

**M**Y TEN-YEAR-OLD COUSIN Ryan Wildin was dying, so my mother and I drove to the hospital in Rochester to see him. Mom put me behind the wheel of her Mazda for the two-and-a-half-hour trip, although I'd never driven a five-speed manual transmission before. As I jerked and ground along, Mom told me what had happened the day I flew home.

Ryan and my uncle Dave had gone to Mason City, where the psychologist had told Dave that Ryan was okay and they didn't need to come back any more. On the drive back, Ryan had seemed happy, full of plans for the summer, so Dave had stopped by the store in Algona to get some groceries before going home. Back home, while Dave had been getting the groceries out of the car and putting them away, Ryan had walked into the house, gone into the basement, fashioned a loop out of a cord, and hanged himself from the ceiling. And that's where my uncle had found his son, dangling, unconscious.

I didn't know where the hospital was, but my mother did. It was not the famous Mayo Clinic, but a large hospital where they send the emergency patients the county hospital in Algona cannot handle. They fly them there from the helicopter pad constructed with the money left by a well-to-do local family whose son went crazy and killed his parents and his sister and her kids before killing himself. That murder-suicide was the only time my hometown made the national news. Soon, we were on Ryan's floor, headed for where the family was assembled.

Everyone sat hunched over in a waiting area, with well-thumbed copies of *Redbook* and *Better Homes and Gardens* lying untouched on the tables in front of them. Some of them were sniffing, and some were weepy-eyed and pale. At first I hardly recognized anyone. Then my uncle Dave, who is only nine years older than me, saw us and stood up. He walked over and hugged first me and then my mom, saying, "Thank you so much for coming; we really appreciate it." He wiped tears from his eyes but I still could see them spilling out. My uncle Dave wasn't a hugger; I'd never seen him cry. I couldn't remember him saying much more to me than "Where's your dad?" or "Hi, how are ya?" My mom made some sort of appropriate response that I thought was good enough for both of us, and I stammered out a feeble hello. Just as I thought I could keep the tears from welling up, Mom made a beeline for Aunt Marsha, who is only three years older than me, and I had to follow her. I didn't know what to say to her. "How's Ryan?" seemed stupid, as he was dying. Again, my mother said something to get us over this hurdle, and I managed a second lame hello and just stood there. I tried not to cry, and I couldn't figure out why I was since I barely knew this cousin, but maybe it was because he was just too young for this.

My aunt asked, "Do you want to see him?" and of course my mother said yes, so I took a deep breath as Marsha, Mom, and I headed for Ryan's room. My first thought when I saw him stretched out in his hospital bed was "Gee, he's grown,"

but luckily, I didn't blurt this out. It was clear even to me that he was unknowing and unseeing, and I couldn't ignore the tubes that ran from every orifice of his body to all kinds of monitoring and life-sustaining machinery, nor could I avoid seeing the bruises from the cord that had been around his neck.

We went back to the waiting room, and I plopped myself on a chair near my aunt Margaret. She had nine kids, eight more than my aunt Marsha. They were all grown up and living on their own, like me. She even had grandkids. "Isn't it terrible," she said, and I realized that this is what Ryan's attempted suicide had reduced the family to saying. After all, we couldn't say "Terrible about Ryan's accident; did they get the driver that hit him?" or "Don't worry, they have all kinds of treatments for that now." Cheery, reassuring assertions containing phrases from get-well cards ("I'm sure he'll be up and around in no time") were out as well.

Then Ryan's doctor came out to talk to the family. With him were the hospital chaplain and several others. The doctor had the results from tests done early that morning after Ryan's middle-of-the-night seizure. It was not good news. For a while, the doctor talked, Marsha talked, Dave talked, then the doctor talked. Marsha asked the doctor, "Does this sort of thing run in families?" and all the Wildins by blood not marriage, including Aunt Margaret, remembered cousin Marvin, who got religion, got a heroin habit, got busted, then got a hose, hooked it up to his Chevy's exhaust pipe, and left this world with the motor running and the windows rolled up. I was so busy trying not to look at my mom, who I know was thinking about Marvin and the rest of the Wildin misfits that I missed the doctor's answer. Anyway, the doctor, done with the preliminaries, dropped the bomb he'd carried into the room. He looked right at Marsha and said, "Your boy, Mrs. Wildin, is not the same boy he was three days ago or even last night. Ryan's brain is no longer functioning. Your boy is gone, Mrs. Wildin." Then Marsha screamed and fell to her knees. She cried, "No, not my boy, not my Ryan." She was very loud and she didn't care who heard her.

I felt sad and sorry for my aunt and uncle and for Ryan, but mostly I felt embarrassed because everyone was staring at my family, and I wished I were just about anywhere else. I couldn't take the emotion pouring from my aunt, and I realized why my father was too busy with farmwork to come to the hospital and I envied him for the excuse. I wished it had been cancer, a swimming accident, even murder, not suicide again. My mother reached out to comfort Marsha, who yelled at her not to touch her, but despite that, I wished I had my mother's courage. The rest of us, being Wildins by blood, stood mute and unmoving, full of guilt and sorrow and other emotions that we would not express.

Marsha recovered somewhat, and the doctor talked on. Dave was ready to pull the plug, but Marsha still hoped for her boy to be miraculously returned. The rest of us sat on the bright orange seats, quiet. We didn't believe in miracles. "Isn't it terrible," murmured Aunt Margaret, or perhaps I did.

After the doctor left, Mom and I said our good-byes and headed home.

When my father got home, we told him, "Ryan is dead."

It took another month for Ryan to die in a way that even his mother could accept.