other day he threw a curve ball that nearly sent the batter to the Hospital for Special Surgery—the knees buckled, the shoulders collapsed, the neck stretched out like it was welcoming the guillotine.

As I knew from conversations with Frank going back to my childhood, he remained upbeat regardless of what kind of physical shape he was in. Tacked to the bulletin board above my desk is the sheet of personalized stationery on which he wrote his e-mail address after our mother's service. At the time, he was ill, living alone, and losing his eyesight, yet printed beneath his name at the top of the paper is the Italian phrase "Il buon tempo verra"—bright days will come. I like to think that this view sustained Frank through his constant setbacks. Saying goodbye to him in his hospital room, aware of his bleak prospects for recovery, I marveled that he kept from spiraling into a depression; his circumstances would have long since pushed me to despair.

I've been out of commission these last months—highly anemic, waiting on dialysis and looking forward to a kidney transplant soon. Alas, the diabetes has caused things to decline precipitately, but the big immediate problem is the fatigue from anemia. I'm taking intravenous iron to boost the system. I still have lots of trouble reading, but It's getting better, though small print is an effort. I mostly watch political shows and wait for baseball.

I didn't see him again. After another hospital stay it was clear that he could no longer care for himself. He moved into a nursing home near Columbia University, leaving his computer behind, which ended our e-mail correspondence. He continued to decline visits, at first on the grounds that he was exhausted by his dialysis sessions, and then because he was not up to seeing anyone. He stopped answering his phone. As months passed without our speaking, I realized that except for when we had both lived at home and during our e-mail exchanges, our contact was always infrequent. After he died I asked myself if we were truly close or if I had imagined the intensity of our bond. If he was alive now I wouldn't rush off to be with him; rather, we would continue our solitary existences punctuated by occasional meetings. For me, our relationship thrived through my satisfaction in our similar sensibilities and pride in his being my brother. Maybe

that's not so different from what occurs between two people who see each other often—the important part is the same.

Why haven't I heard from you since June? What are you reading and listening to? My health is pretty good. I just concluded a series of laser treatments and now have to wait a couple of months to see if there's an improvement. If not, I have a real problem, but my doctor is optimistic. The worst-case scenario is that I get a brace of seeing-eye golden retrievers and hire a midget to guide me left or right with verbal commands. I have been outfitted with reading glasses powerful enough to start a fire, so I'm back to the books. Please pass on a list of anything that has caught your eye.

Frank died in August 2008 at the age of sixty-three. There was no sudden decline; he had been so sick for so long that his body couldn't endure any longer. A few weeks later I drove down to Manhattan to have lunch with my son. I parked uptown near Columbia and walked to the subway. My route, with a slight detour, took me past Frank's nursing home on Amsterdam Avenue, across the street from the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. As I walked by the entrance I felt a surge of annoyance at him for refusing my calls and visits that I knew would have lifted his spirits. Then a happier thought took over, of Frank in the waiting room of the courier office, entertaining his co-workers and sharing the spoils of his latest deli run. I knew that if I went inside the home and mentioned his name, his nurses and fellow residents would recall him this way—it was the generous, personable side of my brother that I once thought existed only for me.

I'm delighted beyond words that you're back to poetry, and think you're going about it the right way. The sheer dailiness is essential. Remember, as Malraux said, even an hour is a lot. Please please please keep up with the essays. I'm reading very good things about the new FDR biography by Smith. Surely the greatest president since Lincoln and makes the Reaganesque neo-con dunderheads look silly. Oh, and there's a book called *Hubbub* about English filth and dirt and scrofula in the seventeenth century. Lots of good disgusting stuff. There is a description somewhere of Samuel Pepys' kidney stone operation that still gives me nightmares. I also hear good things about *Seizing Destiny*, which has epic sweep. I'll try *Fadiman* and *Out Stealing Horses*. Baseball in less than a week, the Rangers heading for the playoffs. Well, it doesn't get any better for this potato.