My Brother, David

I had been out of town for nearly a month, returning just before dark on a Friday evening. It was good to be back home and I was delighted to find that my tomato plants were flourishing and that the first cherry tomatoes of the season were ripe. I picked one on the spot and ate it. Delicious. I knew there would be many more—if I could keep the thieving squirrels away.

The next day was pleasantly sunny and the air a comfortable eighty-two degrees. Not like Florida where I had just spent three-and-a-half hot and rainy July weeks painting and plumbing and doing other maintenance to the mobile home I rent out during the winter months to snow birds from Canada.

Now that I was home, I needed to see my brother, David, whom I had placed in a long-term care facility three months earlier. As I approached my brother's room, I could see its door was just barely ajar. As David always kept his door wide open, that meant only one thing: someone was doing a bit of maintenance on my brother. Through the sliver of an opening, I could hear a woman chatting inside the room as she adjusted what looked like a clean white top sheet. I could also smell feces. When the woman moved, I could see my brother's face: calm, serene, and sporting about five days-worth of beard. As usual, the TV was blasting.

I turned away and found a place to sit in the common room down the hall while my brother got cleaned up. I sat alone, enjoying the quiet. Then I noticed the Toledo Scale in the corner of the room. I got up and stepped on it. It read 234 pounds of "Honest Weight." Not bad after being on vaca for nearly a month. I removed my tennis shoes and had another go: 232 pounds. Even better.

About a year ago, before David got sick, he was still living alone in a government subsidized one-bedroom apartment in downtown Toledo overlooking Cherry Street, one of the city's main arteries. I stopped by for a visit. As usual, he was seated in his motorized wheel chair, his hair a mess, his teeth dirty, and in need of a bath. My brother never put much stock in personal hygiene, so I wasn't shocked. But that didn't stop me from giving him a lecture about taking

better care of himself. As usual, he sat there silently, not absorbing a single word I said, wondering why I didn’t leave him alone. He’s gotten along just fine for over forty years without much help from me, thank you, and he didn’t want to hear my harping. I knew that, but couldn’t stop myself.

Changing the subject, I asked if he needed me to do anything for him. He wagged his head no as I stepped into his dark, little kitchen area. I checked out his frig and freezer to see what he was eating. Then I griped about all the dirty dishes cluttering the sink. Obviously, the aide responsible for assisting my brother wasn’t putting much effort into her job. David’s living room floor wasn’t in much better shape. Before I left, I gathered the library books and miscellaneous bills off the floor and found a more orderly place for them amid the mess. I didn’t stay long. On my way out, I walked up to David, rubbed his gut and asked: “When are the twins due?” I’ve been asking him the same question for years. As usual, he smirked, and lightheartedly answered: “Any day.”

David is in his sixties now, and I am three years older, and his being heavy isn’t a joke. On doctor’s orders, David gave up beer, but he substituted regular Pepsi. Fewer carbs, but a lot more calories. I can only guess how much he weighs, but it’s too much for me or my brothers to lift. The fact that his legs have atrophied to the point he can’t support his own weight doesn’t help. He’s become a dead lift now, and our aging backs can no longer tolerate the strain.

The long and short of it is that it’s impossible for David to take of himself. But as I’ve said, taking care of himself has never been a priority of David’s. Even if such concerns were bright, shining stars, they would remain a constellation he is blind to. Which has caused me to suspect that his day of reckoning was right around the corner.

Case in point: about a year ago, my brother got seriously sick. It started with a sharp pain in his gut. The pain was severe enough that he called an ambulance. He was admitted to a nearby hospital. Three days later I got a call from a nurse on the cardiac unit letting me know David was in the hospital and was soon to be discharged to a rehab facility. All news to me. Not letting me know what was going on—unless he couldn’t avoid it—that’s David’s M.O.

I got in my car and drove to the hospital in a near-blinding rain. When I found his hospital room, the nurse told me David was being discharged to a rehab facility with the goal of strengthening his upper body. The ultimate goal was that he be able to use a slider board to get out of bed and into his wheelchair without help. He’d need some clothes for the rehab facility. That seemed simple enough.

Before I left to retrieve some clothes from his apartment, which was just down Cherry Street, I asked David why he hadn’t called me sooner. “I don’t have my phone,” he said. I took a deep breath and released it loudly. “Do you even know my number?”

He did and recited it. It was because he did knew my number that the nurse had been able to call me. “So why didn’t you have the nurse call me sooner? Like a couple days ago?”

There was a period of silence, which was not uncommon when talking to David. Sometimes it took him a moment to process, not because he is stupid, but because there’s something not quite right with his wiring. In the end, David didn’t have a good answer so he averted his eyes.

I asked my brother for his apartment key. He hadn’t brought it. It was still hanging on the wire basket that adorned the front of his motorized wheelchair, right where he always kept it. No problem, I thought. The only glitch was that his wheelchair was still in his apartment. It hadn’t made the trip with him to the hospital.

I was soon off to his apartment building, a subsidized seven-story high-rise. David lived on the sixth floor. If the place ever caught fire and the elevator was out of service, he wouldn’t stand a chance.

To enter the building, I needed a pass key, which I didn’t have. Of course it was hanging on David’s wheelchair basket, right along with the door key. So I waited until a resident took pity on me and let me in. After thanking the resident, I took a quick right at the first hall and stepped into the manager’s office. She was reluctant, however, to surrender her duplicate key.

“Are you David’s emergency contact?” she asked.

“I don’t know for sure, but I think so,” I told her.

The manager searched the appropriate file cabinet and asked if I was so-and-so; I told her I was and produced my ID to prove it. That, however, didn’t help much. She was still reluctant to let me into David’s apartment.

“Where’s David’s key,” she asked?

“It’s in his apartment hanging on his wheelchair” I replied. “He was taken by ambulance to St. Vincent’s Hospital three days ago. You know that, don’t you?”

She did not.

That made me feel real good for my brother—gone three days and no one knew or apparently cared. At least not in the office.

After getting jerked around for another twenty minutes, the administrator finally got around to telling me what the real problem was: my brother’s apartment was scheduled to be treated in a day or two for bed bugs.

“Well,” I said, miffed, “I have no intention of transporting bed bugs to the rehab facility.”

So I left in a huff and headed over to Kohl’s and bought David some new clothes. Socks. Underwear. Sweat pants and T-shirts. Rehab clothes. And then I headed over to the rehab facility and delivered his new clothes.

David stayed at the rehab facility for ten days, not much better off when he was discharged than when he arrived. There was no way he had the strength or dexterity to maneuver a slider board; he would forever need help getting into and out of his wheelchair and his bed. Still, after ten days of being treated like a prince, David was feeling better. He definitely had a way of ingratiating himself to people. The staff loved him.

During his stay I suggested to David that he consider moving to an assisted living facility. Without hesitation, he said no. I could hear the stunned desperation resonate in his voice. He’d be giving up everything he knew: his friends, his independence to motor around downtown, his trips to the library, and his season tickets to Walleye hockey. And who would visit him? With regularity, that is? He wasn’t ready for such a severe degree of change.

Three months later, David had another stomach pain. This time he didn’t call an ambulance. Instead he rode his motorized wheelchair a half-mile down a very busy Cherry Street and got himself admitted to the hospital again. This time, however, the staff figured out that David was having heart trouble. I didn’t have to wait three days to get a phone call from a nurse. Only a few hours. There was a strange urgency in the nurse’s voice, but not about my brother. She demanded that I come immediately to the hospital and remove David’s wheelchair from hospital grounds. They had absolutely no intention of admitting the hitchhikers David had brought with him, namely bed bugs.

Feeling indignant about the demands the hospital staff was making, I go through three rounds of administrators, each time ascending the ladder of authority, each new voice requesting more calmly than the prior one that I retrieve my brother’s wheelchair and get it off their grounds. If not, the highest power cautioned, calmly, it may end up in the trash. That would be a six-thousand-dollar mistake on your part, I told him.

Given the time between phone calls, I had a chance to consider their concerns and figure out what I could do to retrieve the wheelchair and not infest my mid-size SUV at the same time. I requested that the hospital wrap the chair in garbage bags. The top administrator agreed. I then contacted a nephew and he helped me take the chair back to David’s apartment. This time, we have the keys.

The next morning, David has two stents placed in a single artery just off his heart. That artery, I was told by the surgeon post-op, had been nearly fully occluded, which could explain David’s pain. Unfortunately, David has another artery that also requires a stent. That artery is eighty percent blocked, but that operation will have to wait until David recovers sufficiently from the first surgery.

David is actually scared now that he might die. His voice cracks when we talk about his long-term care. David’s scared enough that he’s willing to give up the apartment he’s lived in for forty years. Plus, it’s a chance to get away from the bedbugs. It’s also a chance to have reliable professionals take good care of him and serve him three meals a day. (Which is a far cry from the health-service workers who spent half their time in David’s apartment on the phone not taking

care of him or his apartment.) Not a bad deal if you're getting older, sicker, and can admit to yourself that it's time for a change. His life could be much easier and he could get healthy.

I can see in his blue eyes and in the slowly emerging smirk on his unshaven face, that having someone cook for him sounds tempting. In the last couple of months, he's lost a lot of weight thanks to his stomach pains and the vomiting and diarrhea that accompanied them. He appears surprisingly amenable. I'm glad to hear it, except for the fear I detect in his voice. I reassure him that he'll be better off. And, I remind him, I only live a half-mile away from the facility, which is the main reason I selected it. When he's feeling better, I can show him a quick route to my house and he can wheel over some time. Navigating the streets in my neighborhood can't be any more dangerous than the streets of downtown Toledo.

Thanks to the Power-of-Attorney papers we signed only months before his two hospital admissions, I am able to admit David to a facility that has both assisted-living apartments and long-term care rooms. I was hoping he'd be eligible for assisted living, but because of his stents and his overall failing health (he has lost a lot of weight, has GERD, a failing gall bladder, a sore shoulder, and some chronic diarrhea), he is admitted to a long-term care room.

David also has to wear a heart monitor 24/7 until he gets his second stent. That monitor bothers his back something fierce because he has to lie on the straps when he is in bed, which is a large part of his day. Overall, David strikes me as just plumb tuckered out and relieved to have so many people taking care of him.

So a year has passed and I find myself sitting in the long-term care facility's common room. Its walls are "decorated" with themed paintings: dogs on one wall, cats on the other. The paintings look amateurish. Some of the dogs are painted in blues and greens. I can recognize the species but not the appeal. I don't care for cats at all, so I didn't bother to examine those paintings. Plus I'd have to get up and walk to the other side of the room. I decide it's not worth it, and after I wait about ten minutes I head back to my brother's room.

Just as I arrive the aide opens the door. We exchange a pleasantry and she returns to the nurse's station. I can see that a crisp new sheet covers my brother's body, which is naked except for a T-shirt and socks. After a year in the facility, he hasn't anything to hide.

I don’t say a word about the smell; I only ask David how he’s doing and he replies, okay. I then confess that after being gone for a month I was afraid his beard would be down to his knees. He wonders why I thought that and I reply that I seemed to be the only person shaving him and I assumed no one would do it while I was gone. “An aide did it,” he chirps. “Which one,” I ask. After a brief hesitation, he admits, “I don’t know her name.” Which is a common confession for David, as he hasn’t made it a priority to memorize staff members’ names. I have over the years attempted to train him to at least say “thank you” whenever someone does something for him (like me, for instance), but he’s been backsliding of late so I continue to prompt him whenever a staff member brings him a meal, or an evening snack, or drops by to check in on him (“Say thank you, David”). But he has yet to see the need to memorize the names of the staff, not even the ones who take care of him daily and clean him up when necessary. When I counsel him, “People like it when you use their names, David,” my advice, I’m sure, carries the familiar ring of nagging.

David has the TV on, loud as ever, and he’s watching vintage wrestling bouts from the late 90’s. Despite the liberal use of the word “professional” attached to it (which I assume is intended to confer these ridiculous contests with an undeserved level of legitimacy), it’s pseudo wrestling, pure and simple. More than anything, this “sport” looks like a bad episode of the Three Stooges on steroids. A toxic concoction of slapping, stomping, and play-acting meant to produce a grotesque spectacle of comédie sadique.

I don’t know any of the wrestlers, of course, but David knows them all, their stage names and their real names, their families, how many titles they were allowed to win and when, and what those wrestlers are doing now, if they are still alive. Over the past year, I have been forced to suffer through watching more wrestling with David than I’ve seen since my boyhood days when Bobo Brazil, Dick the Bruiser, and Haystack Calhoun were big names.

Having said that, I surprise myself one afternoon when it dawns on me that if I will just get off my high horse and embrace the premise that professional wrestling is a kind of burlesque—as bizarre and farfetched as it can be—that I might just find it amusing.

That metaphorical lightbulb flickered on for me one afternoon when David and I were watching a “King of the Ring” match between The Undertaker and Mankind. The match featured a cage made of chain link fencing assembled inside the wrestling ring. The cage was about ten

feet tall and had a ceiling of chain-link fencing enclosing its top. It’s what the announcer called a “Hell in the Cell” match.

Early on, both wrestlers exit the cage and climb up the fencing to the top of the cage. They slap each other around for a bit, exchanging insults as they do, when all of a sudden The Undertaker, who has apparently had his fill of trash talk, grabs Mankind, picks him up, cradles him in his arms at chest height, walks over to the edge of the cage and tosses Mankind over the precipice. OMG! There’s a lot of concrete down there. Can a body survive such an assault?

Mankind plummets earthward. His fate seems etched in stone. Luckily, however, Mankind does not splat into a bloody blob on the cement. Instead, after what has to be at least a twelve foot fall, he lands on an announcer’s table smack on his back. Of course the announcers have scrambled out of the way just as Mankind crashes like a meteor only inches in front of them. One of the table’s legs immediately collapses under the force of Mankind’s weight, and the pathetic, stunned warrior slides slow-mo to the floor. Head first. Ouch. No, make that Double Ouch! The cheers from the fans are deafening.

After the requisite five minutes of EMT attention, during which boos and cheers mingle and compete in a contest of their own, Mankind is rolled away on a stretcher, all the while being taunted from atop the cage by The Merciless, The Vile, The Cruel Undertaker. Has the man no empathy for a fellow warrior, I wonder?

A camera follows the stretcher and the limp, lifeless figure of Mankind to the nearest exit. It is a dark day for Mankind. But then, just when things appear bleakest, the near-dead Mankind springs to his feet like a phoenix and, as improbable as it seems, somehow musters the courage to scale the cage again where The Undertaker awaits. It is nothing short of a miracle.

Soon, Mankind is taunting his taunter face to face, begging for more. Which he gets. But this time, instead of being jettisoned overboard like garbage, a door on the chain-link ceiling falls open and The All-Powerful Undertaker hurls Mankind like a lightning bolt down through the opening to the canvas below for a second beat down. Mankind is stunned. Probably wonders if anyone got the license number of the truck. I just had to laugh, even as I exclaimed to my brother: “I don’t care how many times they rehearsed that, *that’s got to hurt*! ***That … has got … to hurt*!”** Wince. Cringe. Chuckle.

And for a moment, I find myself wondering why my brother likes professional wrestling so much. Does he envy the wrestlers' physical prowess? The wholeness of their bodies?

Or is it—and I regret having this thought—that they too have recklessly abused their bodies? Of course, in different ways than David does, but abuse nonetheless. David quit wearing his braces as soon as he got his own apartment and no one was around to nag him about it. He quit using his walker. Quit going to physical therapy. Quit brushing his teeth more than once a month. And now his back has a wicked curve in it, his feet curl under his legs and cannot be straightened. The wrestlers who take the most severe beatings in the ring will, no doubt, suffer their own physical breakdowns when they get older—after their long self-imposed regime of abuse catches up with them.

Whether David ponders such thoughts, or not, I have often wondered what it would have been like for David if he hadn't been the victim of a birthing accident: only one good arm, making him left-handed by default; his legs both damaged, and now, after years of neglect, useless. If only he hadn't been born with CP. If only the nurses hadn't forced my mother to delay giving birth until her OB/GYN arrived. David's little body and his fragile head banging into her pelvis, repeatedly, begging to get out sooner. Bruising his brain, damaging it. How much more could he have become than he is? Fate, if that's what it is, be damned.

On a different sunny Saturday afternoon after I returned from Florida, I find David is watching more wrestling when I enter his room. One of the actors is wearing a clown outfit complete with a mask and makeup. I didn't much care for the match. I notice that David needs his fingernails cut. I find the clippers in his top drawer, retrieve the wastebasket, and get to work clipping.

As I work I decide to tease David. I am his brother, after all. While I'm clipping his fingernails, I say to him: "You know, David, Halloween is only a couple of months away." Keeping my eyes on my work, I add: "I was thinking I could hire a hooker and have her dress up as a pizza delivery person and bring you a pizza. What do you think?"

My brother lived downtown independently for over forty years—from the time he graduated from high school, when he was twenty-one, till a year ago when he was sixty-two. That’s forty-one years. He knows how to get around. And I don’t just mean to the public library.

My brother hesitates for nearly twenty seconds (processing/calculating) before he answers. “Maybe. If I could lock the door somehow.”

“I could have her deliver a Meat Lovers’ pizza,” I say. “Then confess—*in a very naughty voice*—that she forgot the sausage!”

“Okay,” my brother says tentatively.

“Okay,” I echo. “And then you can tell her—in your own *naughtier voice*—that you have your own.”

David laughs. I laugh. (The naughty hooker laughs.)

Of course I have no intention of doing any such thing. That’s part of the joke.

The surprising thing is: The more I’ve cared for my brother over the past year the more I’ve come to realize he’s no prude. He knows a dirty joke when he hears one. Doesn’t mind telling one either. Likes a good double entendre. I’ve known for a long time that he’s no virgin. And he’s never had a steady girlfriend that I know of, never been married, and never had a child. Nor have I ever heard him reflect, good or bad, on those topics. I have no idea if his life is filled with regrets or not. The truth is, the bulk of his wheelchair life has been a mystery to me.

I decide to ask him why he likes wrestling so much, to break through some of the mystery. He answers that he’s liked it since he was a kid because me and our brother, Hector, used to watch wrestling every Saturday afternoon when we were little and he got hooked. (His appetite for professional wrestling is as simple as that; his addiction began in his youth. And, it seems, I am partly to blame. Ouch!)

David also likes hockey. He’s been a Walleye season ticket holder for years. I ask him about that too. He tells me he likes hockey because the family often watched hockey on Saturday nights on Channel 9. (Back in the days when TVs required an antenna, our household only picked up four major networks. Channel 9 was the Canadian channel out of Windsor, and the

hockey program we watched was “Hockey Night in Canada”.) So that too had something to do with me, and Hector, and my dad, because we all liked to watch “Hockey Night.”

And what about the Walleye, I ask? “When did you start to like them?”

The reason he likes the Walleye surprises me: our dad used to take him to games in the old Sports Arena.

“When was that,” I ask?

“Oh, maybe, about when I was eight or nine,” he guesses, unsure of the exact year.

“So Dad took you to the games in your wheelchair?” (The kind you push.)

His answer stuns me. “No,” he says quickly. “Dad used to carry me in.”

“Dad carried you in? Really? Then what?”

“He’d find me a seat and we’d watch the game,” he says.

I’m dumbfounded. My dad, David’s dad, *carrying* David into the games? I quickly picture my dad swinging David out of our white two-door Pontiac Catalina, hoisting him up and carrying him across the gravel parking lot and into the Arena. I see David hugging dad’s neck securely, his good arm and hand like vices, the metal braces attached to his shoes reflecting light from some nearby source and pointing the way.

I don’t remember any of that, though surely I was around. Mostly, I don’t remember my dad being so loving and thoughtful to David. I feel a kind of rejoicing in my heart to hear it, though.

David tells me that the General Manager of the *The Blades* (what the *Walleye* franchise was called fifty years ago) never charged David for a seat at the games. Not while he was GM. (When the family went to the Lucas County Fair, the carnies who ran the rides were the same way—David always rode for free. I didn’t ride for free, even when I carried David on and off rides—but David did.)

When David moved out of the family home in 1975, his apartment building on Cherry Street was near the bridge that crossed the Maumee River, leading to the Sports Arena, the home

of Toledo hockey. The total distance from his front door to the Arena was about a quarter mile or so; it was just natural that he continued to be one of the hockey team's biggest fan.

It's not easy unmuddying the waters of memory. Still, the more I think about it, the more it seems to me that other than Hector, who is a year-and-a-half younger than me, I remember more about David than any of my other younger siblings (and there were seven of them).

The most important thing I remember about David, especially now that he needs my help and I see him more, is how genuinely I loved him as a small boy, when it was my responsibility to get him dressed every morning, to strap braces to his legs, to escort him in a cab when he had a doctor's appointment, to right his tricycle when he tipped over on the sidewalk and cracked his head (which happened too often), to prepare his bath at night, and sometimes, after we had watched *Frankenstein* or *The Wolfman* to get under his bed at night and treat him like any other younger brother, scratching the dark walls in our common bedroom menacingly while moaning his name, over and over: "*Da-viddd! Daa-viddd! Daaa-viddd!"* Adding as menacingly as I could: "*I want my liver back!*" Scaring him to death as I lunged my hand up between the wall and his bed, trying my best to grab him, my hand moving like a giant spider over his sheets, clamping down on his shoulder or his arm with my frightful fingers, him screaming like a little girl, and in my small way, trying to make him feel like one of the gang.

There's a huge gap between those times and these. Forty-plus years of random visits and holiday eves. I am not the hero here. David is; he's the survivor. And though I have suggested I have been a good brother, I have only been a brother. What I should have been is the good friend David needed all those years. I could have been more. I could have helped more.

It's a failure of character I am not proud of.

Maybe, just maybe, in the time we have left together, if he'll bear with me, I'll come to appreciate professional wrestling as much as he does.

Actually, that may be a bit too much to hope for. For now, I'll try to be a better brother and see how that works out.