

If someone asked me what my favorite state to visit was, Alabama would be the last to cross my mind, yet somehow, I never failed to end up in the passenger-side seat of my aunt's truck when she traveled to Mobile to visit our cousins. We made about half a dozen trips to the historic state from the time I was nine up until I turned eleven. As a kid, I loathed nothing more than a long car ride. The radio faintly clung to the signal from the B95 music station as we transferred from Highway 84 to Highway 45, leaving us to bear the unpleasant sound of overproduced country tunes mixed with sporadic surges of static. The rattling of the warm, foggy window against my head forced my sleepy eyes open while I shifted around uncomfortably in the leather seat. My aunt placated the constant ask of "Are we there yet?" with cheap fast food and an extra charging port, perfectly fit for my iPod Touch cord. After each trip, when we finally arrived at that quaint, suburban home with chipped, white paint covering the porch, my entire body felt stiff, like I had been expedite-shipped in a small, cardboard box. The only thing that made it worth it were the smiles on the family of three's faces when they greeted us from the other side of their hinged screen door.

This time was different. Instead of watching *Maleficent* at a local movie theater, buying peanuts to feed the squirrels in the park, or cheerfully roaming through the Exploreum Science Center with my cousins, I would be attending one of their funerals. I had not spoken to Michael in several years, for his contact information did not survive my switching to an actual phone. I found out on the drive there that he had remarried after formally divorcing his spouse, the one I had come to love as if she were my own blood, and now he had two adolescent stepchildren in addition to the young son he shared with his ex-wife. I had not thought about him in a long time, not until my mom woke me up the morning after to tell me the news. I recalled once reading about the increased suicide rate for Marines, but even that did not soften the hefty blow that was delivered to my chest.

July 12th, 2019, like most middays during summer in the south, was plagued by suffocating warmth and intense humidity, both gifts granted to us by the union of the blazing rays of daylight and a series of scattered rainstorms. As we pulled into the parking lot of Mobile Memorial Gardens Funeral Home, a sense of despondency washed over me. The near entirety of my extended family lingered outside of the dark, wooden entrance doors, unobtrusively socializing in scattered groups. About half of them I had not seen since our annual Christmas reunion, and the others I only recognized from the horde of timeworn pictures my aunt once

hung in the hallway of her home. Accompanied by my parents this time, we exited the vehicle that transported the four of us over a hundred miles and approached one of the circles of familiar faces. Until the clock inevitably struck two, we opted to discuss any unrelated topics that popped into our heads and ask each other questions we did not care to know the answer to. It seemed easier than acknowledging the glaring pain of our loss. We were saved from the discomfort of small talk by the sound of the doors opening. An older gentleman propped them open and called for those of us here for Michael to make our way inside. Before I joined my family in shuffling towards the entrance, I snuck another glance at the sky, and for a moment, I bore witness to the silhouette of his home disappearing into the sun.

Inside there was an impressive lounge area near the front desk, illuminated by tall windows; the mirrored privacy film covering them protected us from the curious gape of those traveling past. It took only a few moments for the same person who granted us entry to announce that the immediate family could join his wife and stepchildren for the private viewing. I roughly chewed the inside of my cheek for the first of many times that day and averted my gaze when his sister walked by guiding their mother, who clung to her daughter's arm like it was the only thing preventing her from melting into the earth. A surge of guilt tied itself into a knot in my stomach, and I could not help but vilify the outpouring of sadness that sprung from my soul. I did not know Michael as intricately as them, nor did I share as many memories as the other people in attendance. My fingers went numb, for each neuron in my brain was now engaged with deeming my heart a fraud.

I dulled the incessant screaming of my skin by gulping a lake of chilled water from a frail, paper cup and accepting whatever prolonged embrace came my direction. The opening of the entryway that separated us from the hulking gravitational pull of the display room yanked the cotton from my ears, and the white noise ceased. I witnessed my entire family take less than four seconds to hush themselves, and it sent a chill down my spine. Shielding their heartbreak with hospitality, most people hung back, subtly motioning for others to go ahead while they glued their eyes to their own muted reflection in the brown, marble floor. It seemed that once again, my aunt required some company, so I joined her side, ignoring the way my calves shook when they carried me. A line formed behind us and one of Michael's aunts, who helped rear him into the man we all adored.

My throat tightened at the sight of him. Everything about the scene felt unsettling, from his immaculately ironed uniform to the way his head rested against the pure-white pillow in his casket. I wondered if the people here would think less of me if I turned back, but a brief, comforting pull on my shoulder reminded me that the truth was rather contrary. I inhaled as deeply as my strained lungs would allow, while my teeth latched onto the superficial indentation in my inner cheek. Less than fifteen seconds passed, and the tears I wanted so desperately to subdue began to make their great escape. I forced a smile when I spoke to his wife and spoke lightly, as to not allow the unavoidable crack in my voice to dampen her already crushed spirit. I could not recall the last time I cried to my father, but today, I did so unreservedly. I wiped what I thought to be a runny nose, but instead, a bright red droplet of blood stained the knuckle of my right thumb. I lunged for a tissue as swiftly as I could without causing a scene, before scampering to the general direction of the bathrooms.

Having just perched myself against one of the cold walls of a narrow bathroom stall while dangling my pinched, tissue-filled nose recklessly close to an unfamiliar, porcelain latrine, I formally requested that whatever entity relished in my humiliation give it a rest. However, my embarrassment was soon pacified by the idea of Michael attempting to muffle a hardy chuckle with his enclosed fist after observing me gallop in these uncomfortable wedges once I was out of sight. Huffs of amusement slipped out between my labored breaths, and they were so anesthetizing that it took a while for me to realize I was sobbing again. The flow of the bleed weakened enough for me to abandon the soft material, but still, I remained on the floor, miserably clinging to the sides of my own shuddering chest.

My brain armed itself with an immeasurable arsenal of questions for Michael, but since he could not tell me the answers, I undertook the challenge of discerning them myself. Stepping into his shoes triggered a muscle memory that momentarily chained me to the echoes of my own depressive episodes. Did he endure the griminess of laying in an unmade bed without having showered in a week and the shame of having to wade through a sea of unwashed clothes? How many times did he try to tell us goodbye, only to be discouraged by the sharp cramps that shot through his hand after writing with a dull pencil for hours? Which days were the ones he made sure to tell those around him that he loved them, because he knew something they didn't? How often did he stay on the phone for a few extra minutes, just hoping that someone would ask if things had gotten bad again? Was there any overlap in the intense, somber songs we blared when

we finally grew tired of hearing our own voices squalling into pillows? Did he feel so utterly and unbearably alone that it seemed easier to leave behind everyone who reminded him of a time when his mental health issues did not deceive him into believing that he was a burden?

Despair entangled its icy fingers in the hair on the back of my neck and jerked my head toward the sky, forcing me to realize that someone whom I loved dearly experienced the same anguish I thought was exclusive to my bruised mind. The nativity that cloaked my understanding of how he perceived himself and the world around him slipped off my shoulders and dissipated upon touching the blemished ground I laid on. To me, it made no sense for someone so dedicated and well-intentioned to have to live with the distress of suicidal ideation, but here I was, mourning them. It seemed selfish, but I imagined the scene that would have played out if last year I stumbled down the same dark path; my family having to practically hold onto each other to get around, people trying to distract themselves with small talk because they could not accept the actuality of what happened, and someone I used to know crying their heart out on the bathroom floor at the sheer thought of me being in pain. More than ever, I recognized what it truly meant for one to take their own life. Instead of observing it in a film or hearing about it from a friend of a friend, I felt the depravity of it myself, and it was agonizing.

After spending the next half an hour collecting myself and dismissing the concern my family expressed in their messages to me, I joined my stepmom in the chapel and waited for the service to begin. As the attendees began to slowly trickle into the room, another family of three sat in the pew behind us. Within a few minutes of them sitting down, I begin to feel a gentle stare grazing my neck; the corners of my mouth twisted upward when I caught a glimpse of a toddler hoisting herself onto the cushioned pew. Her mother later tapped on my shoulder and contentedly whispered to me, “Sorry to bother you, but my daughter has been trying to get your attention for the past ten minutes.” I smiled for the second time that day and turned around to chat with the pair of them. I wondered about what life had in store for this young child and could only hope the Universe would give her the blessing of a persevering nature when she needed it most.

During the service, people shared the highlights of Michael’s life, recounting some of their interactions, his appreciation of his family, and his time in the military. I did not expect those speaking to dive into the subject of his failing mental health, but anger still rose in my chest when they praised him for enlisting in the service that would give him a horrific case of PTSD, calling him a hero for sacrificing his mind to a war our country should not have fought in

the first place. I waited for someone to call his suicide what it was--a tragedy that could have been avoided if he had professional help. Nobody was willing to say it. Why were people expected to move forward with their lives when they did not fully understand why this happened? What in these speeches served to remind them of the consequences of suicide? How were they supposed to recognize the signs in themselves and others if we refused to talk about the ones we missed?

I pondered the implications of these questions as we made the brief drive to the cemetery, where he would be buried in a plot that housed the bodies of other veterans. The cotton filled my ears once more and I glued my eyes to the damp grass below my feet. I swore that the next time I rounded the corner to that dark place, I would reopen the catastrophic wound of this day to remind myself of the ramifications. I would recall his mother and sister clutching to one another for dear life, the sadness twinkling my relatives' eyes at the mention of his name, and the tears I shed on the restroom floor. I would remember that if someone as loved as Michael was so wrong to believe no one wanted him around, I could be too. I would seek help, for the sake of those who loved me. I would choose myself.