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CW 100

Very Short Essay

Veracious

Dear Scott,

I found out you died as shorts and t-shirts started being replaced by sweats and hoodies, two years ago. Simran and I had been in bed when Mom got the call. We had talked for a bit and were just getting to sleep, minds drifting unwarily into unconsciousness when suddenly they jerked back to attention as we heard her start to sob.

Hesitantly, we got out of bed, creeping past the large cabinet of trinkets in the hallway, through the big, double glass doors, into the living room where she sat, kneeling, eyes hidden behind a sea of tears. At first, there was silence. Simran and I looked at each other, confused, scared, helpless. Mom's knuckles had turned bright red, the sharp outline of the ancient landline phone engraved into the palm of her hand as she clutched onto it with all her strength, refusing to let go.

A moment passed before our presence was noticed. Papa, who had been standing next to Mom this whole time, turned around and looked at the both of us. He, too, looked uncharacteristically at a loss. Still, not a single word was spoken.

Finally, Mom turned her head. Her movements were slow, painful, as if getting her body to agree with her mind took conscious effort. Seeing her sitting there, tears and snot racing down her face, I couldn't help but think how weak she looked, how powerless.

"It's late. You guys should get some sleep. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to wake you up," was all she could manage, forced to stop by an unforgiving onslaught of snuffles.

"What happened?" I replied, voice frail and timid, barely escaping my lips.

"It's your Uncle Scott," Papa answered. "He passed away, Aunt Nat's on the phone, Mom just found out."

I hated you. Hated you for leaving JoJo, my grandma, all alone in that massive house with no one to take care of her. Hated you for reducing my mom to this vulnerable shell of her vibrant self. Hated you for making her deal with the loss of her youngest brother, just two years after your older brother passed away. Couldn't you wait? Even in death, were you that selfish?

Mom told us you had been doing better, that the last few months you'd been sober, trying to get a job. She told us you were planning to work for Uber, that all you needed was a second-hand car and you'd start earning again, maybe even move out of JoJo's place into an apartment of your own.

Bullshit.

As a kid, I looked up to you. You were the cool uncle, the one who could do all the voices from all the shows, the one from the Chuck E Cheese commercials, the one who taught me how to do a front flip on the trampoline, the one who could play the drums, the one who could do the Sunday morning New York Times Crossword in pen. I adored you. I wanted to be like you. But that didn't last very long, did it?

I remember that very summer, just months before you died, we'd come to visit, to check in on you guys. Papa still hadn't come yet; he flew in later than us to do some work at home. Mom, Simran and I had gone out for a movie. We came back late, butter from a mountain of popcorn staining our clothes and breath alike. When we reached home, we saw you in the front yard, smoking, already falling over yourself. Gross.

I opened the door, finally tall enough to grab the spare key from on top of the door frame, carefully hidden. We went inside and closed the door behind us, turning on the lights and each grabbing a small snack before crawling into bed. Mom knew you better than I did, she saw it coming. She asked Simran to sleep with her that night and told me to lock the door to my room. Thinking she was being her usual paranoid self, I thought nothing of it.

Sure enough, though, you came in a few minutes later, surprisingly making it through the front door without tripping over yourself. You walked to the back of the house, hand aimlessly swinging around what must've been the twentieth bottle of beer for the night. There was a loud crack and the house rang with the tinkling of shattered glass on marble floor. Then, the banging started.

An eternity later you stopped, realizing how fruitless your efforts had been, and just as I thought you'd leave, calling it a night, you started to shout. You shouted about how fucking horrible your life had been. Blaming 9/11 for stealing your friends from you. Blaming that time you got mugged in New York for stealing your legs and, as an extension, any chance at a stand up career. Blaming your ex-wife for stealing your one shot at happiness. Blaming us for leaving you alone with JoJo, for making you a 50-year-old who lived with his mother.

I used to give a shit, but now I'd heard it all too often. My sister was crying, frightened of what you'd do, broken bottle in hand, alcohol replacing the blood in your veins. I didn't even bother being scared. I knew you couldn't do anything; you were way too much of a coward for that. I put in my headphones, cranked up the volume and texted Mom and Simran telling them to do the same and try to get some sleep.

To be honest, I didn't even cry when you died. There was a time I loved you, I probably still did, do, but I stopped caring a while ago.

I tried to cry. I thought about the fun stuff we used to do, about playing on the waterslide in the backyard, chasing down the familiar yet all-too-infrequent chime of the ice cream van, announcing its arrival, catching fireflies at night to make makeshift lanterns all across the house. I thought about all that, about how I'd never have that again, how that was all over, but I realized I wouldn't have had it anyways. As soon as alcohol and cigarettes replaced us in your life, I knew there was no going back. Family played second fiddle.

Usually when someone dies, their survivors are asked what they would tell the person if they were still alive. I thought about that a lot after that phone call in the middle of the night. Mom would probably tell you she loved you, that she supported you no matter what and that she was proud of you for doing better in the months preceding your death.

I don't think I'd be that kind. I'd probably be blunter, more honest. I'd tell you to get your shit together, to stop moping over being dealt a bad hand and be at least a shade of the person you always told me you were. I might tell you how fucking disgusting you'd become, never showering, the sickly scent of smoke and alcohol draped over you like strong cologne. Heck, I might even tell you how JoJo died a year after you did, how she had to be put in a home because you decided to up and leave, and how you probably killed your mother by being a cheap fuck and keeping her on a strict diet of peanut butter M&M's so you could cop yourself extra bottles of booze.

I'm not sure exactly what I'd tell you, but whatever it'd be, I'd really hope you listened.