

UNCLES

Uncle Mark breathes audibly through his nose and has crooked teeth. He let me shift his truck along Chicago's lakeshore to pick up mushroom and onion pizzas from Michelinni's, and the treat wasn't just the scent of cooked mushrooms sneaking out from the side of the box, but leaving my older brothers behind at the house. The rest of the time, they were always leaving me.

Uncle Mark made me feel grown up, maybe even grew me up faster the way he never talked to me in the roller-coaster child voice some adults use for too long. He'd look over at the lake most of the time we were driving, like he might drive straight into it. Then, he'd put his hand under my chin and say, "You really are beautiful, believe me." I thought that was OK. He wasn't creepy, just confused—he'd only started talking again right when I was born. Sometimes, he didn't have any idea what to say.

When I was a little older, Mark told me on the phone that when his friend jumped out of a helicopter in Vietnam the blade severed his head from his body and the dirt caught onto the rim of his severed head as it rolled. I could hear the teeth shaking in Mark's mouth, and I could see his eyes reaching for that pewter water while I held my breath. I secretly hoped my brothers would turn out better than some of my parents' brothers. When I talked to Mark, it was short and taut. One afternoon with the phone to one ear, I was looking at a picture of my older brothers, back and forth from their blue eyes to my larger reflection swimming on top, when Mark said, "You're beautiful, you're so beautiful," and then he hung up. He made me believe that because I was alive, I was.

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Uncle Jody always wears a flannel shirt. He gets berated by my mom's sister, Ria, for pretty much everything he does. He drinks, he swears, he spends all day pumping a train across the United States, he can make me laugh just by raising his coal gray eyebrows. Jody's my favorite Thanksgiving dinner guest. Shakes when he laughs like his shoulders might come down onto the gravy and wipes the backs of his eyes with the knob of his wrist when he talks about pummeling through cows and kidnapping kids who threw rocks at the caboose.

I've always loved Jody, quite possibly just because of his unbelievable size. Sometimes he loses weight, but then he puts even more of it back on. Once, I asked him how much he really weighed, and he hefted his belly up by his belt, put his hands on his Levi'd hips, and said, "Three hundred and fifty, yes ma'am." I catch him giving prime rib and buttered scraps to the dog so often, I'm half surprised Jody's actually eating enough at the table to be such a mass of human being. When he picks me up, even though I'm past the age when it might be proper, he lifts my feet right off the ground. I'm afraid I will lose him to Ria's lack of love.

I'm younger than most of my favorite people in life. This isn't necessarily about them living; it's about them being part of my life. Hey. Life is selfish. Uncles aren't always. I fear not living up to their legacies. I resent that some love is ill-received.

90 Once, Jody was talking about pouring a beer in the dog's bowl, and Ria, who looked like she might overturn the table on his lap, said real slow and smoldering, "You're giving booze to the dogs?" and he said, "Hey, Ree, it's better than drinking alone." You can tell there's something not right in the air between them, thick and thin at the same time. My brother told me it's because Ria and my mom have both thought at different times that they married the wrong men. Their husbands are awkward for opposite reasons: my dad speaks rarely and Jody tells too many stories. Plus, Jody likes to say a lot of things twice. My uncles all seem to have this tension between what they're thinking and what they should say, a tension that was bred out of my dad, who spent his quiet childhood in an attic taking apart radios and putting them back together.

Jody's brothers are either in jail or filthy rich. His dad, a Mexican-Italian Mafia boss, was on America's Most Wanted list till the day he died. Jody's mom, Evelyn, lives on a cattle farm in Trinidad, Colorado, where she nurses all her drug-ridden kids and kids of her kids who come back home broke with busted faces and need refueling before they go out in the world and wreck everything up and down again. "Evelyn," Ria says before and after a story about her mother-in-law. "Evelyn." Like a curse. Which means she married one. Which is maybe why she says things twice, too.

When Ria got addicted to pain killers, the tables turned a little. I was in the hospital room with my uncle and my mom and my cousin Michael. My mom was stroking Ria's hand and pushing the black hair away from her vomit-stained face, and my uncle was making light of the heaviness by arm

wrestling and picking Michael up by the waist even though his son weighs somewhere in the three-hundred range, too.

Ria looked like a scene out of *The Exorcist*, shrieking a blue streak, confusing all our names, and thrashing against the restraints, alternating her fury with gentle bouts of slack-neck sleep. My mom, soothing as a steam bath, bringing the hot heat of that awful detox room down to a comfortable temperature, said, “Shh. Shhh.” If I had a choice between looking normal but being crazy, like my aunt, or looking very different than normal but knowing how to love with a fierceness like a storm, like my mom who has a skin disease, I’m not always sure which of their hard lives I’d choose to live. Maybe I’d choose to be one of my uncles who never tried to render their tensions into any single statements, which seemed to be a series of statements in themselves.

Jody leaned over after all those years of Ria’s hatred and probably his hatred of her too—he’d found her under a quilt, multiple times, with an empty bottle and the wide dumb look of a surprised child—and he kissed her on her teeth-torn lips, and said, “I hate you, Ree. No. I love you. I love you.”

Uncle Dan. He married Rosemary, my dad’s only sister. He let me drive his motorcycle past labyrinths of corn and clouds while he rode on the back. Said he could live on a bike and never need to stop because you can trust in the sky to stay there while all the miles mercifully pass you by.

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Had twins: a girl and a boy. Monica and Matthew. Before the baby boy was six, he died and nobody could do anything about it. Dan thought they could, but it wouldn’t be another boy. He poured all his love into Monica: horses, a little playhouse out back, two puppies, three cats, and a bedspread full of stitched animals.

Rosemary and Dan adopted Cyndi, a freckled little thing with screaming red hair, and she got less. Ran away one night, past Moon Pie and Billie, Monica’s hang-nose horses, with only a can of soup and my grandmother’s wedding ring to keep her company in the Longhollow woods. I blamed Dan. I was twelve. I watched the story on TV and couldn’t decide if I hoped Cyndi would come back. She was my hero, my orange-haired role model of flammable independence. After the dog and the helicopters and a few days of dark eyes, she snuck in a back window of the house because she was hungry, and she got caught.

In the midst of their mess, I thought of being unloved and what that might feel like. I thought if I were Cyndi, I would have brought more soup. She

called Uncle Don when her dad wasn't being a good dad. Don picked her up, bailed her out, hid her in his one-story house. It wasn't enough, until later when she realized it was.

Dan sent Cyndi to Boys' Town in Omaha where the bad kids go, but she couldn't get good. When he drove her there, he was wearing a perfectly pressed shirt, and I wasn't there, but I know because Dan wouldn't have had it any other way. He was in the Coast Guard Auxiliary. He was a John Deere Plant Manager. A Horse Trainer. A Harley Collector. Father of one son and one daughter. And the other one named Cyndi.

When she was at Boys' Town, I asked Don what he thought about it and he said she wouldn't have ended up there if she'd ever known what it was like to be a real daughter, which made me feel bad for knowing what that felt like. My parents used to drive the seven hours to Lincoln, eating peanuts and raisins and M&Ms and singing softly along with John Denver, just to pick up Cyndi and take her to Applebee's.

92 When she started singing in a nightclub, Dan drove his big truck across the frosted fields and sat in the smoke watching the hips, the crooning, the slow sadness of this slumped young woman older than her age. Sometimes I thought Cyndi had acquired the years of two lives: her own and the one of the boy whom she'd replaced. When Dan helped her offstage, he felt the extra lump of something in her tummy, which turned out to be a baby boy, the first to carry on their family name.

Dan talks a little, but works more. He built a "toy box" on the side of their ranch that holds twelve cars and two boats. He calls Monica "Muffin," and Cyndi "Cynthia." He calls me Megs, but I can tell he's a man troubled by names because he's not sure how to call the shots even though he's a man built with a composition to call them. He was my dad's best man only because I think my dad wasn't really sure who to ask. Now they talk about technology and engines, and that's enough for them.

In a recent picture, Dan's holding the youngest of Cyndi's babies, born to fathers who've run so far in the other direction that no one in our family has ever seen their faces. Dan completely rebuilt their living room even though there was never anything wrong with it, and in the photo, it's a gleaming honey-brown behind him. Miles's drop-lip face is Kahlua-colored, and Dan is looking him right in the eyes, like "Are you mine?" Sometimes I look at the history of all the people related to me and I think the same thing.

The first time I saw Cyndi since she ran away was at my own wedding this year, the year after we lost Don. She had on a tight gray dress and high black heels, and while I spun her two little boys in circles at the foot of my draping white gown, I wondered what Cyndi thought about the fact that I got a neat little life and she didn't. I wanted to give her something, but all I had was my hands and my laugh and a dance for her boys.

Uncle Kevin. My mom's oldest brother. Moved to California and married a woman half his age, which means she's almost mine.

Kevin swims a mile every morning in the Pacific, and every time I talk to him he says, "Meg. I am in the best shape of my life." He used to be a big-time lawyer who tried the same cases as Johnny Cochran, but when he met Ting, he quit. She'd gotten two graduate degrees at UCLA before she hit thirty and started a consulting company between Chinese investors and Californians. When they went back to see her family in a poor fishing village in the south of China, they sent me a padded photo album in the mail. In my favorite one, some pointy canoes are angled into a sea of scalloped waves where hunchbacked rocks lift their gray shoulders out of the green. The first time I touched the ocean, I was with Uncle Kevin, who said he'd never move away from the water even if it meant being away from his family for the rest of his life.

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"What do they do out there in California?" I ask my mom. "No one knows," she says. They live in Redondo Beach, and I had dinner with them recently. While I was talking, they leaned so far over their grilled chicken I thought they'd get it on their shirts. They were hungry for a piece of our family, and I guess I was it.

They offered to pay for all of graduate school for me because they can't have kids. I said no, I'd wait to enroll until I had more money. Kevin said, "Meg, this is a gift. You can't refuse a gift. Your education's at stake." I said yes. They lost more money than they wanted to admit. I paid the late fees. I cried to my mom that my education was at stake when they had to repeal the offer altogether, but she disagreed. Debt feels like cold water, but it's probably better this way. I learned the beginning of a lesson I understood in Don's death: I am afraid to inherit anything, especially loneliness.

At Kevin and Ting's wedding, we blew bubbles at them from plastic white bottles. My mom cried because she knew it was the last wedding her mom would see. I would have taken more notes about my grandma that night had

I know the same thing. She had on a pale pink suit and had to keep sitting down, but her beauty was still there, graceful and clean like a wave that does not break, just smooths, consists towards the shore. I wore a lilac-colored sweater and a black skirt, an outfit for someone in between youth and adulthood, and my hair had just started to get curly. It was short and springy, and I knew I was supposed to be youthful and happy, so I was. The whole weekend happened between the hotel swimming pool and the courtyard's white fold-up chairs as we welcomed this petite foreigner, fashion-forward and from a fishing village, into our family of problems.

Uncle Mark was shaking and Kevin was, too, both heaving with heart-breaths when they came down the aisle, and I looked at my shiny legs that I'd just learned to shave, and the sky holding tight and white over the ceremony, and I felt young and alive and uncertain of what to do about all the frailties of family. And how I fit in.

94 Don. He died without legs. He was my dad's only, and younger, brother. He was shot four times in the spinal cord by an angry man at the toy company where they worked. He never worked again, but he never walked again either. They had to take his legs once they stopped working. I wondered where they put them.

Uncle Don invented Simon, the game where you push the lights in order, after they show you a pattern. You have to repeat things to learn them, he said. His showers turned to baths. I crawled up in Don's lap, which was easy because there was no lap, just a space for me, and he was interested in every movement, every pattern, anything to see things move, to watch my brothers and me light up like flaming cartwheels on his wheelchair-preserved lawn.

He raced remote-control cars. Bigger ones than what you may have ever seen. Some had hydraulics and remote controls that looked like they sent the Starship Enterprise skyward. He drove them with this bug-eyed glee, beat out the competition as they circled the asphalt track, blurring, blurred, finally just a blur of red rotating with everyone's attached eyes and my uncle's strong finger pushing the joysticks just so. If I could tell you what his voice sounded like, it sounded like my father's times two, even though Don was many years younger.

Don talked twice as fast and twice as much as Dad did. He could talk the salt out of a potato chip and a waitress out of her job. He believed in the necessity of all things: words, toys, words about toys. He never pretended

that the people he listened to were insightful; he actually believed they all were. My dad sat smiling and blinking hard around Don. They were both photographers and liked to do weird things with film like superimpose faces, one on top of the next, so the end of one eye was the beginning of the next eye on a ten-eyed man, or take a picture of a grease-calm lake upside down so you couldn't tell which way was right-side up. The difference was that sometimes I wished my uncle's gregariousness was in my dad, and once I even wished my dad wouldn't have legs if it meant he knew how to talk to me like Don.

My mom said Don was interested in everything because he couldn't do so much of anything after he lost his legs. Actually, he didn't lose them. He opted to have them taken away because he didn't think he needed them anymore. I always thought he'd be just as interested in everything even if he could run, because we are what we are and that's a whole bunch of problems on one set of legs, whether we have legs or not. Don loved leather newsie hats and paisley shirts. He had a special pool cue he only let us touch after explaining how much it cost. He won every pool tournament he ever entered and drove the sleekest car in the neighborhood: a silver Pontiac with throttled handles for the brakes and gas.

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When he was first in a wheelchair and had both of his legs, they were useless as detached shoelaces: flaccid, noodly, and thin. I liked his torso better without them. The first amputation was because of gangrene, and I understood that you can't ever have something called gangrene happening in your body and go on living with it. At that point, my grandma started saying she wished she could see Don "whole" again.

The second leg he lost because he fell in love.

It was with this woman named Eileen who was much better than the wife who left him after the accident. When Eileen got cancer, she had to wear these tight long sleeves. It was in her lymph nodes, she said, and pushed my fingers into her fleshy armpits and neck. Eileen and Don lived a life that was anchored to their too-soon deaths: a full life—full of touch and timing, speed and slowness, possessions, including each other, that held their hobbies up to the light.

Eileen brought my fingers ever so slowly down the lengths of her limbs to show me the reflexology that cured her for a while. "They just pull all of the bad out of you with their fingertips, and you can feel it, honestly, just stretching thin." She was lying on Don's black leather couch, and her springy gray

hair was trying to escape from under a wide-brimmed beach hat. Eileen felt like sun. She felt like she was my aunt even though she never was.

When the cancer came back, Don told his doctor, "Take this leg so I can take my love down to Hawaii and not have to lug it around." The first doctor said no. The second doctor said yes. That doctor took the leg, but Eileen died the week before they left.

The day before Don died, he said, "Tell me about you you you, everything!" and I told him about my poems and my knee aches and the red dog hair gathering in the corners of my wide-planked floors because I realized that he was the only person who knew how to fill himself up, and he needed everyone else to do it.

Don's daughter-in-law, Allie, was talking to me on the phone in his hospital room that day, and she said, "Ask me something, ask me anything." I didn't realize she was dying for distraction, imploding from the details that precede death.

96 I heard him crying in the background for specific things, and I couldn't sit on my own bed. I kept standing up and sitting down and standing up and chastising myself for the privilege of hinging knees. "Ask me anything, anything," Allie said, and her desperation was a full-force faucet over the phone.

I couldn't think of what to ask.

One time when Don was really sick, I asked him if I could lie in the sand bed next to him to see what the flowing of all those thousands of granules under a wounded body felt like, and it felt like a mix between the ocean and the beach.

I thought about how Don had to lift his hips out of his chair every five minutes from the pain.

I thought about how we drove his car all the way across Illinois to surprise my grandma one afternoon, and we went a hundred miles an hour the whole way just to prove that no one could stop us and that we were fast.

I thought about how Don used to make farting noises with his mouth before someone took a picture so that all the smiles were genuine.

I thought about the picture of my two brothers and me sitting in Don's chair, his head resting against mine, lips closed in a smile, eyes closed, too, like he was trying to hold on to a dream.

When he died, I wasn't there. The whole town told stories about him inside a shoulder-to-shoulder billiards room. Allie took him to Hawaii and

laid him to rest in the ocean where less mass means more movement, and being legless might be like having gills.

He left me ten thousand dollars. All I wanted to do was trade it in for his fascination of moving things, for his sense of seated vigor spun from the smallest of the world's turnings. I knew that part of the reason Don had gathered up so much love for life was that someone had taken so much of his away.

So I used the money to pay for writing classes. I researched legs and lymph nodes and the patterns of the memory. I created images and asked questions of them. I learned to look into things:

The hole Don left in my dad.

The uncles I have left.