

Hate You Alive, Love You Dead

Sitting in the back seat of our family minivan, I notice my mother making a turn in the opposite direction of our house. I want to ask her where we are going but I already know. I look over at my younger brother Jake sitting next to me. Although he is two years my junior, I can tell he knows, too. I feel myself physically sink into my seat. I want to disappear. I am embarrassed even to be in this neighborhood, and I don't want to be seen by anyone.

My mom turns the car into the driveway of his unsightly baby blue townhouse. The vinyl siding is crooked and unattached, and the garage door has a large dent that no one cares enough to fix. My mom looks over her shoulder and tries to extend warmth through the smile she forces upon her lips. "I'll be right back guys, you just stay in here," she says to us. I feel a little relief that I don't have to go into that wretched place and face the elephant in my life. But, at the same time, I know this means he is not well and my mother is trying to protect us. My heart breaks for her as I think about what she might encounter inside.

I watch her as she trudges up the front steps, opens the door, and lets herself in. I glance over at Jake and imagine myself in her situation. If it were my little brother who needed help, I don't know if I could be as strong as she is, and I don't think I could handle seeing him in that state.

It is a sunny day in early March, the kind of day that gives one hope that there is life after a long winter. That is not how I feel looking at this house. There are no hope, no evidence of life, and no happiness. Jake and I sit in stone cold silence as we wait.

After about 20 minutes, I watch her open the front door and walk back to the car. Her shoulders slouch as if she is trying to carry the burden of a weight that is not there. She looks as if someone has stuck a siphon into her soul and sucked some life out. She gets in and drives away without another word. I'll never know what it is she just saw inside, but every time a situation like this occurs my anger towards my uncle John grows. He is a veteran who has served six tours of duty in the Middle East. As a result of his service, he has severe PTSD, and to cope with it, he drinks. I understand that he has been through a lot, but he is no longer functional and relies on my mom and grandparents for everything. The strain that this puts on them is immense. I resent him for the hurt that he causes the ones whom I love the most.

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It is a hot and humid Memorial Day morning. After watching the parade in the glaring sun, I squint to adjust my eyes as I walk into the Mandt Community Center for the ceremony. I feel the refreshing cold rising off the concrete floors, and look around at the mass of people. I immediately pick out my grandfather. He is a tall, sturdy man. With impeccable posture, he speaks confidently and proudly as he greets nearly every person he passes. Next, in sharp contrast, I notice my uncle, isolated and slouching on the rickety wooden bleachers. He is sober and looks as if he has been starved of oxygen as he sits there with dark circles under his eyes.

I try to pretend I haven't seen him as I walk towards the bleachers on the opposite end of the room, but my mom redirects my effort. I obediently follow her as we cross the room to sit by my uncle John. When I reach him, he smiles and ruffles my hair. "Hey Bells," he says. I make myself return the smile, then drop my head, climb two rows back, and plop myself down. I am upset that he acts like everything is just fine. I am ashamed that I must be seen with him, but I feel guilty for hating him the way I do. They tell me he is sick, that he can't control it, but in my

mind, it is a choice. All he must do is choose to stop drinking. Sometimes I wish he had cancer or was paralyzed or something like that because then I couldn't blame him.

My mom walks in the front door and nearly collapses into my dad's arms. She isn't crying, but I can see something different in her eyes, something changed. She looks empty. My heart breaks at the sight of seeing her like this. I feel something heavy in the air, and I try to hide from it, sink to a level where the weight cannot find me. She whispers something to my dad that I cannot hear, and I see him hug her tighter as he begins to cry. At no point in my life have I ever seen my father cry.

My dad is the one to tell me that uncle John has died. I can't say I didn't expect it. In fact, there were times when I wished it would just happen already, to stop the constant strain of seeing and caring for him that my loved ones had to endure. 'Just tear the Band-aid off.' I never said it out loud but thought it many times. It's different now, though, seeing my mom in this state. I don't know if she will ever be the same. I think about my grandparents, and I don't know if they will be able to survive losing their only son. Why did he have to do this to us?

Looking back, I have kind of made peace with the impact that my uncle John had on my life. I now have a better understanding of the horrible things addiction can do to the mind and body. Because of my understanding, I no longer blame him for his disease. When I remember him, I try to push out of my mind the image of the pitiful man he was at the end of his life. Instead, I look back on the strong, proud, kind man he was before he got sick and the addiction consumed him. The man who was filled with so much love for nature, his two little boys, and his big, slobbery yellow lab.

I find myself thinking about him more than I ever thought I would. I think about him whenever I'm by the river. He loved to go kayaking and take us fishing. I think about him at holidays. It must hurt my grandparents to see the empty spot at the table that he should be filling. I think about him the most when I see my cousins, his two sons. When I watch his youngest son play baseball, I think about the joy he would have gotten from being a part of it. When I listen as his older son fills the house with beautiful piano music, I think about how proud he would be to hear the music.

I still get sad when I think about him. I am sad that he can't watch the wonderful people his children are growing into. I am sad that he is not able to be a part of their lives. I am sad that the only memories they will ever have are of him as a sick, lifeless man. I am sad that my grandparents had to watch their only son be buried in the ground. I am sad that my mom had to watch her little brother die. However, I am happy that he played a role in my life. Despite the hurt he caused me and my family, I no longer hate him. I am thankful for the lessons he taught me about pain, sacrifice, grieving, and pride. He will forever be a piece of my memory and have a place in my heart.