

An American Suicide

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What I remember most about my uncle's funeral is my brother crying.

My brother never cries and he's proud of it. He's one of those all-American boys who just missed being cast in "Saved By the Bell" and walks through life with an invisible letterman jacket casually slung over his shoulders. He's handsome and smart and lives to make the world laugh. The whole world. He likes to see it shake. To feel it under his feet. To know it's because of him. He plays baseball and dates beautiful girls and has a freckle right next to his dimple. He knows how to wiggle his ears.

But I've always said that my brother is happy lyrics set to unhappy music, and he sings so loudly most people don't even notice the melody — half because he's afraid to stop and half because he refuses to. My whole life all I've wanted is to tune his instruments, but my hands shake. I've never been able to save him. I've been the problem child, the wild one, reckless and sad, the one my mom stayed up waiting for. So, so, so sad. Blue in the face sad. Jack's been the happy one. The smile with the dimples and the living, breathing proof that we are not all our parents' children.

It's been a running joke in my family, how I monopolized all of the tear ducts, how I was the crier and Jack was the jokester, how he had this unbelievable ability to either bottle things up or shrug them off. We worried about him sometimes, worried that he needed to cry, but he assured us that he didn't. He'd joke about it, say that one time he almost cried during a movie—*Up*, I think it was—but he thought really hard about it, concentrated so much, and forced the tears right back into his eyes.

But at my uncle's funeral, my brother cried.

The funeral was at an old-fashioned Italian funeral parlor in the East Village. It appeared to be straight out of *Goodfellas*, and I kept waiting for Robert DeNiro to roll up, to tell us that it was all a show, that we had walked on a movie set, no one had died, it was all make believe. *Fuggetaboutit*, he'd tell us. But no dice. My uncle had really died.

I didn't know anyone there, and I was wearing a hideous black silk dress with my hair up in a top knot. I hated myself for thinking about how I looked when there were photos of my uncle *in memoriam* all around me. What made me hate myself even more was that from the second we walked in the funeral parlor, I instinctively clung to Jack like I had two broken legs. My fingers whitened from pressing them into his arm. I'm mad at myself for that, for making him feel like he had to stand strong for both of us.

Yes, Robert DeNiro was nowhere to be found, but every other Italian in the Tri-State Area seemed to be there, hugging each other, all somehow towering over me, speaking so loudly and so quietly at the same time. Like talking too close to the microphone. Arms would wrap around me and then

unravel before I even knew who they belonged to, before I could identify their individual smell apart from all the other smells in the room that were clouding together into one, grief-ridden, rose-petal scented cloud. No one understood why we were there. We were all bewildered, walking around. A montage of my uncle of when he was young and supposedly happy played on a screen. I say “supposedly happy” because I don’t know for sure if he was— not knocking the wall down in Berlin, not on top of the London Bridge, not amidst the cherry-trees in Japan or on the beach in Thailand. Because my uncle killed himself, really, really killed himself, like he was sure about it and everything. He wasn’t drunk or on drugs. He wasn’t hysterical. It wasn’t after some kind of traumatic event when he wasn’t thinking straight. It was in Florida. He left pages and pages of detailed notes to his blood relatives as explanation.

It was off the side of a kayak in the middle of a lagoon. He did it right at sunset, right when the sky was melting, the day ending, the sun quivering. It was with weights tied to his ankles. Heavy ones. I don’t know how heavy, but heavy enough so that when he slid off, he sunk right down to the bottom, fully committed to giving himself over to the cold and to the deep. There was no room to change his mind, even if he wanted to when he was down there; he was stuck. He forced himself to die. I think about that a lot, how he weighed himself down like that, how he gave himself no room to wuss out.

I’m shaking writing about it. Imagining my uncle floating above the chains of those weights. As much sense as he thought it made, it made *no sense*. Not because I don’t think suicide is ever the answer. I do not think I am in a place to judge what the answers are. I do not think I am in a place to point to the pain in someone’s heart and tell them it doesn’t hurt enough to kill them.

Especially since I survived a suicide attempt myself. I gave myself room to change my mind, though. I did it the pill way. I swallowed so many, but then, I changed my mind. I decided, *better not die today*, so I got my mom and we went to the ER and I spent two weeks in the hospital trying to convince doctor after doctor that I wouldn’t leave and try to do it again. I drew pictures of rainbows and flowers. I read AP Economics textbooks in preparation for the upcoming school year to show them, *see, I’m planning ahead*. I was fucking Strawberry Shortcake, the little happy, giggly girl that has cupcakes for friends. They let me out and I never tried to kill myself again. It was quite the Herculean feat, I must say.

But I don’t judge my uncle’s choice. I am not angry with him like my mom. I’ve stared into the darkness. I know how delicious black velvet can seem. I just don’t *understand* it because my uncle was the most happy-go-lucky adult I knew. He bounced through life one joke at a time. His sentences were constantly interrupted by the bubbly, sweet sound of his laughter. He knew how to make fun of you in just the right way so that everyone else thought it was brutally honest enough to laugh at and you thought it was just insightful enough to know you mattered to him.

One time, we were all at dinner with my grandma, who was a very demanding woman, and we were at a really fancy restaurant. My uncle told the waiter that if he could keep my grandma from complaining *once* the entire meal, he’d give him \$100 on top of the tip. The entire time, the waiter

hovered around my grandma just in case the ice in her water glass melted or her jacket fell from the back of her chair, and we were all laughing so hard that she was too confused to complain. He'd always pretend to steal my nose as a kid and laugh at me as I'd run all around him, determined to get it back. He'd bring my brother and me to haunted houses and gleefully walk through, so excited to get scared himself. He'd bring us to see Santa Claus every year and to go on all the rides in the mall, and he'd plan trips to Hershey Park so strategically we didn't miss a single roller coaster and never waited in any crazy long line. Everyone always used to play around and say that my uncle was a kid that never really grew up. He loved to laugh and have fun and enjoy holidays and give presents just because. He always smelled delicious, too, and he was never late to anything. He loved America so much. He wanted me and my brother to join the military and learn all our history. He thought it was unacceptable that I couldn't name all forty-four presidents or the major battles of the Revolutionary War.

My uncle was the first in his family to go to college. They were all real Italians, fresh off the boat, religious as shit and all about big dinners with fresh cooked tomato sauce. He got into a bar fight as a kid and lost his left eye, so he had a glass one. I'd always known him with that one smaller, still eye that always just looked off.

He got into a lot of trouble, but he made it out, found himself a job on Wall Street in the 80s, made a sinful amount of money and lived in London through his twenties. He traveled every weekend, strutting the ex-pat title around to all the English girls who loved the look of American dollars, with his jet-black hair and expensive suits. He met my dad living in London, back when my dad was also young and handsome and rolling in dough. My dad is first generation too, from a working class family. Together they learned Italian. French. How to make love to red wine and half-finished bottles of top-shelf champagne. Both of them had made it over the rainbow, to the other side. They had gone from Joe the Plumber to Mitt Romney and they were only 25. They were those people Republicans like to talk about when they talk about the greatness of a meritocracy. Straight white male pillars of success. Proof that anyone can do it.

I never really knew about my uncle's financial situation after that. My whole life, I'd never been to his apartment or his office or known where he worked or what he did. I just knew he lived downtown like cool people do. He was always well dressed with gelled back hair and some new business idea in his back pocket. I knew he and my dad had left "the life" behind. My dad because he went bat shit crazy and had to rely on disability. My uncle, I didn't know why, because he wanted to work for himself, my mom said, because he wanted to be his own boss. I always just thought he had money because of all the stories, because I didn't think people fell from those heights that often, that my dad had to be one of the only ones to make it from the bottom to the top and then take a whole family back down with him.

I didn't know his financial situation, but I guess it was bad, really, really bad. Six-feet-under-in-debt sort of bad. I don't know if it was thousands or millions or what, but he had been drowning in debt, in shame, in self-hatred, long before he slipped off that kayak with those weights on his ankles. In his letters to his sisters, he wrote that he hadn't wanted to be a *burden* on anyone with his

financial troubles, and that he would have been thrown out in the street soon, homeless and broke. He couldn't do that to anyone, he wouldn't, even though both his sisters are very well off.

And I will only admit here, to someone who didn't know him and so can't be angry with me: as overwhelmed as I was by his action, I was wildly underwhelmed by his reason. I had been waiting for something cinematic—like he was gay or a vigilante or in some kind of toxic suicide pact with a woman who thought she was a mermaid. Money troubles? That was it? It couldn't be. I'm a writer, a movie buff, a hyperbolic drama queen. This was not why people killed themselves. Even my "reason" had a bit more of film-trailer flair. Right before I swallowed all those pills, I found out the guy I just slept with had taken a sex-tape style video of me. I was seventeen, in the throes of the college application process, and terrified he was about to ruin my life. Scared, insecure, steeped in daddy issues—my trope has been in a movie before. But money troubles? The guy in *Wolf of Wall Street* got through it.

But even as I thought about how insufficient a reason it was, as so sure of that as I felt, I could feel my uncle's image in my mind grow meek. I could see his frame lose its height. I could hear his voice start to crack. His Adams apple peel back.

Stop, stop it.

I had to stop it, because as my uncle's childhood best friend recounted some story about going to the principal's office, my brother was crying. My dear, sweet, smiling brother had tears creep, confused and lost, down his china-doll face. My mom was sobbing behind me, but I didn't turn around. I tried not to look at Jack either. I just held his hand with my sweaty palm, and I was too small to make even his index finger feel safe. I looked straight ahead, past my dad, who was standing in the front, his back turned away from the speaker, staring straight at Jack. He was watching him cry, a cloying look in his eyes. He must have been thinking, "*Oh, my boy is broken now. My boy needs me. My tall, towering feat of a boy is on the floor. He needs me to pick him up now.*"

My dad was happy about it. I could feel it in the eagerness with which he peered around the shoulders of those obstructing his view. Jack could feel it too because his man-jaw clenched and he ran a hand through his hair the way angry boys do. He whispered to me: "*I am going to kill him, Grace.*"

He sounded like he meant it, like he was more sure of it than he was that we were at my uncle's funeral. For a second I imagined him doing it, too. I imagined him pushing me off and running up to where my dad stood and wringing his hands around his neck so for once in his goddamn life he couldn't speak, he couldn't say anything awful. His eyes would roll back, I think, I don't know, I've never seen anyone strangled, but his eyes couldn't *look* at either one of us anymore. They couldn't take joy in seeing my brother cry. And then he'd be dead. Right there, in the middle of that Italian funeral parlor, a perfectly convenient place for a dead body to be found. We'd be free until Jack was jailed for the rest of his life for a crime anyone who has ever met my dad has wanted to commit.

“Let someone else do it,” I said. If it had been a different venue, if we weren’t listening to stories about our uncle when he was alive because now he was dead, I would have added something like, *orange isn’t your color.*

I wasn’t crying. I couldn’t cry. I didn’t want to, either. I wanted for once in my pathetic little life to be my brother’s pillar. Because even Atlas shrugged, so Jack should be able to. I felt my brother grab my hand tighter. I knew I wasn’t adequate, but at least I was something.

After the funeral was over, my dad hobbled over to my brother and me, insisting we go to the lunch afterwards at a nearby restaurant, a staple in the Raffetto family.

“Sure,” Jack said, forever the stoic. His cheeks were rosy and his eyes were dry. I remember my dad peering into them as if he was trying to spot tears hiding in there, as if he needed them so badly, like they were an elixir or the last remaining drops of the fountain of youth. I wanted to stab him. I wanted to shout, *it should have been you!*

It really, really should have.

We had to wait for my dad to get his car, which would take a while because his knees were basically immobile. He was falling apart slowly. First it had been arthritis in his hands, now it was ailments all over his body. He was decaying. A nightmare wide awake at only fifty-eight.

While we waited for my dad, we went into a rice pudding shop across the street. Jack has loved rice pudding ever since we were kids. He would always trade with me during lunch at school, anything I wanted for my pudding cup. I would tell him he was stupid to try to trade with me, since we had identical lunches (our mom made us the same thing), but I’d give him the pudding cup anyway. Half because I loved him enough to give him anything and half because I had burgeoning anorexia.

Jack got himself a rice pudding with coconut shavings on top. I didn’t say anything about how we were about to go to lunch. I got one for myself too. We sat on the stoop outside, fresh out of our uncle’s funeral, and we ate delicious, goopy rice pudding. It felt so disgusting and yet tasted so delicious that we didn’t stop. Were we heathens? Maybe. I don’t know.

“I’m so tired, Gracie,” Jack told me, yawning as he rested his heavy head on my bony shoulder. *“I just want to sleep.”*

“It’s okay,” I replied, wanting to say a thousand other things. I wanted to tell him it’d also be okay to cry some more first, to tell him that if he was sad, he could say something to me, and I was so sorry for almost killing myself, too. I wanted to say that he could fall apart and I’d be there to put him back together, or at least to try. That I was so disappointed in myself for not being strong enough for him to hear me call him *“my baby brother”* and not laugh. But I didn’t say anything. Because our father had been feasting on his tears and our mother had been sobbing and he was a boy who was trying to learn how to be a man and now had one less man around to teach him.

Our dad pulled up in the car, hunched over with a grimace on his face from one of his various perpetual injuries. We got inside and, immediately, he started talking.

“It was so nice to see my old buddies from the good old days, back at Lehman, you know, I got your uncle promoted, you know. God, we had so much fun in London. Greece. Grace, you would have loved our trip to Greece. The yacht was out of a movie, I swear, we couldn’t believe it. I brought it up to Pat earlier, but he couldn’t remember....”

Probably because he’s been on a hundred other yacht trips since then, I thought, as my dad, wide awake, happily fell asleep at the wheel wide awake, into his American Dream that died a painful death and would never come back to life. I tried to feel bad for my dad, just for a second, to wonder what it’s like to eat like mortals do after tasting the stars. I tried to envision my uncle, feasting on the bright light way up in the sky. I wondered if it felt like a relief, or like he was back where he belonged, or if when you die you really just die, so he felt nothing at all. I wondered what it was like for money to mean so much, or if maybe it meant that much to me and I just didn’t know it. Maybe the privilege was too deep in my veins for me to even know it was there.

I looked over at Jack. His head was pressed up against the door, his eyes fluttering closed as he tried to will himself to sleep. To escape. He looks like the American Dream my uncle drowned in. But my brother knows about the black boys that get shot in the streets and the women who get raped and the refugees who are stuck in deserts. I hope he realizes that even if he drowns in the idea of the American Dream, if he tries, he will still be able to breathe.