

My Brother Donald

My brother, Donny, was a year and a half younger than I, and we shared a cherished childhood in Allendale, New Jersey. The great woods behind our cozy home that was filled with ancient trees and ground pine and lady slippers and wild grapes, the fields filled with blackberries and old apple trees, the nearby swamps crawling with turtles and snakes and frogs, the abandoned sand pit that was filled with fossils and had steep banks dotted with fragrant sweet ferns, and the brooks filled with fascinating creatures kept us very busy. There were plenty of neighborhood children our age for friends, and it would be an understatement to say that we were constantly engaged in the business of childhood.

I especially remember our childhood summers. Our parents bought us a large, green, canvas wall tent, and cots and sleeping bags, and we often camped out in it, setting it up in our yard down by the woods or in our grandparents' wooded lot. Our family belonged to a local swimming club where we went swimming every warm summer day. Every year our family spent part of the summer at a cabin on Lake Dunmore in Vermont, which is truly a patch of heaven. Time flew by there as we spent each day fishing, swimming, boating, sailing, water skiing, and hiking in the Green Mountains. On rainy days we played board games, and cards, and read. There never was a TV in our cabin. Church suppers were very popular. Once a week we all got dressed up for dinner, and I fondly remember some of the best restaurants such as the Brandon Inn, the Middlebury Inn and the Waybury Inn. Every Friday night, the Sunset Lodge had dinner and a square dance. Most of all we enjoyed our summer friends who, like us, returned every year. Our Aunt and Uncle and cousin, who was a year younger than Don, had a cottage on Lake St. Catherine, and it was really fun to visit back and forth. Other summer excursions were to visit our great aunt Ethel on Cape Cod, and friends of my grandparents who had a summer home on the Jersey shore. A number of other relatives and neighbors and friends had cottages or cabins on lakes in New Jersey, New York State and New Hampshire, and we always had a steady stream of invitations for visits during the summer and fall.

Grammar school days passed in a flash. Our high school years zipped by, both of us going our separate ways with new and different friends.

Throughout our college years, we had only the opportunities to visit each other during holidays. I recall arriving home for Christmas one year with a mustache. Don had arrived a day before. When I walked into the house, our parents not yet home from work, Don was taking a nap, and I woke him. He looked up and said, "Oh no! You grew a mustache too? They made me shave mine off."

We both had summer jobs between spring and fall semesters, and it seemed that we were always very busy building our careers. Time and distance began to separate us, especially when I graduated and took a position in Delaware. I year later, when I was drafted, and joined the Navy, we drifted apart, although we corresponded once in a while.

When I returned from service in the Navy, Don was sharing a spectacular town house with two other people in Greenwich Village, Manhattan, and it was fun to visit him there. He later decorated a charming loft-like space of his own in the Village, occupying the entire third and top floor of a very old brick building. Behind this block of old townhouses was a beautiful green space filled with trees and shrubs. Don's loft opened

onto a large flat roof overlooking the green space on which he built a terrace with an awning, and he planted a very attractive roof top garden. The place was charming, warm and relaxing, with comfortable modern furniture, a wood burning fireplace, and the terrace was a beautiful summer living space. Unfortunately, the place was also the scene of a terrible crime.

Thieves study people's schedules and habits. Don had been mugged more than once, and he tried to be careful as he moved around lower Manhattan, especially at night. One payday, he cashed his paycheck at work, as employees often did, because he was going out to dinner with friends. He had several friends who owned supper clubs and restaurants, and, being single, he frequently joined friends for supper before he headed home. He had also gone out for lunch with a client that day and was wearing a favorite large ruby ring that had belonged to either our great or great-great grandfather, which our father had given to Don. A thief, who must have studied the routines of Donald's company and the layout of the large office building he worked in, got into the elevator with about a half dozen employees. He stopped the elevator between floors, pulled out a gun, and told everyone to strip down to their underwear. It was a cold winter day, and Don already had his coat and gloves on, ready to walk out the door as soon as he hit the ground floor, as a true New Yorker constantly on the move. As he followed the gunman's instructions, he managed to slip off the ring inside the glove, which he then dropped on the floor along with the rest of his clothing. The thief took his cash, his wallet and his watch, but at least he still had the ring.

The most serious incident, however, occurred one night as Don returned to his apartment after a late dinner and socializing with friends until after midnight. The three floor building had a shop on the first floor. The second floor residents, and Don on the third floor, entered through a street-side steel door with a dead bolt lock that was protected by a folding steel gate. Don had unlocked and folded open the gate, and had just unlocked the dead bolt, when someone hit him on the head with the butt of a handgun and pushed him through the doorway into the foyer. There were at least two gunmen, and they hit him on the head several times more until he was unconscious, left him bleeding on the foyer floor, took his keys, and ransacked his apartment, taking every single thing of value. There he lay until morning, unconscious, in a pool of blood. The next morning, a neighbor noticed that the steel gate was open, and, trying the door, found it unlocked. Fortunately, he opened the door, saw Don on the floor and called the police. Don was in the hospital for about a week, with a severe concussion. If the neighbor had not found him when he did, Don might have bled to death or lapsed into a coma.

Needless to say, the trauma changed Donald's attitude about living in Manhattan, and it was only a matter of months before he located a designing job in San Diego and moved there forthwith, staying with friends until he could find a place of his own. It was no small decision for a successful designer to leave the world's design capital, but he could no longer be a New Yorker.

After I finished seminary studies and was called to a church in Sussex County, New Jersey, where our son, Allen, was born, we continued to visit back and forth occasionally, but Don was very busy and began to travel extensively. He had no car, so we usually drove into the city to see him. At the time, he was designing mostly children's clothing. Part of his design routine included frequent buying trips, on which he purchased clothing that caught his eye to study. He did this throughout Allen's early childhood,

which proved to be of great advantage to us, as Mary and I kept Don informed of Allen's sizes so that Don could buy all his samples in that size. Consequently, Allen was one of the best-clothed children anywhere for many years, dressed in the latest styles from stores like Saks Fifth Avenue. Suits, jackets, jeans, you name it; the kid had the best of everything. This continued even after we moved to Wisconsin, and Don moved to California, but our correspondence slowed.

His home in Highland, California was lovely, with a stunning backyard of lush plantings, outdoor living spaces, and a pool. He converted his garage into a studio with a fireplace, where he could work on his designs, and paint and draw. We enjoyed receiving his occasional photographs of the place, but we never got to California for a visit.

It wasn't until after I had the stroke in 2000 that we corresponded regularly again and started calling each other once in a while. When he bought a computer in 2001, we really enjoyed getting back in touch. In the fall of 2002 he visited Mother in New Jersey and I started planning a trip to California in order to visit him in 2003. Of course, his sudden death in March of 2003 from a massive heart attack ended those plans forever, and I instead found myself flying to New Jersey to be with Mother for his funeral and the interment of his ashes in our family plot at George Washington Memorial Park cemetery in Paramus. Mary stayed in Iowa because of her job, and Allen was in Africa, so I traveled alone for the first time as a handicapped person.

I stayed with Mom and John through Easter to have an extended visit and then returned to our Iowa home and to an emptier life. Another chapter of my life had ended, and I was doubly sad to have it end so suddenly, even as I was planning to see my brother in just a matter of months.

Don's funeral was attended by nearby family, Mom and John's close friends, and their friends from church, but only one cousin was there. No distant relatives came. Don's friends from his college and NYC years were in distant places and out of touch. How odd that such a restless and sometimes frantic life would end so quickly and quietly.

Mom and I wrote his obituary together, extending a very short notice that had already appeared in the local paper:

Donald Leslie Mowbray was born 16 May 1947, the son of Hazel Rudolph Mowbray and the late Thomas Mowbray of Allendale. He attended the Allendale Public School and graduated from Mahwah High School in 1965. Donald was an honor student at Rockland Community College where he received his associate degree in 1967. He continued his studies at the University of Bridgeport and received a B.S. degree in Business Administration and Graphic Design in 1971.

Following graduation, Donald lived and worked as an artist and designer in New York City from 1971 to about 1980, where he continued his studies and received a diploma from The Fashion Institute. Some of his major design projects included the well-known tiger head and tiger stripe design for Faberge products. He designed children's clothing for a number of companies, among them Rob Roy, that were sold by retailers including Saks Fifth Avenue and Macy's in New York, and Dillard's of Fort Worth. Freelance graphic design projects included advertising and stationery for the Plaza Hotel.

In the early 1980's Donald moved to California, first to San Diego, and later to Los Angeles, finally settling in Highland, California. He worked for several companies and traveled extensively to Costa Rica, Sri Lanka, Hong Cong and Singapore to oversee the production of numerous lines of clothing that he designed.

Donald loved nature, and most of his drawings and paintings included graphic representations of fish, animals and plants. His gardens in California produced magnificent blossoms all year long.

Donald is survived by his mother, Hazel Mowbray Tillinghast of Allendale, one brother, Thomas L. Mowbray of Nashua, Iowa, his stepfather, John Tillinghast, one stepsister, Diane Tillinghast Procino of Waldwick, and his friend Carl Gudmundson of Highland California. He was predeceased by his father, Thomas Mowbray.

A few weeks after the New Jersey funeral, Donald's many friends in California held a memorial service and a festival dinner in his memory. They had waited for some of his closest friends to get back from a vacation in Europe. Some time later one of his close friends sent to Mother a number of personal items she had found among Don's papers and photos. Among them was a short poem, in which he obviously senses his mortality:

You can shed tears that I am gone,
Or you can smile because I lived.
You can close your eyes and hope that I come back,
Or you can open your eyes and see all that I have left.

Donald left a lot. He lived fast and sometimes frantically. He tried everything. He knew everybody. He traveled everywhere. He smoked continually. He drank much. And he never stopped talking. His many friends and colleagues were always ready to listen to him and to watch for the next brilliant design to come flowing out of his pen onto paper.

And so it was in 2003 that instead of traveling 1000 miles to the west coast to visit with Donald, I instead traveled 1000 miles to the east coast to be with him when he made his final journey home.

Rest in peace little brother. In the words of the Roman lyric poet Catullus to honor his dead brother:

By strangers' coasts and waters, many days at sea,
I come here for the rites of your unworlding,
Bringing for you, the dead, these last gifts of the living
And my words—vain sounds for the man of dust.
Alas, my brother,
You have been taken from me. You have been taken from me,
By cold chance turned a shadow, and my pain.

Here are the foods of the old ceremony, appointed
Long ago for the starvelings under the earth:
Take them: your brother's tears have made them wet; and take
Into eternity my hail and my farewell.

[Fitzgerald, Robert. *In the Rose of Time: Poems 1931-1956*. (New York: New Directions Books, 1956), p. 148.]