

Introduction

On the unimaginably awful day the doctors told us my brother, James, had just two weeks to live, he shared his final wishes. The book you hold in your hands is my way of honoring one of those requests.

After disposing of the contents of his beloved house on Hickwood Road in High Point, North Carolina, and then, the house itself, I began to comb through his papers. Some were tucked away in a filing cabinet in our mother's home, remnants of our childhood in 1970s Flatbush, Brooklyn. Some were files, in various formats, that I found on his computer.

Screenplays, teleplays, some complete, others, fragments. Scratchy notes filled with ideas and character development in his distinctive handwriting conjured up our long-ago pre-digital correspondence.

All of it brought him vividly alive.

It was no secret to me, big sister to James, that my brother was a frustrated creative. Turns out one secret he had kept was just how much he'd been writing over the course of his life—over a thousand pages.

As a child, when he wasn't watching movies at the Kent Theater on Coney Island Avenue, perusing comic book stores in Bay Ridge, or chomping a slice of pizza from one of the thousand joints anywhere in the borough, he'd channeled his painful shyness and frustration with school into a novel and short stories.

Long before word processors, much less computers, our mother helped him type the pages. As his foxhole buddy and only sibling, I'd been asked to read and review his wild, meandering opus, *Mr. Paul*. He even went to the trouble of copyrighting the work, but never—that I knew—had he shared it with anyone else.

Decades later, as I dissected the pages in my grief, my own unmistakable handwriting leapt out—my attempt at offering edits and suggestions on James's romp through the Flatbush streets that provided the backlot of our youth.

When I'd read his novel, *Mr. Paul*, long ago, I had no idea about the Beats and I doubt James as a teenager did either. But reading it today, the wry, alienated, acid trippy stream of consciousness smacked of Bukowski.

My sixteen-year-old brother wrote disaffected characters like a malcontent middle-aged pro:

And when you're old enough, you'll go and get a job where you'll stay your whole life, and you'll get a wife, and have a family. And when you're thirty or forty you'll look at your miserable little life and say, "Hey was it worth it? Was it worth it?" And you'll look around you, you want to inflict some pain this time, and you'll look down at your little son. who's greatest worries lay in not hitting a home run when he's up at bat, and, "Jesus Christ, Daddy, this new math is impossible!" and it's your turn to fuck up someone's life and you'll do it to your very own son, you say no now, but you will, trust me, you will. And maybe you'll spend the rest of your life looking at the world from a bottle, or just come

home, kiss the little woman, and blow your fuckin' brains out, that will get him, Mike, that will mess him up pretty bad. Yeah.

Content aside, that a restless teenager focused so hard and long on such a tedious endeavor as writing a novel takes my breath away—especially knowing how few would-be writers of any age ever manage to elevate an idea from concept to fruition.

As an adult, James had—in his time off from his day job as an audio-visual technician—produced two short horror films from scripts he'd written. After the thrilling rush of production, he'd encountered the frustration so many artists face: It is one sort of trial to make a movie. It is entirely another to get it out into the world, to find an audience.

Even a voracious consumer of films and television programs such as James—the kind of person who effortlessly rattles off the names of directors and cinematographers while eloquently dissecting the nuances of season four of a streaming series versus season five—didn't quite grok the enormous, foreboding complexity of the Hollywood myth-making machine. Likely, it's why he never ventured into the business himself.

Because he adored and admired me, who he saw as fearless and invincible in the way only a baby brother could, James assumed I could crack those worlds on his behalf with a snap of a finger.

Would that I could be so powerful.

That's why this collection is so important to me, in addition to being a bittersweet remnant of the monumental and untimely loss of my only sibling.

The writing contained in this volume, and on the associated website we've created to carry what couldn't quite fit in print, amounts to James' life's work. It offers insight into his mind and worldview better than any diary or biography ever could.

In "3:25 on the M Train," he shares the tortured fears and disappointments of a child encountering a being less fortunate than himself.

His "Dirty Laundry" captures and lampoons the madness of the local television station, WGHP, where we both worked long ago in High Point.

(Watch for the depiction of a ball-busting news producer—yours truly—and note that mockery of the news business specifically, and media in general, appear frequently as themes in his work.)

With "In Greensboro," he begins to sketch out a seminal, dire moment in the history of the city we both lived at one point and revered.

(That's one I dearly wish he'd finished.)

The descent of the titular character in "Candie" into the dark side is palpable and wrenching.

The crusty, bombastic, sarcastic, and politically incorrect exterior vividly expressed on many of these pages was his shield against the world. His disease further aggravated his point of view and his embrace of the violent and macabre. Not only did he love consuming horror films and thrillers, he loved dreaming them up.

To wit, one plot line, never developed, in his files: *A dangerous sexual predator targets a number of women on a cross country late night flight.*

(Amusing, since James was terrified of flying.)

Innately, my brother was a sweet and giving soul who commanded us, at life's end, to "help other people."

Even if you find the darkness and debauchery here challenging to wade through, just by having this book on your shelf, sharing it somehow with someone, or taking a look at the works on the website, you're helping me and our mother, Jane, to honor another of my brother's last wishes:

To tell his story. To keep his memory alive.

On behalf of him, and my family, thank you.

- Lisa Napoli

* On the website <https://moment-films.com> you can find James' novel, other writings, and links to videos of the two films he completed, SERIAL KILLER BOB and WITCHKILL.

