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Creative Writing
February 20, 2006

Riding the Waves of the Sun

The worst day of my life hit me on Friday, July thirteenth, 2001. Billy Grey, best friend of nearly thirteen years died of glioblastoma multiforme, a type of brain tumor. Born August first 1988, Billy died eighteen days short of his thirteenth birthday. I was born ten days after him, and, since our parents were friends, we grew up together – we went to school together, played sports together, and even lived together for days upon end. In 1999, at the age of eleven, Billy was diagnosed with a brain tumor and was airlifted to Albany Med for emergency surgery. He recovered quickly from the operation and started to go to chemotherapy sessions every week. His condition continued to improve as he learned to battle the chemo and to deal with a new lifestyle. Through the worst of times, Billy never complained, but instead just continued to fight his battle. Eventually, out of sheer determination, Billy returned to doing the activities he loved. He led his little league baseball team with double vision, played fetch with his dog every day after hospital visits, continued to attend a rigorous private school and get A's and B's while enduring radiation treatment, and remained a friend. When someone who means so much is so close to death, it is hard to not think of what *will* happen. But, with Billy, I would only worry when I wasn't around him. Even in the weeks before he died, when he had trouble doing the simplest of activities, whenever I was around him, I couldn't help but be optimistic. Only after departing from his company would some fragment of truth and doubt sneak into my mind. His optimistic spirit was contagious – it was impossible to

not get caught up in his optimism and go-getter attitude. And, in this way, I relied on him more than he did on me. It may seem backwards, but for Billy, for who he was, it made perfect sense. He never let you feel bad for him because he didn't feel bad for himself; he took what the world dealt him and just did his best. And, that trait – that hidden gem – is what made Billy.

In the spring of 2001, his condition, which had gradually been improving began to rapidly decline when the tumor reoccurred. Despite the efforts of medical teams across the Northeast, there was nothing that could be done. And so, as spring waned into summer, I watched the person I loved the most lose himself. Only a shadow of the old Billy still remained visible in those summer months, and I didn't believe what was happening. I didn't understand it then, and I don't understand it now. But, I was so sure - so completely confident - that no matter what was dealt to Billy, he would fight and win. When I would visit him, he'd tire himself out having thumb wars with me. Even if he hadn't slept in hours (he needed lots of rest with the cancer and chemo), he wouldn't go to bed until I had to leave. And, he rarely lost any of those small daily battles – the ones that happen every day to every person. He had excelled at everything, even with cancer, so I couldn't see how beating this plague was any different. However, it *was* Billy's last and most valiant battle ever. He had beaten the tumor once, and almost got away a second time, but his body just couldn't take the abuse. While his mind never gave up, his body, the physical part of him, was killed by the disease. He died that July, and I was dumbstruck. I didn't react at first. I was still blinded by my hopes for Billy later in life that I missed the reality, and so the news took some time to hit me. And, when it did, I held my emotions in. While my parents offered to help me, I refused their comfort and

aid. I severed my ties with him in relation to the outside world. I only reflected alone – only showed emotion on the subject while alone.

That December, Billy's father, Ken, and I ran with the Olympic torch. I had nominated Billy to the International Olympic Committee to run with the flame, but instead, Ken and I ran with it in honor of Billy and his spirit. And, while that was a special day, I never showed that I was sad. I just locked my emotion inside of me, invisible to the outside world. Nobody asked me how I felt, and so I failed to tell them. However, in reflection, I've now learned that my feelings on that day have changed. Billy was always an amazing athlete and fighter. The Olympics was a dream of his and to be able to carry his name through the flame of the Olympic torch gave me an honor I barely deserved. Billy couldn't respond much in the week before he died. But, when I told that he was chosen to run with the Olympic flame, he somehow summoned the energy to grin at me, and if he had been slightly better, I am sure some phrase would've escaped his lips, but it was unnecessary. He was happy, and he was proud of me. Knowing that filled me a crisp feeling of mournful fulfillment I have yet to detect again since that afternoon.

This story is not about death. It is not about learning from death. Rather, this story I am here to tell is about discovering life in the face of death. And while it has taken me this long to even attempt to place some closure on Billy's struggle, I have learned more than I thought possible about how to conduct one's self through the ups and downs of living. Billy, always quick with a joke and there to please, made sure I would get the message before he left me.

The best day of my life occurred on Easter of 2001. It was one of those late March days where the sun yearns for spring but the earth lags behind. The wind blew warmly

and softly against our faces as we stood in the grass field behind my house. The hill we were on overlooked the horse farm, and the lateral lighting had illuminated the trees in such a way that their shadowy tendrils reached for hundreds of feet before dissipating. In the distance, the horses whinnied in anticipation of the spring months. Our pale bodies were slapped by the sun's rays. Billy, my brother, and I were sitting on the slope of the hill, observing the horses at play below us. The grass tickled our naked feet that stroked the cold dirt. We talked, relaxed, and waited for our Easter dinner. The clouds were numerous, but harmless, and as we talked and relaxed, the sun began to dip closer to the horizon, warning us of the Easter dinner to come – one we didn't want. Adults came and went – asking about our lives and what we were doing – missing the point. We just nodded and smiled, blinded by the beauty around us. As the sun dropped dangerously close to the trees, Billy and I began to throw a Frisbee.

We didn't say a word to each other during that time. The obscurity of dusk crept up on our fun, but we didn't stop. That Frisbee just kept bouncing in between our hands, only pausing at the end of every throw to be thrown back. Our minds danced in the shadows of the horse farm to this melodic rhythm. Images ran through my brain from my younger days with Billy on the farm. Kicking field goals over the rickety, old, wooden swing set to win the Super Bowl – playing nine holes on the farm on our award winning golf course – catching turtles in the pond – sledding at speeds of thirty miles per hour – playing with the cats – sleeping over on weekdays – making ninja turtle action figure setups – weeding the garden for my parents at the immense salary of seven dollars an hour – playing hockey, football, soccer, baseball, croquet, badminton, tennis, and even new sports – beating video games – watching nature – seeing the horses – launching

rockets into the sky – two day sleepovers – seeing the new year’s ball drop together. The sun had passed by our side of the world, but the pink and orange light from the sunset still lingered, illuminating our song.

We understood each other that Easter night. As we stood there, the Frisbee gliding through the space between us, we saw the culmination of the friendship we had had for twelve and a half years. I wonder if Billy knew some bit of information about his condition that I didn’t know – that no one else knew - but on that day he showed me what I had to value – that I had been with him for over a decade. Everything came together in our minds. My mom called us in for the Easter feast, but we didn’t move. Instead our muscles followed the rhythm set by our minds, continuing the Frisbee’s motion. As she called again, Billy smiled a toothy grin and nodded. He gave the Frisbee one last flick, a perfect throw, and when I caught, he just smiled in recognition of our achievement on this world, to push life beyond its capacity. My mom called again, louder for us to come eat the huge meal that had been prepared for us (eating, another of our favorite pastimes).

“Let’s get some goddamn turkey in our stomachs,” he yelled, jogging up next to me.

I smiled and turned to see a tired look come over his face as we walked into the house. The sky had dimmed to a deep blue now, and the Frisbee lay out on the lawn motionlessly awaiting the morning dew. Our steps echoed in the garage as we left that beautiful day behind for the confines of the indoors. As we entered the house, Billy put on his best face and erased his exhaustion from his appearance, ready for the next event, and I now realize how difficult it was for him to show me this one meaning of life.