

My Uncle's Phone

The remote control molded to his hand.

That's what they told us, the coroner's office, when they called. He'd been dead four days when they found him, a heart attack they thought.

An odd detail to lead with, though, the remote control thing. What was their intention? To say in his final day, his final hour, just before meeting his maker he chose to watch television? He didn't know it was the end, he just died of a heart attack. The stents no longer worked, unable to hold open the closing arteries. The natural contraction from age, the built-up plaque from too many steak dinners. Maybe it wasn't laziness and buildup, but the previous day's racquetball game was too much for his weakening organ. Did he still play? Maybe it gave out while he was on his couch resting from a long day at work. They were getting the wrong impression, or giving it. No one suspected drugs.

They called his soon-to-be ex-wife first, which was a mistake. I hope they didn't tell her about the remote control. Jesus, he'd be humiliated and that's all they needed to tell her. She'd tell the kids and the attorneys and who knows, it proved her case that he was a good-for-nothing.

Then they called his brother, but it wouldn't surprise him. They hadn't spoken much since he moved away in the middle of the night all those years ago. He knew less about him than anyone. Wouldn't know the television shows he watched or the people he watched them with.

Then they'd try his sister, but she was out of the country, always traveling, hadn't spoken to him since his birthday, almost a year ago, dead of winter in Maine. Any

month between October and May was the dead of winter he'd say after he moved up there twenty years ago in search of a good drug rehab facility. He escaped from Nevada, a late night exodus. He left everything, abandoning his car at the airport, never packing up his apartment. After thirty years of hard living, everything he possessed was in his numbed hands: a small suitcase, his phone, some underwear and a blue suit.

Why the blue suit, he'd once asked, maybe to a therapist or on a drunken date and then relayed it to me as a sign of familial imbalance.

You never know when you'll need to attend a funeral.

For a guy just past fifty he'd lost more money than the rest of us had made. It wasn't a case of being overly risky in the sense of making bad business bets, he made questionable life bets. Like when the call came from Brucey, the high school buddy he starting drinking with. The one who couldn't stop taking risks, became a lawyer, and got disbarred. The one who became a stock broker, but got banned when someone learned the stocks he sold were in companies that weren't actually public, just yet.

But Bruce still got leads and my uncle Chris couldn't help himself. So when he heard about Micron Tech he sold everything. Not like his car and such, but anything with value like stocks, that coin collection from when he was a kid, the painting his mother had left him. It added up to a lot. More than a million dollars he told me in a way that wasn't bragging. He told me as a cautionary tale. I was his nephew and he didn't want me to make the same mistakes. "Only one per family," he would say.

Bruce wasn't lying this time, though. This was real stock, a real company, a real opportunity. He was just wrong. The offering happened, the patent was pending, it just didn't come through. Previous defeats were immediate, but this one lingered, the deal

hanging on, the revenue dropping slowly, then day-traders giving it a kick and all of them hope, until it fell again into a financial death spiral. His problems turned from where to put the insider gains to paying rent.

His phone arrived at my house a week later. It was particularly odd that I would be the one to get it, after all I was just a nephew, 20 years his junior. But I lived closest, up in Boston and the county only paid to send it to the nearest relative.

It came in a crudely-packed small brown package and like him, it was dead. And without a charger. It was a few more days before I could spring it back to life after sitting at the Apple Store for 30 minutes with a borrowed lifeline. His phone was a generation or a two ahead of mine. He was a fanatic for new things, always the first in the family to get the phone or the computer or the game for his girls. He didn't brag about having the newest thing, but it was there, in his hand or plugged into his ear, visible. It was a mark of pride, a measure of his success, weather he was feeling successful that day or year was irrelevant.

Sitting at the sandwich shop across the Apple Store I scrolled the messages on his newly-alive phone, knowing one of them was from me as we'd exchanged texts, his preferred mode of communication since his separation, and the most-recent stint in rehab. He'd been depressed since the financial reversal and his inability to jump start his career weighed on him. There was no starting with Uncle Chris, only jump-starting, a way to get over that initial hump or slump. He couldn't stand that, wouldn't be able to survive the pain of not succeeding or not knowing if success was certain. He needed an early win or else he'd fall back and his falls went farther than most. I'd speculated about this, but didn't really know the depths, until the phone told me.

He wanted to die, but without killing himself. He texted somebody named C@ndy. "I don't want to live like this, but can't imagine the girls learning I killed myself," he wrote two days before he died.

It was an active last weekend, his phone filled with outgoing calls and incoming texts. He'd told me there were no friends in Maine and his social life was all a blur of bad dates and people he tried selling houses to.

But K@t seemed to be a friend. The texts exchanged were intimate beyond what I could say to someone. If only I had his confidence.

"Could you do that?" he'd text after asking for something that made my face feel hot, bringing color to it in a way that made it burn. I put down the phone embarrassed to be reading these, I wasn't meant to. Nobody was. He must have known her pretty well. She agreed to do a lot of things that I didn't think you asked before a first date. It sounded like a first date but then I don't know what first dates are like when you are in your fifties.

I called K@t's number but it said her voicemail wasn't set up. Maybe she was new to town.

Next there was a series of exchanges about times and dates with someone called Dr. \$\$\$. I hoped he might help us all deal with the suddenness of it. Everyone wanted to know what happened, the way you read the end of a book to find out who killed the hero. A coroner report would take weeks and he was the first in our family to die early, other than Uncle Brent, but that was a car accident.

"How much do you need?" was the first thing Dr. \$\$\$ said when I called.

"Hi, need, sorry, no, I'm calling about a patient of yours."

And the phone clicked dead.

He didn't pick up my next two calls to him. There was no voicemail.

The last calls on his phone were to a person named Smok&y.

Someone picked up my call, but said nothing. I just heard breathing. After a few seconds I said, "Hello, my name is Rick and you were the last person to talk to my uncle."

"Where you live," said a deep voice that sounded as if it had been burnt.

"I live in Boston, but my Uncle lives, lived, in Maine."

"Where?" said the voice.

"In Maine," I said, again.

"Address," he said.

"Are you a delivery man?" I asked, which sent him into a fit of coughing laughter.

"My uncle called you last Thursday, a bunch of times."

The line went quiet.

The phone dinged, surprising me as it suddenly came alive, texts from the previous week pouring through. A phone now risen. The message was from a number identified as "Home." It turned out the number was not his home, but the house where his girls lived with their mother, in Wisconsin.

"Good night daddy," the text read. "I'll see you next week."

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