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The childhood accident that changed three brothers forever

When Jonathan Tepper's youngest brother died in a car crash, it split his family's life into 'before' and 'after'



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The Tepper brothers – (L-R) Timothy, Peter, Jonathan and David – were inseparable throughout their childhood. (Pictured in 1991, weeks before Timothy's death) Credit: Jonathan Tepper

Jonathan Tepper

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If anyone ever asked how many brothers we were, it was always four. David, Peter, Timothy and me. Timothy was gone, but we'd always be a band of four brothers. In our lives there was only *before* and *after*. Timothy's death was the equinox, and when he was gone, every day became a little dimmer.

My three brothers and I grew up as American missionary children in Madrid in the 1980s. Our neighbourhood of San Blas had the highest rate of heroin use in Europe, and my father, Elliott, and mother, Mary, roped us into their mission work of starting a drug rehabilitation centre, Betel. Even though we were only little children, we were handing out flyers to junkies while they shot up and shared needles.



Peter, Jonathan, David and Timothy grew up as missionary children in the San Blas neighbourhood of Madrid. (Pictured c1985-86)

The first addict to enter the centre was Raúl. His nickname was *El Tocho*, or “Stocky”. He was solid, his hands meaty and strong. When my brothers and I spotted him before church services, we tried to climb him. Little Timothy was his favourite to carry. Timothy delighted in looking down imperiously at David, Peter and me. He looked like a village boy who had tamed a wild elephant.

The men in the centre became like older brothers to us. They nicknamed us “the Dalton brothers”, after the notorious gang of bank robbers of the American West from the *Lucky Luke* cartoons. We took it as a compliment.

When we played football, David was the best – his body would move one way, the ball another, but they would reconnect further down the field, as if magically tethered. Peter played midfield, while I was goalie and Timothy my trustworthy defender. He stood in the way of attacks without flinching before half a dozen players twice his size ran him over.

Evening was the most beautiful time to play. The sun dipped below the rooftops, and in the half-light, the sky turned shades of lavender. We headed home sweaty, marching with our arms locked around each other's shoulders, telling stories until they no longer resembled anything like the facts.

As we grew up, we no longer played football together every day. David entered high school, and his world was already floating away from ours. He had taught himself calculus from books at 12, and he was looking forward to going to university. He was the eldest, two years older than me, three older than Peter, and seven years older than Timothy.



The brothers in Avila, Spain, in 1988. L-R: David, Jonathan, Peter and Timothy

Walking Timothy to school fell on me because I was 14 and vaguely responsible. We shared a bunk bed and did not fight. On our walks to school, I taught Timothy about the US's trade deficit, Newton's laws of motion, and the

taught Timothy about the Celsius scale, Newton's laws of motion, and the basics of thermodynamics – stuff every child should know. He was my little experiment, his brain a laboratory for my prodding and probing. I thought I was teaching him, but I was teaching myself.

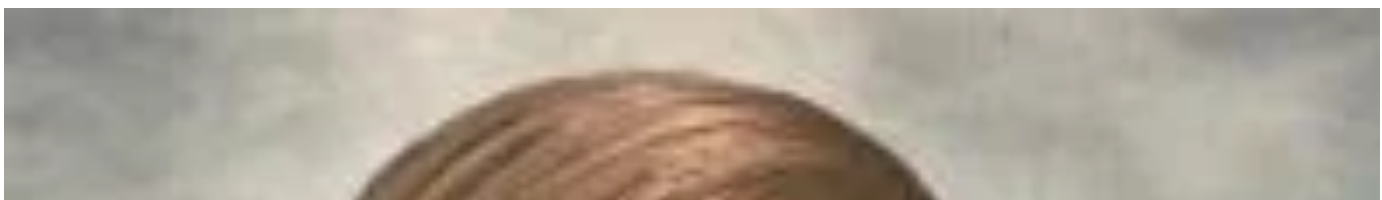
Timothy and I hatched intricate plans. We loved jazz and listened to Miles Davis and John Coltrane. We, too, would be one of the great duos of jazz history. We planned on attending Harvard to get a decent education. Our age gap meant I would have graduated before Timothy was a freshman, but we had figured that out – I'd find a job in Boston and he could share my apartment. We even planned that I would be president for two terms, Timothy my vice-president. Then, we would reverse roles. If Ronald Reagan was an actor and president, it wasn't too far-fetched to think we could be musicians and presidents. We had life all figured out.

Every few years, we ventured back to the US to visit relatives and churches. The drive down a North Carolina country road on July 19 1991 was unremarkable up until 10.45am. David, aged 16, had just got his driving licence and was at the wheel.

I looked up from the book I was reading seconds before it happened. I glimpsed the white stripe delineating the edge of the road. One wheel strayed over the line, and then the minivan lost its balance and rolled over.

The accident lasted only a few seconds. Timothy was asleep in the front seat. The car rolled and rolled, bellowing with the crunching of steel. We were thrown against the van's sides, the roof and the floor. Suddenly, everything was quiet.

David screamed, "Timothy! Where's Timothy?" He was not in his seat. We climbed out through the windshield. Timothy lay unconscious next to the minivan, blood gushing from his mouth and ears. I had read the *American Medical Association Encyclopedia of Medicine* on Mum's bookshelf. Instantly, I knew he was going to die. It was five days before his 10th birthday.





Timothy, aged nine, in 1991, the year he died

I was struck by how absurd death is. Death does not announce itself. While David was driving, my father, who was in the middle seat behind David and Timothy, had read us the psalms and told us he loved us – but that was what he always did. He did not know they were the last words he would read to us as the band of four brothers.

At the hospital, as I sat by my father, I thought of all the people in Betel. “Daddy, death is real... I need to help as many people as possible before I die.” Tears welled in his eyes, and his voice cracked as he said, “Jonathan, you don’t need to make any decisions now... From now on, you have to live life one day at a time.”

When we met my mother at her parents’ house, David, Peter and I stood at a

distance as my parents slowly approached each other. “I’m sorry, Mary. I’m so sorry,” my father said. “It’s my fault. I shouldn’t have let David drive.” We walked over and embraced her; then we stood in a broken circle.



The Tepper family in 1991 (L-R): Peter, Mary, David, Timothy, Elliott and Jonathan

When we returned to Madrid, Timothy was gone but his presence was everywhere. We all collected our photos of him, like children building castles on the beach, tracing with our finger in the sand, hoping the tides of time wouldn’t wash away our memories and pretty pictures.

At first, we retold stories, trying to enlarge them, hoping to bring Timothy back to life. Then we spoke less and less. All the joking and mischief disappeared. David, Peter and I walked together to school, but we couldn’t make sense of things. Adults struggle with grief, but as a teenager, you’re even less able to understand.

David had been driving when the accident happened, and he held himself responsible. It was a freak accident – Timothy would probably still be alive if his seatbelt hadn’t failed. But nothing we said lifted the load David had placed on himself.

As we slept at night, David whispered: “Why? Why’d it happen? I should have died instead of him.” Peter got up from bed and hugged him. “It’s not your fault. I love you.” After the accident, David went from a tall, athletic, extroverted teenager to an introspective young man.

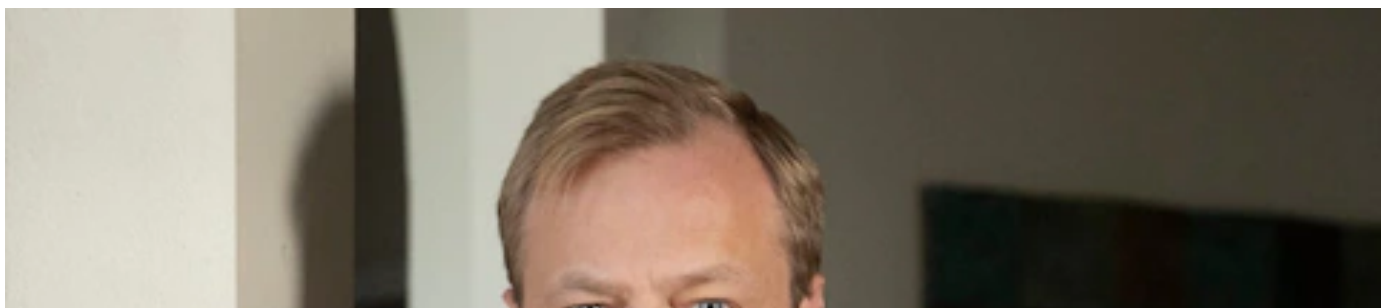
The loss of Timothy was like a missing limb; we felt his absence every day. One morning, on the way to school, Peter said: “I guess I’m the youngest now. He was the joker. I need to be the clown now... but I don’t know if I can. I can’t laugh anymore.” Peter choked up. “No one’s going to take anyone’s place, you hear me? You’ve just got to be yourself,” I said.

And who could match Timothy’s irrepressible sense of humour? With an earnest look he would ask my parents the most ridiculous questions: “If we need to save the environment by recycling paper, why don’t we recycle toilet paper?”

I often wondered if Peter missed Timothy, because I so rarely saw him cry – until I heard him wail one day when he was on his own in the garden.

After Timothy’s death, thoughts of suicide seduced me; I was 15 when he died. But I spoke to no one about them – not my parents, not David, not Peter. The real and only reason I never killed myself was that I did not want my parents to lose another son.

Our grief is as unique to us as fingerprints. My parents grieved in their own way, and the space between them filled with the cobwebs of misunderstandings. What I feared most were the terrible silences – like ghosts that entered the house and became larger, more terrifying the longer my parents avoided each other. A fault line below the surface, the accident remained hidden from others, but we could never escape its faint tremors and vicious aftershocks.





After Timothy's death, Jonathan battled with dark thoughts and contemplated suicide Credit: Allison Joyce

After the accident, David looked after Peter and me with great care. He had sent me his college textbooks when I was in high school, and I followed him to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. At university, we were isolated from our friends in Madrid, but David and I shared an apartment, as Timothy and I had promised we would do. Peter went to the United States Military Academy in New York, but visited us on breaks.

The peak of deaths from Aids-related conditions in Spain was in 1994 and 1995 – my first years of college. When we returned to Madrid, most of our friends had died. The world we grew up with was gone. Raúl had become our older brother, and when he died in 1995, it felt like when we lost Timothy all over again.

At university, I got scholarships and fellowships every year, partly out of financial need, but mainly out of a self-imposed burden to make Timothy proud. I tried to live for two and did not want our dreams to die. Timothy's picture rested on my desk, an ever-present reminder.

I was chosen as a Rhodes scholar and went on to study at the University of Oxford. The only way I knew to escape grief was through books; I stacked them high as if building a wall, unsure what I was keeping in or out. I had tried to live for two but only lived half a life.

After I went to Oxford, David followed and got his degree, and then Peter. Unlike American universities with one large graduation ceremony, at Oxford the ceremony is held many times a year because the Sheldonian Theatre is so

the ceremony is held many times a year because the Sheldonian Theatre is so small. We hatched a plan so we could all graduate together on the same day. As we stood in our gowns, with our parents by our side, I thought of how far we had come from the streets of San Blas. How I wish Timothy could have been with us for all the journey.



Peter, Jonathan and David all graduated from the University of Oxford. 'How I wish Timothy could have been with us,' Jonathan reflects

The Dalton brothers gang will never be complete again. Even today, if anyone ever asks how many brothers we are, it is still four. We will always be four.

David, Peter and I speak less of Timothy with the passing of time as memories of our childhood fade. We don't need to. Timothy died but his presence lingers, like a boat's wake, growing ever fainter but ever wider.

We no longer live in Madrid, but we go back as often as we can. David works with me now, running Prevatt Capital, a fund that bears my mother's maiden name. Peter was a student chaplain at Oxford and is now pastor of a church in Florida.

My brothers have children of their own, and my wife and I have a son, Nathan. He is a human hurricane of curiosity. He looks like Timothy and reminds me of

him every day. We are all links in a long chain of love.



The surviving Tepper brothers today, 25 years after the accident. L-R: Jonathan, David and Peter Credit: Allison Joyce

My father is 79, but the old lion is still working and wants to help addicts until the day he dies. Betel has been running for more than 40 years now, helping hundreds of thousands of addicts. My parents are heroes, not because they built a big organisation but because they practised love and empathy daily.

I wrote *Shooting Up: A Memoir of Love, Loss and Addiction* because words keep time from bleaching the colours out of memories, the fading snapshots of the past. I hope the memory of my brother and friends might be a blessing to others.

When Timothy died, I thought that nothing would ever again be well. I believed I could never be happy. Now I know that we do have a choice. Life goes on, and as surely as sorrow follows happiness, tragedy holds within itself the possibility of joy.

Shooting Up: A Memoir of Love, Loss, and Addiction by Jonathan Tepper (Constable, £25) is published on Feb 19

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