

## Untethered

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There he was, out of the blue, at my doorstep. It had been what, five years? Five years of sleepless nights, wondering if he was even alive. I was confused. Angry. But most of all, relieved he was okay. “Where have you been?” Before I could even say anything else, he barged in, gave me a quick hug as if we had seen each other the weekend before, and shut the door behind him.

It’s funny. For identical twins, we couldn’t have been more different. I’m more reserved, not very daring. I didn’t stray too far, or at all, really, from the path I was expected to take. I look and act as average as it gets. I still live in a perfectly normal house in a perfectly normal neighborhood with my perfectly normal family. He, on the other hand, was a wild, impish version of me. Always had been.

Every time I looked into his eyes, I saw a whole universe. You could tell he wasn’t ever fully present with you. That’s not to say he didn’t care or listen. He truly did. But there was something else going on in that head of his. Usually, an unsolvable problem he was working through, or one of his many unachievable dreams. He was simply fascinating to be around; you never knew what mind-blowing thing he’d utter like it was nothing.

He was obsessed with astronomy. I spent many nights watching him point out planets and stars in the night sky. Once, for Christmas, he got a backyard telescope. I’ll never forget him seeing the rings of Saturn for the first time. He let out a breathless laugh, steadied himself, and went completely silent. Just staring. He grabbed my shoulder. “You have to see this. Come see this right now!” They were spectacular that year, tilted wide toward Earth. “One day, I’ll go there,” he whispered, but with his usual conviction. “One day...”

Right after we turned fifteen, our parents died in a car accident. Our whole world turned upside down. We didn't really have much of an extended family. At breakneck speed, we were placed into foster care, and don't you worry, promised we wouldn't be separated. Well, that was a lie. While he bounced between foster homes for the next three years, I was adopted almost immediately and went on to start my perfectly normal life.

I constantly felt guilty. I got to sleep in a familiar, warm bed every night, never went hungry, and my adoptive parents were wonderful. I saw my brother briefly once or twice a year, and while he never told me how bad things were, I could tell. There's not much you can hide from your twin.

What I liked most about him, what made him different from me, gradually stopped being cool. His permanently uncombed hair and unkempt appearance used to make him look so carefree. Now, he just looked messy. But his eyes were still the same, with that familiar, almost supernatural intelligence about them.

I went to a local college and got a perfectly normal job. That would've never been enough for him. He easily got into one of the country's top research universities, majored in astrophysics, and even earned a PhD. What a contrast. He published outstanding research multiple times and was nominated for and won award after award. He never accepted any; he was in it just for the sake of knowledge itself, not self-glorification.

Then, just like that, he vanished. After a month of not returning my calls and texts, which, to be fair, wasn't all that unusual for him, I drove to his city to check on him. I found his front door unlocked. Drawers and cabinets open, books and papers scattered everywhere, the living room lights still on. It looked like he had up and left, in a hurry. I asked his colleagues at the university if they knew anything. Nothing. I contacted the police, which led to an investigation. Still nothing.

For five years, I wondered what had happened to him. Five agonizing years. Only for him to abruptly show up at my house and leave me again just as abruptly.

“It’s a long story,” he said, after shutting the door. “I just came to say goodbye. I have to get going soon.” My own flesh and blood standing right there in front of me. He looked older, tired, but happier than I had seen him since we were kids. I was overcome with emotion. But there was no time for that, apparently.

He told me that, before he went missing, he met another researcher at the university, a neuroscientist. He showed up at his office one afternoon, and there she was, waiting at the door. She mentioned she had read some of his papers and was very interested in his work. Then she discussed her own ongoing research and how groundbreaking it might be. I could tell he was heavily simplifying things for me, doing his best to put it all in layman’s terms.

She had been studying the human brain for a long time and was particularly interested in human consciousness. And this is where it started to get wild. She theorized that consciousness was an electromagnetic wave that propagated in a higher dimension. Hence, it’s never measured emanating from someone’s head. “I’m sorry, what?” While several cortical networks and whatnot are involved in consciousness, her belief was that it is biologically tethered to each person through the thalamus. He had to tell me what that was, too.

It was getting harder and harder to follow by the second. He explained she had been studying and trying to perfect a procedure called thalamic ablation, which is used to manage conditions like Parkinson’s disease and chronic pain syndromes. It’s safe and non-invasive, utilizing focused ultrasound to target specific nuclei in the thalamus, depending on the disorder. “Where are you going with this?”

“There’s a set of thalamic nuclei called intralaminar. They’re left alone during those procedures because damage to them can leave the patient in a permanent vegetative state.” And what do you know, her grand proposition was that targeting them instead could potentially release a person’s consciousness, effectively freeing it from biological constraints.

So, we could be free from our bodily prison. But at what cost? Not to mention the fundamental assumptions being made. Would somebody’s consciousness, when unshackled, remain a coherent entity? Retain its memories, sense of self? According to my brother, yes, probably. Hopefully. “I know there’s a lot of speculation involved.” Yeah, you got that right. And there was only one way to find out.

She had approached my brother because of his extensive research on dimensional theory. They talked all afternoon, and my brother was entranced by her ideas. She had her own private lab and a small team. “Family money.” At this point, I wondered how an extremely bright man like my brother could get duped so easily. “Did you get scammed? Is that what happened?”

“No, of course not!” She invited him to work with her on the condition that he didn’t tell anyone. Not a soul. “Not even me?” He had felt awful leaving me like that, or so he said, but this was way too big an opportunity to pass up. “Bigger than us, even? Huh.” I felt hurt. A twinge of pain ran through my chest. How could he have done this to me? “I’m sorry. I really am.”

For five years, they worked on the specifics of the procedure and how it would all play out if successful. He reiterated the basics to me. If they were right, consciousness propagates in that higher dimension at the speed of light. That means upon release, from its frame of reference, it could reach anywhere instantaneously. “It could go from here on Earth, to Alpha Centauri, the Andromeda Galaxy, the edge of the observable Universe, to Saturn, and, as far as it was concerned, no time would’ve passed.”

Yes, Saturn. I let out a laugh; he hadn't changed after all. However, all of this sounded absurd to me. His explanations were intoxicatingly convincing, but this was ludicrous, right? I mean, sure, it was a fascinating theoretical exercise, but it was just that. Theoretical. "So, you disappeared for five years over this? Over something that's clearly unattainable? Is that it?"

"We think we finally figured it out. This *is* it. And I'm the one who's going to undergo the procedure." My legs buckled. I hugged him and just bawled, begging him to reconsider, as if that would've changed his mind. It was a done deal. His eyes lit up while talking about this; I knew he really believed in it.

The procedure would render him in a vegetative state, or, just as likely, kill him. Either way, they would keep him—or his body—for further research, and I couldn't go see him—or his body. Oh, I also couldn't tell anyone about any of this. Ever. But they were confident his consciousness would be freed regardless, and he'd go to Saturn and wherever else out there in the Universe. I wiped my tears. Knowing I'd never see him again hurt way too much.

Before he left, I asked, "Will I ever know if this procedure has worked? Will I ever have confirmation you're out there propagating in a different dimension or just, I don't know, dead?" He explained that, from my perspective, time would continue to behave linearly like we're used to, and it might be a while before he'd be able to communicate, if ever.

For that to be possible, this higher dimension would have to intersect our own, and we'd have to hope the dimensional barrier is thin enough that his consciousness could draw enough energy from quantum fluctuations or ambient radiation to interact with electromagnetic fields, manipulating them to create oscillations at radio frequencies that, if amplified, could be detected. "Phew."

If all those conditions were met, yes, he would absolutely attempt to contact me. “I promise.” In other words, clearly, I would never know if it worked or not, which felt horrible. How the hell would *I* detect those oscillations? What if none of those assumptions were correct? “Goodbye.” He left. I stood there, staring at my door for what felt like hours.

As the months passed, it didn’t get any easier. I missed him every day. Every hour of every day. But I had to accept my brother was a unique guy pursuing unique goals, and if that foolish consciousness experiment was what made him happy, so be it. He was gone, gone forever. And I had to move on.

That winter, I arrived at the office one day to find all my coworkers huddled around a TV in the breakroom. A live newscast was on. I couldn’t hear the reporter over everyone’s chatter, so I moved closer to the door. “...are urging caution, but it is being treated as a possible sign of intelligent extraterrestrial life...” I went inside the room, trying to get a peek at the screen. “...and three days ago, scientists at the Karl G. Jansky Very Large Array in New Mexico picked up an unusual radio signal coming from the general direction of Saturn...” My heart skipped a beat. “...very faint and consists of a repeating pattern in what appears to be Morse code.” The reporter paused. “It spells out the word ‘hi.’ Researchers do not know how long it’s been transmitting...”

I walked out of the building. Didn’t even grab my coat. The frigid air bit into my skin, but I didn’t care. He’d made it. He’d actually made it, just like he said he would all those years ago. He was free. And he’d found a way to reach back across dimensions to let me know he was all right.

“Hi to you, too, brother!” I yelled at the pale sky.