

Allegiance · Bret Lott

THE FIRST TIME Brad ran away I knew exactly where he was.

I do not know if my parents know this fact even today, as I write this. Such is the depth, I guess, of promises I made to him.

“Swear to God,” was what he said to me often during our childhood and adolescence. “Swear to God you won’t tell Mom,” he’d say, then wait for my answer: “I swear.” What followed after each promise was a confession designed, I believe, both to impress me and to make me an accessory after—or before—the fact. *Can you believe this is what I’m going to do?* he seemed to say, and in the same breath spoke the threat, *Tell, and I’ll tell that you knew all along.*

Big brothers.

He was at Mark and Marvin Freeman’s, two blocks away, twin brothers and fellow freshmen of Brad’s who hid him in their garage for a night while my mom and dad stayed up talking to police, calling friends, relatives, any place he might show up. After that, once it was too late at night to do anything other than wait for whatever word might come, I watched them split off from each other, my mother to the window above the kitchen sink, holding herself as she looked out into the black, my father pulling a chair from the dinette set, turning it to the sliding glass windows onto the rear porch and pool area, their backs to each other. He stared, too, out into the black.

It was in this manner they waited.

And here I was, possessor of the secret, watching them, dumb with allegiance.

Something happened to Brad when we moved from Buena Park to Phoenix in the middle of his sixth grade year.

Before that he was the big brother everyone knew at Elizabeth Dickerson Elementary. My first days of school each year at Dickerson—I was in the fourth grade when we moved—were ones in which I was identified by nodding teachers as “Brad’s brother,” followed by the beneficent smile signaling me I’d inherited quite a pleasant legacy, one I never lived up to. Only years later, once I’d finished college and was headed to grad school, did my mom reveal to me her fears for my future back then, fears based on

the kinds of grades I used to bring home: she thought I'd end up bagging groceries at the Bayless, or pumping gas, or wind up a middle-aged man washing dishes.

Noble endeavors all; just not what a parent wishes on her kids.

But Brad.

Brad was a star, a hero: top grades all through elementary, a favorite of everyone. I struggled trying to remember what *indent the beginning of a paragraph* meant—I only now know because a third grade peer, a Japanese kid whose name I can't recall, explained it to me in terms I could understand: "You start a new part of what you wrote by going in from the side about as far as the tip of your thumb"—while Brad brought home straight A's.

The day before we moved to Phoenix, Brad's class had a going away party for him after school, and I remember saying good-bye to my teacher, Miss Craig, a woman whose frosted hair seemed a copper shell atop her head, with nothing more than a "See you later," then going to Brad's classroom, where my mom waited for me.

She stood outside the door, and as I came down the covered walkway toward the room, I heard music.

Mom opened the door then, and the sound grew to reveal itself to me: The Monkees, their latest album, one we had at home, the tune "Zilch," though that wasn't a song at all, more a confused swirl of takeoffs on "Revolution No. 9" than anything else.

I looked inside.

Here was his entire class, all of them dancing, the desks pushed back to the walls, on one of them the granite-gray box of a record player every classroom had. In one corner was a table set up with Dixie cups, beside them a punch bowl filled with what I took to be red Kool-Aid, beside that plates of cookies.

Kool-Aid, cookies, kids dancing to The Monkees. They were dancing like what I'd seen on "American Bandstand," arms all over the place, backs snapping and feet shuffling. They were *dancing* in there.

And there was Brad, leaned back, knees bent, his arms working like slow windmills, him smiling away, dancing.

Then we moved.

Twenty-five years later, after a single session in a drug rehab center, Brad would come to our mother's house and inform her everything that had gone wrong with his life was because they'd made him move during the sixth grade. This after an hour with the counselor.

My mother refused this reason. I was there the day after they'd had this talk, and she was still burned up over the blame laid neatly at her and my father's feet.

"I told him to look at you!" she shouted at me. "Look at *you!* We moved back to California when you were a junior in high school, I told him, and you didn't end up in jail!"

True enough, but now that I've lived here with my own family in one place for the last seven years, and now that Zeb, my older son, is entering fifth grade, believe me when I say we won't be moving anywhere soon.

Because something, in fact, happened.

Though I was in a new school and my life was filled with trying to figure out how to become friends with my classmates, not to mention English and Math and Arizona History and Lore—I was in the fourth grade and still couldn't tell time!—I was aware that something in my brother was breaking down.

I cannot pretend to know what happened to him, can only give the litany of events that each seemed crescendo enough, but which would be eclipsed one way or another somewhere along the line of his life.

It might have started with our next-door neighbor, Lynn, a new kid, just like Brad, who'd moved in a couple of months after we did. He was a blond-headed kid who had a motorcycle, a skinny, narrow-chested kid who had this sort of grin that seemed to me only trouble: his lips never parted, his eyes always half-way closed. He beat me up during a basketball game on our front driveway one afternoon over an elbow he'd given me to the chest. The only reason I took him on was because Brad was right there, and I thought he'd join me, or pull him away, or stand between us. Something along those lines.

But Brad only stood there, my brother, the basketball at his hip, while the kid sat on my arms and punched me in the chest.

The summer after the sixth grade, Brad and I went out for the swim team at Roadrunner Park, the local community pool and playground. Brad made the team, I made dead last in the one qualifying heat I was in.

By the middle of summer Brad had accrued a dozen or so ribbons, most of them blue, in his age class. My mom had them framed, two rows of ribbons hung there on his bedroom wall, proof of his proficiency, that star quality.

Practice was at seven o'clock every weekday morning, and Brad rode his bike the mile or so to the park, stayed there until ten, then came home.

But on our way home one morning from the Bayless, the trunk full of groceries, my younger brother Timmy and I in the back seat, our baby sister Leslie up front with Mom, I felt the car slow down as we drove along 32nd Street, and I saw Mom looking out her window to the desert between the road and Roadrunner Park.

I looked out the window, too, saw a few yards off into the scrub and cactus two kids on a motorcycle, parallel to us and headed in the same direction we were. Lynn was driving, Brad behind him, his hands to the seat, holding on. They were laughing, passing words back and forth between them.

We drove that way, slowly, for a quarter-mile or so, my mom all the while glancing from the road to the motorcycle to the road and back, until Lynn peeled the motorcycle off into the brush, and away from us.

Then she gave it the gas.

Brad came home a little after ten on his bike, his towel draped over his shoulders.

I stood in the doorway of my room, listening for what would happen from the kitchen.

"How was practice?" Mom said.

"Great," he said. "It was hard."

They were silent a few moments, and I heard the refrigerator open up, heard an RC bottle popped open.

Mom said, "We saw you and Lynn riding the motorcycle."

Silence again.

Finally, Brad said, "That wasn't me. I was in practice."

Though I could see none of this, only heard it from my room, I knew how this scene played: Brad, once discovered in a lie, never *ever* gave in, as though he actually believed whatever story he could create, actually believed that it was not him we saw twenty yards away, laughing on the back of a motorcycle. I knew he was looking our mom, right then, right there, straight in the eye, and telling her it wasn't him.

“I don’t think so,” Mom said, and I could see her, too, averting her eyes from his, hiding her face as she called him on his lie, as though if she herself were to see his eyes she might actually believe *him*.

“Why don’t you believe me, Mom?” he said then, his voice all broken and sorrowful, full of tears. “You never believe me!” He stormed from the kitchen, and I had to duck into my room, not wanting him to know I’d heard it all.

His bedroom was across from mine, Timmy and I sharing since we’d moved here. I stood a few feet back inside my room, Timmy down the street playing at Cameron’s house, Leslie somewhere.

I heard Brad slam shut his door, waited, waited, then heard him quietly open it.

Here he was, inside our room. He walked right in, his shirt off, wearing cutoffs, the same pair I’d seen him in on the motorcycle.

Carefully he closed the door behind him, then turned to me, whispered, “Swear to God you won’t tell Mom.”

I was quiet no more than a second or two before I nodded, said, “I swear.”

“Coach kicked me off the team. He saw me smoking.”

He looked at me hard, dared me with his eyes to look away.

Of course, I did.

Where I’m going with this I do not know, and as I type this on the computer, my younger son Jacob stands beside me at my old manual typewriter set up on the desk top, the typewriter I wrote my first three books on, a beat-up Brother portable I got for high school graduation.

He’d not seen it before this afternoon. We’re headed to Vermont for the summer, and since I can’t fit my computer into the van, it’s my plan to bring the manual, hope for the best.

“Maaaaan!” he said when he saw it on my desk, as though it were the latest in computer hardware, this thing you have to slam at to get the keys to print, an arm out to the side you have to pull on quick and hard to get the carriage back into place. Pure technology, he thinks.

I want to show him how it works, and so I type out:

Jacob Daynes Lott was born on December 10, 1985, just 15 days before Christmas, making him the best Christmas present I ever got.

He smiles when he sees it, then reads it out loud to me. I pull the carriage return a couple of times, look at him, and say, “There. You can type whatever you want.”

He looks at it, bites on his lower lip, grins. He points his index finger, searches out the keys.

“Press hard,” I say, “or it won’t print dark enough.”

He finds the key he wants, then puts his finger to it, taps hard. The letter Z appears, a little light, but there.

Z for Zeb, I know. His older brother.

He types, me pressing the shift key when needed, and I watch as he spells out the words “Zeb Lott was born on May 12, 1983.”

The print is still a little light, almost empty in places. But it is a sentence, readable.

I turn back to my work, let him type beside me while I keep going:

Still vestiges of Brad’s waning glory surfaced now and again, as when, in the spring of the seventh grade, he was cast by Mrs. Gentry, our music teacher—Larkspur, back then, ran from kindergarten to eighth grade—in the role of Pigpen for the school’s production of *You’re A Good Man, Charlie Brown*.

He was a good singer, he could act. I’d seen him in rehearsals, little more than people standing around in the music room. What made it the music room was the presence of a piano in one corner.

But he was good.

A week before the play was to open over at the high school, Brad was kicked off the cast.

He’d decided to go out in the desert with Lynn and a couple other guys to hunt ground squirrels instead. I watched him from the kitchen window walking off down the driveway with two chlorine bottles filled with water for the hunt: you followed a squirrel toward its hole, and when it disappeared inside, you poured a gallon of water down in there, waited for the thing to float up. Sometimes it escaped out another entry; sometimes, there it was.

But before he'd left with the bottles in tow, he'd said to me, "Swear to God you won't tell Mom what we're doing."

I swore.

The afternoon my mom got the call from Mrs. Gentry, Brad cried to her, "She hates me, she hates me! That's why she kicked me out!" then stormed to his room, slammed shut that door yet again.

I turn to Jacob to see what it is he's been typing the last ten minutes or so.

I look over his shoulder, ready to smile at my second son's writing, be it story or gibberish. Whatever it is.

There, after the news of his big brother's birthday, is the unfinished sentence, "Though in these days I don't like him very much but I still. . . ."

"What are you typing that for?" I say, too loud, already angry at him. Here he is at a typewriter for the first time, banging out a message about how much he doesn't like his big brother in these days.

"I was just—" he starts, but I cut him off, say, "You love your brother. You love him. You don't stand here and type about how you don't like him."

The irony of the entire scene is lost on me a few minutes, the huge and ugly line drawn between what I was at that moment writing about my older brother and what my son was writing about *his* older brother too big to see, a plank in my eye while I holler on about the speck in my son's.

Jacob walks in his sleep nearly every night. One night last week we found him walking down the hallway toward his brother's room, the top sheet from his bed trailing behind him, a corner of it held tight in a fist.

"Zeb," he was saying, his eyes half-opened and glazed with sleep. "I have to tell Zeb," he said again, his mind always so deeply set on his brother and what he is doing at any given moment that, even in sleep, he's preoccupied with him.

Yesterday morning Zeb came downstairs for breakfast, and stretched, yawned as he sat at the table. "I slept really good last night," Zeb said.

Jacob, already at the table, a spoonful of Froot Loops up and headed for his mouth, stopped, looked first to Zeb, then to his mom. "I slept better," he said.

I realize now, with Jacob's sleepwalking to his brother's room, with that small sentence banged into a manual typewriter, with his measuring his

entire world against only his brother, that Jacob is me, just trying to make my way in the wake, for better or worse, of big brother Brad.

Where to from here with this tale of my older brother's fall from grace? His running away that first time might seem the next logical step, though there are any number of incidents I could talk about: the two times he was arrested for possession; the two cars he totaled, one while our parents were away in Las Vegas, Mom's last words as she followed Dad out the door: "Brad, don't drive the car"; the second time he ran away, this time by flying to San Diego with Bruce Homer, the two of them sophomores, where they would spend what little money they had quickly, end up sleeping on the beach before Bruce would wise up, call home, get money wired for bus fare back, while Brad, invincible in his resolve, would not give in, only hitch his way up the coast to my grandparents in the San Fernando Valley, where he would spend the summer working as a janitor alongside my grandpa at Consolidated Film Industries; the telegram from Brad's commander on the *USS Tolovana*, where Brad had been arrested in Yokohama for bringing marijuana on board, the stash hidden inside his scuba tanks, the telegram simply stating he was confined to the ship for the duration of the cruise; the annulment of his first marriage on the grounds of fraud; the addiction.

And what of my ascendance, my rise in the face of his fall? For me there was marching band, church membership, jobs at Taco Bell and Smith's Food King and Knott's Berry Farm and RC Cola, the senior prom, the president's list for 4.0 GPA in college, a marriage still intact, graduate school, a professorship and publications.

Where to, except to ask why this difference between brothers exists, brothers raised in the same household, by the same parents?

Of course there is no answer. Only that we are different people. It would be pleasant, comforting—perhaps that drug rehab counselor's only aim, really, was to comfort Brad with a place to lay blame—to believe it boiled down to a move in the sixth grade, when the truth stares at me so evident, so plain it might as well be a plank in my eye: we are two people.

What I know now, though, is the true nature of my question, and why I ask it: I am a father, afraid for my children and the lives out there gearing up to swallow them whole. I want to find how the lives of my children can take their turns away from me, just as Brad's took his from my parents, so I might stay it from happening in my own sons' lives.

Here are my parents, staring out windows, their backs to each other, wondering where their firstborn has gone, and why.

Brad turned up at school the next day, simply rode the bus in with the Freeman boys. My mother was called—Dad was, by no choice other than to make a living, at work—and she drove to school, where Brad was in the principal's office.

When she asked why he'd done it, he shrugged, said, "I don't know." He was smiling, my mother told me this afternoon, when I called her for just this reason: to find out what it was like as a parent to discover your runaway son. Brad was smiling in the principal's office, pleased with himself for what power he'd exerted in all this.

This was my mother's assessment of the situation. And I remember seeing Brad come home that afternoon from school—I was still at Greenway Junior High then, got home before he did—I remember him coming into the house, the bus that had dropped him off at the corner long gone, my mother silent as he entered, pulled from the refrigerator a bottle of RC, then adjourned himself to his room, gently closed that door.

But not before looking at me leaning out of my own doorway, his eyes speaking the same old threat: *Tell, and I'll tell that you knew all along.*

I did not tell, not even this afternoon, asking my mother about what it was like to have a son run away, me still dumb with allegiance.

Such is the power of a big brother.

"Don't tell Dad," I heard Zeb whisper to Jake from the playroom one afternoon not long ago. I was here, in my office, working away at a short story: my sales pitch, a son after his father's heart, in my own way.

"Jake, don't tell Dad," Zeb whispered, and it seemed *Swear to God you won't tell* ought to be the next words I would hear.

Is it any wonder, then, why I left my desk and headed for the playroom, bent on finding out what matters of secrecy had been placed in motion, bent on the sad hope, for better or worse, of breaking the allegiance between brothers?

It was only a matter, finally, of the soccer ball being bounced against the playroom wall. And it was Zeb to confess, Jacob, his little brother, already dumb with allegiance.

But what else could I have done?