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**MY PSYCHOTIC UNCLE, MY PSYCHOTIC SELF**

Due to my father's Naval career, we moved a lot while I was growing up. Hawaii. California. Japan. With all the moving around, my mother tried to give us some stability and roots by taking us to Staten Island every summer to visit my grandmother and aunt and uncle.

My grandmother lived in a huge old white Victorian with a beautiful wrap-around porch where I spent many summer days sitting in a rocking chair, reading the stacks of books we got every week from the Tottenville library.

My Aunt Sarah and Uncle Bill, along with my three older cousins, lived a couple of blocks away in an old farmhouse. They had a barn with chickens, a huge vegetable garden, and an old plow horse named Miguel. They also had an above-ground pool, which seemed huge as a kid but was actually a big bathtub.

I spent my summer days splashing around in the pool with my plastic arm floaties, learning from my cousins how to swim from one side of the pool to the other, then running around on the deck, cooling off in the afternoon in the air conditioning watching the Banana Splits and Kroft Superstars.

It was an idyllic childhood in many respects, but there was a dark side to this family dynamic.

My Uncle Richard lived with my grandmother throughout my childhood. He cloistered himself in his upstairs bedroom, which was filled with stacks of old newspapers and other yellowing papers up to the ceiling. When the rest of our family gathered around in the dining room for my grandmother's Southern fried feasts, Uncle Richard stood in the shadows, watching

us in his ill-fitting plaid pants and tattered shirts. He seemed to want to be included but didn't feel invited.

Richard had been a successful landscape designer after graduation from Cornell University with a degree in botany. The garden outside my grandmother's house blossomed under Richard's green thumb.

But apparently, soon after college, something in Richard had changed, and he became this ghost-like soul tiptoeing around in the darkness as we played Monopoly downstairs.

Sometimes he would shyly give me presents: a plastic rain bonnet, a newspaper article that had nothing to do with me or my interests, or a strange drawing. Then he would disappear back into the shadows, leaving me confused by the meaning of his gift.

My Aunt Sarah often excused Richard's behavior as being the result of exposure to Agent Orange when he was in the Army. But he had been stationed in the U.S., so I doubt that.

My family was good at sweeping things under the rug, as they would do in later years with my own mental health issues. For the most part, they ignored Richard's strangeness. It was taboo to talk about what might be wrong with him. And yet, I was sort of obsessed with this question.

On summer nights, I would lie in bed listening to the sounds of the neighborhood teenagers drinking beer and smoking pot on the corner. Drag racing on Hylan Boulevard. If I stayed up late enough, I would hear Uncle Richard leaving the house to walk several miles to his job as a cemetery night watchman. Sometimes I could hear the teenagers yelling insults to him, making fun of this odd man as he walked alone in the dark.

I was afraid of Uncle Richard, but not because of what he might do or say to me. I was afraid because I had this nagging feeling that I was more like him than anyone else in the family. I sensed that he recognized our connection, too, and that was why he often gave me those cryptic gifts. Maybe he was trying to say something to me that only I could understand.

Years later, when I was cloistered in my own bedroom with the shades drawn just as Richard had been at Grandma's house, I would stay in the shadows, like he had. I would listen to my family going on with their lives downstairs, and would feel like I wanted to be included but was uninvited.

My mental illness took me to different places than Richard's. I would find myself living in the Dallas airport for three days during one psychotic break. Seeing dead cows hanging from telephone poles during another. And swallowing a bottle of Depakote during one depression, after which I awoke to hear a doctor telling my family I might be permanently brain damaged.

But despite the difference in the manifestation of my illness as opposed to Richard's, we both lost out on a semblance of a normal life. We both struggled to fit in. We both had a hard time finding our way in the world because of our symptoms.

Alternating between semi-catatonic depression and crippling paranoid mania, I would be hospitalized twelve times and put through dozens of medication trials before finally being diagnosed correctly with Treatment Resistant Bipolar I Disorder and finding the right cocktail of meds that worked for me. I am grateful to say that I have been stable for 16 years.

It was a tough journey, but, unlike my Uncle Richard, I got help for my psychiatric issues. I was left with sadness and regret that my uncle, a kindred spirit to me, never found peace or solace with his own mind.

He died a lonely, forgotten death from a heart attack. Feeling chest pains, rather than calling 911, Richard got on a bus and traveled twenty minutes to his doctor's office. His doctor immediately called EMS, but Richard didn't make it to the hospital alive. His funeral, at the Methodist church in Tottenville I had grown up attending, was painfully sparsely attended.

My cousin Ginny said that when she went to the boarding house where he lived after my grandmother died to clear out his belongings, she expected to find evidence of some nefarious, shameful behavior to make sense of his strangeness.

What she found instead, in her words, were "remnants of a life humbly lived." His small twin bed, neatly made. A few items of clothing, neatly pressed, hanging in the closet. A few trinkets, including a New York City snow globe. And a Bible resting on the bedside table.

I keep a few of the objects Richard gave me, which scared me at the time. A flat grey stone, and a photograph of a large black bird. I keep these things quietly on my piano, and I think of Richard when I see them.

I'm sorry he lived such a lonely life and died alone, too. I'm sorry I never reached out to him to try to get him help. And I'm sorry I was afraid of him, this gentle yet tortured soul.

In many ways, not wanting to end up like Richard led me to seek help for myself. In many ways, he cleared the path for me and my own freedom from insanity.

Thank you, Richard.