

Caroline Smith

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My Uncle Kevin

I never got the privilege of knowing the beautiful mind and radiant soul that was my Uncle Kevin's. My mind is painted by the warm memories my family has shared with me of the time when he was alive. Full of laughs and joyous, "remember whens" as well as astonishment at his truly impeccable mind. I remember admiring his portrait up on the wall in my grandparents home. He wore a brown suit and was surrounded by shelves of books. He wore the sweetest smile and there was a deeper essence I felt in his eyes. After learning more about him, it was clear to me that this photo was a beautiful depiction of who he was.

With an interest to study psychology after high school, I felt a responsibility to use this project to learn more about Uncle Kevin. I was aware of his condition, but I had always been too scared to ask. I was afraid to tread on my delicate memory of him. I learned that understanding his struggle with mental illness would not erase my warm thoughts of him. His mental illness was not him, but rather an important part of his life.

In order to do his memory justice I sat down with my mother and engaged in a difficult conversation. My mom, who was young at the time, tried to do her best to depict him to me. What was given to me was a beautiful and poetic string of stories that when pieced together depicted my great uncle Kevin and the legacy he left behind. Tears were shed, Kleenex we certainly used, but I walked away with a deeper connection and understanding of my family.

My Uncle Kevin suffered from schizophrenia, a severe mental illness characterized by altered perceptions, abnormal thoughts and odd behaviors. Those who suffer from schizophrenia often experience a loss of motivation, social withdrawal, and the "flat affect" (NIHM). For him, this would come in waves, similarly to getting a seasonal flu, unpredictable and some times being more severe than others. The contrast was stark and something my moms youthful mind had trouble grasping. Kevin was like a candle in a dark room, withering in the breeze and when he got sick, the wick would burn down, the room would become dark again. This darkness was debilitatingly obvious to all around him. Schizophrenia was a cloud, omitting the sunshine my family had grown accustomed to.

"There was no one quite like Kevin."

She recalled the times he would spend with her in the backyard teaching her to play softball. She pointed out his sense of humor and his gentle strength to bring light into any room he entered. Even when she would grow frustrated he had a smile and subtle wink of an eye that

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could cease a brewing tantrum from overflowing into a sea of emotions. There really was no one quite like Kevin.

“He was around often, but I didn't mind”

She shared that she was happy to have another friend around to engage with. My mom recalled the days that he wasn't up to entertain her or even get out of bed. Despite warnings she, like many other stubborn 7 year olds, believed she could overturn this. She described how she would gleefully skip into the room, pull open the blinds and let the sun pour in. She would rip his covers off and try to pull him out of his bed. This oftentimes would turn into a not-so friendly game of tug of war, one my mom would end up losing. As she got a little older and connected the cloudy days to Kevins “bad days” she started to understand that he really was sick. That even the sun becomes blocked out by gray skies.

“He was a giver, even though he never had much.”

Due to his time in and out of psychiatric hospitals he had struggled quite a bit and relied heavily on his family. They were his center through the dark and uncertain times. His parents, my Nonny and Boppy, our beautiful angels, were devoted to giving their son the best life they could. His siblings, my Great-aunt with a heart as fiery as her beautiful auburn hair, and my grandfather, who had been his best friend and sidekick from the start. My mom also lent a helping hand the second she was old enough. This is a quality she will never outlive. She said that after he passed, many of them had felt that they did not do enough but I almost immediately disagreed. He lived a much better existence distinctly because he had a loving bundle of angels working overtime to ensure it. Unfortunately, not everyone who suffers from such things can have this.

“He was make love, not war”

While attending University of Connecticut in “The Sixties” he joined the likes of the gentle pioneers of the anti-war, commercially known “hippie” crowd. Where countercultural idealism and the pressure of the Vietnam War gave way to a youthful revolution. Characterized by things like change, Bob Dylan, the rise of Rock music, vibrant colors, and long hair. The growing angst and desire to liberate their spirits from the systemic conservatism of the political environment created the desire for chemically influenced states of consciousness. This was done through the use of substances such as psychedelics, acid, LSD or otherwise through “the grass” also known as marijuana.

There is extensive research that draws on the use of psychedelic drugs, specifically hallucinogens and mental illnesses. My mom had alluded to my family's belief in the correlation between Kevin's “fun time” in college and the development of his illness. I did my own research to reach a conclusion on the validity of this assumption. Most sources determined that there is not solely one cause of schizophrenia, it can be a number of things. From genetics, emotional trauma, stress to environmental factors. Studies have shown that it could be heritable through twin studies, but there has not been a gene that seemingly determines the onset of the illness. There has also been research supporting that there are subtle abnormalities in the brain of a schizophrenic, meaning biological and genetic factors could play a larger role than assumed

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(NHS). On the same note, it is understood that it could also be triggered by the imbalance of neurotransmitters dopamine, serotonin and glutamate. This hypothesis may more closely support my family's understanding of his illness' origin.

The National Institute of Drug Abuse declares that *classic hallucinogens* such as LSD, acid, mushrooms and DMT and *Dissociative drugs* like PCP fall under the umbrella of hallucinogens. They are known to alter perception, thoughts and emotions as well as cause hallucinations and vivid sensations similarly to the effects of psychotic disorders. When in use, they are known to disrupt the brain's chemical messaging systems in the CNS as well as interrupt the functioning neurotransmitters serotonin and glutamate. A long term effect of constant use of these kinds of drugs has been identified as Persistent Psychosis. Persistent psychosis symptoms include visual disturbances, scattered thoughts, mood swings, and paranoia. Here we see an overlap in symptoms, dipping into schizophrenia.

I also utilized a study done by *Fairmount Behavioral Health System* to understand how such drugs behave in the brain. What is clear is the similarities between how schizophrenia affects the brain and how classic hallucinogens behave in the brain. A key difference; drug-induced hallucinations differ from hallucinations caused by psychotic disorders such as schizophrenia because they alter a person's regular perception with the use of external stimuli. Schizophrenics are also more likely to experience unpleasant paranoid delusions that encompasses auditory and visual hallucinations, whereas most drug users recalled positive and even "enlightening" experiences. However, hallucinogens can mimic symptoms of schizophrenia by interfering with the functioning of serotonin receptors in the brain. The catalyst in connecting these effects is shown in the use of antipsychotics to treat schizophrenic patients. These drugs act as antagonists at receptor 5-HT₂ which are serotonin receptors. Here is a clear and scientifically recognized connection, but unfortunately this research was not present at the time of Uncle Kevin's diagnosis. The state of psychiatry in the Sixties, was nowhere at the level we have reached today. This idea makes me wonder what could've been.

"It hurts for us to think about what could've been"

My mother spoke on how sad she felt that he never had children of his own. She shared that although he had found love from time to time with his Irish charm, when he got sick it became painstaking clear that he couldn't. He had a responsibility to those around him, and he had come to terms with the fact that his life couldn't take an ordinary course. She shared how intelligent he was. How he was always reading, exploring and expanding his knowledge. He had the most amazingly vast collection of music that my mother shared with me. This gave so much life to his memory. I felt badly that she had dwelled on his life and the "what could have beens" I could tell that it felt unfair: such a force of light should not be dimmed or contained. Mental illness isn't a democracy.

"I remember everything about that day."

Tears began to flow when she described the day she got the news he had passed. a day that the sun stopped shining. A truly dark day for all of my family. My mom remembered the details of that day, including me in the high chair, unbeknownst of the grief to come. She recalled the world around her that day like a photograph that slowly faded in color. From that day on, it felt

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as though things began to fall apart. A single thread unraveling an entire cloth. Their sun, beautiful Kevin, at the center of their familial solar system seemed to have disappeared into the vast emptiness of outer space. But like the sun departing to sunset, he faded into a design as powerful as fire and delicate as a watercolor painting. His departure from Earth was a force of nature as was he. My family eventually found peace and solace in that they knew he was finally free and no longer suffering. He rests atop a beautiful landscape and he will never stop shining for them. In the absence of the sun the night may provide a darker sky, but it will remain illuminated through the moon's reflection of its light and the scattered constellation of stars throughout the universe. He exists in us and in all the beautiful reflections of light in the world. Through his writings, music and sweet memories.

“His mental illness may have defined a lot of his life's path, but it in no way defines who he was or the extent of his character.”

I embarked on this personal journey to understand and effectively share how mental illness functions in families and individuals. I have learned that mental illness does not care if you have a loving family. Mental illness does not care if you are adored by nieces, nephews, friends, colleagues. Mental illness doesn't care if you could have a bright future or would be a great father and husband. Mental illness doesn't target the “weak minded” or the sensitive. Mental illness does not care if you are the sunlight that warms all those you can touch. It is real and it is overbearing, an ailment no different than smokers lung, or cancer. Mental illness does not encapsulate a human being's soul or love they give. It is a sickness that requires help and intervention. It should not be romanticized by the media but it more so should not be stigmatized or suppressed in society. Knowledge is power and awareness will breed empathy and an even stronger mental health system. My Uncle Kevin's was a story that warmed my heart and broke it in the same breath. I know the impact he had on everyone around him, and despite the prevalence this mental illness had on his life, I have a memory of my Uncle Kevin that exists completely separate from this concept. Although I was too young to distinctly remember the moments our timelines had mixed, I feel fortunate that I was able to feel the light of his presence in my short life. My mother shared with me the times he would come over, and how he would get a kick out of the smiles we were able to share even prior to my ability to form speech. I feel as though he left a bit of sunshine with me, for that I am eternally grateful.

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Jennifer

The sun is what you bring to me,
especially when a day is cloudy.

The dreams in your eyes
are wide as the bluest sky;

the love in your smile much bigger!

But when you are sad

or even what we
sometimes call bad -

if not the sun -

the moon I see!

because a change of mood

more of you is understood;

more of you is come to me.

And what I may not tell you,

when I'm sometimes stern,

is that:

the sun you bring to me

+ from your happy Love,

much there is to learn.

for you -
so much -
on
-1990

Merry
Christmas

1978

Love,
Uncle
Kevin

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