

If My Brother Was Still Alive (if only...)

By

Barry Jay Kaplan

WHY I LIKE IT: *Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes...It's hard to sit here and say the things that I like about Barry Jay Kaplan's, "If My Brother Was Still Alive." Not because the story isn't beautifully written, but because of the profound sadness that permeates throughout.*

I've always been of the ilk to believe in the author to tell the truth – not necessarily the narrator, not the speaker, for sure, but that the author behind the voice has a kernel of truth behind them. I've been tricked well before, in a good way (i.e. – oh, I just made that up), I have been lied to before (i.e. – I blatantly made that up and it's bullshit), or I have just sat back and not cared whether the truth mattered or not.

The truth doesn't matter with this story, it can only help and make the breath of the word more palpable.

I wouldn't know what to do if either of my brothers died.

I would be inconsolable.

I would probably spend the rest of my days burning down other people's lives because they weren't there while everyone else was.

The brother in Kaplan's story expresses grief better than I can.

The brother in Kaplan's story has a depth and a history of which I cannot compare my family to.

At no point in time does that make this story any less poignant.

"If My Brother Was Still Alive," is an honest, well-crafted piece that breaks down the heart and doesn't necessarily build it back because there is nothing left to replace the hole that is left when someone is gone.

I think if there is one pattern that I've written about with the stories for issue 11 then it is about how we overcome loss, rise to the hardships that face us, and, most importantly, how we learn to move forward.

Kaplan's work is another one of the great pieces we have for you to read.

My advice may be garbage, but I often suggest you take it.

Enjoy.

QUALITY QUOTABLE (*for the love of language...*)

...and I'd mop up the roast beef gravy with a hunk of seeded rye like I could not do at home and he'd push a napkin at me and tell me to wipe my mouth before we left and we'd laugh, then leave and shake hands and I'd watch him go through the revolving doors into his building, a guy in a suit with all the guys in suits, and I'd be thinking *I've got a brother* and walk away so pleased my chest was full, and run across the street clearing my throat and laughing out loud.

If My Brother Was Still Alive

By Barry Jay Kaplan

If he were still alive, my brother and I would probably be speaking, instead of him holding out on me until the disease that got him finally got him, and there was I with egg on my face, still not speaking to him, still holding out on him as well, full of self-righteous rage, unforgiving and glad of it, unfurling it and waving it around like a flag that belonged to my country and not his.

*

If he were still alive, my brother would probably have rethought his edict that I was not allowed to visit his house, supposedly not because of what I was but because of what the neighbors would say, would have rescinded his rule of not letting me see his children for fear, unstated but firmly held, they would be sexually corrupted, and would have permitted me to forgive him for these sins so that I would not have to replay them every night when I go to sleep or retell

them whenever anyone asks how's your brother, as if we had been and were still in some kind of contact, no matter how seldom, so that I would actually have some new facts (anecdotes? gossip? tales?) to relate but I don't, I only have the ones they've already heard, *no no no no and no!*, that I can't get out of my mind because the cruelty is so fresh and I get such pleasure being right and wronged.

*

When my brother was still alive, I should not have gone to his son's wedding as a gesture of good will, not flown to North Carolina, rented a car and booked a hotel room on my own dime and driven to his house to be introduced to all his new southern friends as if he and I were still close, which we never were, and certainly would not have wound up in the kitchen with him, with him telling me how glad he was that I made the trip, that it meant a lot to him, that it meant a lot to our mother to see the two of us together, and I'm thinking: yeah, and all I had to do was fly a thousand miles, leave my dog and my boyfriend home, because you're my brother and your son is my nephew, as if that meant anything when you are the very people-*family* don't laugh--who have treated me like an outcast.

*

When my brother was still alive and my mother had to be moved to the nursing home, I should have *demand*ed that he help me clear out her apartment and not accept his *I can't* as a reason, even though I was to find out later, years

later as it happened, and as it happened was told the information by him himself, my brother, who couldn't admit to me at the time that he was in agonizing pain and about to go have surgery the very week our mother went into the nursing home and her apartment had to be cleaned out, leaving it up to me to do it alone, plus arrange for my mooching cousins to come over, not to help me clean but to take whatever they wanted, which included, of course, my mother's television set and her lounge chair and dishes, but he could have but didn't tell me right then, right then on the phone but instead chose just to stonewall me and say: *sorry, I can't help*, and it was snowing when I had to drive to her apartment and make arrangements with the Good Will to come and take the walker, the princess phone, the box of cooking utensils and a garbage bag filled with Danielle Steele novels.

*

When my brother was still alive and we were still not speaking to each other, I shouldn't have listened to our parents blaming me for it, so that every time they did their *what's with you and your brother* routine I wouldn't have to say *it's him it's not me* and watch them sigh as if I was the reluctant one, or have to put up with them urging me to speak to him by calling him while I was in their house and forcing me to take the phone and them listening while he and I apparently had a "conversation," only it was just a lot of *hey how you doins* and *what's new with yous* and who the fuck cared, not him, not me—them, I

suppose, for sure, and I have to wonder to this day why, what was so important we had to talk?

*

If my brother were still alive, the memories I have of our early years would not be tainted with the sour regrets and missed opportunities they are now, so that I think about sleeping in the same room with him and playing records together on Saturday mornings, and him carrying me to bed when I fell asleep in the living room, and teaching me how to whistle, all of those memories, since he turned out to be the kind of closed off, frightened, judgmental guy he turned out to be and probably always was only who noticed, who cared about anything like a person's character then, when there were such important things to evaluate someone by like who they rooted for and the kind of sneakers they wore and if their hair held a wave and if they smoked Kents or Kools, those memories are all sour now, sour thoughts that bring me down, that scratch at my insides and make me angry sometimes and sometimes sad, the rat, how he ruined things.

*

If my brother were still alive he'd of course have the same job he always had, a clean place, an office where I would visit him regularly and we would go out and have a guy's lunch, the steam table at McAnn's Bar & Grill and me just old enough to drink a beer when we started that routine, and how it was a kick to take the elevator to a high floor and tell the receptionist *tell my brother I'm here*

and her saying *who're you?* and me saying *his brother*, that was something that was working great, didn't need fine tuning, we talked about our parents, felt the same way about both of them, hated him/loved her and why was he always either angry or clammed up and when was she going to give him a divorce or at least walk out, and I'd mop up the roast beef gravy with a hunk of seeded rye like I could not do at home and he'd push a napkin at me and tell me to wipe my mouth before we left and we'd laugh, then leave and shake hands and I'd watch him go through the revolving doors into his building, a guy in a suit with all the guys in suits, and I'd be thinking *I've got a brother* and walk away so pleased my chest was full, and run across the street clearing my throat and laughing out loud.

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If my brother were still alive, it would all be the same is my guess because you are what you are, I know where he came from and how he was raised, I know those parents of his and what they did and didn't do, and that's how you become, that's your school. So how'd I become the guy I became, coming from the same place with the same cast of characters and the same rules about life and the same wisdom and the same set of what's right and what's not and do you lie or tell the truth, are you nice or at least pretend to be, do you excel or just go along and not have anyone say anything bad about you, behave so well, toe that line so rigorously there's no fault to find. If my brother was still alive, and we were still talking, we could maybe discuss this and he could maybe give

me his insights into how I got to be the way I am instead of being afraid of it, me, but he's not and we're not, so we won't and he can't and I'm stuck, repeating myself and not figuring out anything and this persistent buzz of what'd be if he was still around.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *'If My Brother Was Still Alive' is certainly a personal story, even confessional in its form, in which the narrator attempts to exorcise his unresolved feelings about his relationship with his brother after his brother has died. Ultimately, after peeling away the past, he is left only with the irresolvable present.*

AUTHOR BIO: My short stories have appeared in Descant, Bryant Literary Review, Central Park, Appearances, Talking River, Kerouac Review, Northern New England Review, Upstreet, Brink, Amarillo Bay, Perigee, Apple Valley Review, Drum, Brink, New Haven Review, Club Plum, Blue Mountain Review, Fleas on a Dog and others and have three times been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. One of my stories was selected as one of five Best Stories on the Net Anthology and nominated for the Million Writers Award. I am the author of three historical novels Black Orchid (with Nicholas Meyer), and Biscayne (Simon and Shuster) both selections of the Literary Guild and That Wilder Woman (Bantam Books). With co-author Rosemarie Tichler, I have written and edited the interview books Actors at Work and The Playwright at Work. I have an MFA from the Iowa Writers Workshop where I was research assistant to Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. I am currently working on a novel about the Jews who fled Germany in 1938 and found safety in Shanghai.

As a playwright I have won the Whitfield Cooke Best Play Award from New Dramatists and a grant from New York State Council on the Arts for my history play, Blood and Water. Landscape of Desire is published by Smith and Krause and was the American representative to the 25th Australian National Playwriting Conference. My musical biography of Rock Hudson, Rock and Roy (music by Stephen Weinstock), was developed at New Dramatists with grants from the Frederick Loewe Foundation and the Cameron Mackintosh Foundation and had workshop productions at New Dramatists in New York and at the Chicago Shakespeare Theatre, both directed by Simon Callow. The musical Step Aside had workshops at the York Theatre in New York, and at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival. Like Love (music by Lewis Flinn) won a DramaLeague New Directors/New Works Project Prize and premiered at the New York Musical Theatre Festival. *His story* Amsterdam too was published in **Issue 9**.

