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## AND LIKE YOU I'M VERY MISERABLE

by

Rachel Sherman

The news that Jim had killed himself came when Charlotte was putting her toothbrush back into the drawer just before leaving for work. It was her mother's voice who answered the return call, but her father assumed the ultimate obligation of divulging the black news of her uncle's death.

There had been a text earlier in the morning, directions to call when Charlotte had a few minutes—ignored and rescheduled, because it was going to be about Charlotte's relationships, which she generally preferred to conduct after dinner or on the walk home from class. The actual news—*Uncle Jim killed himself last night*—registered with the dark surprise of a heavy footfall on an invisible stair.

Charlotte used two squares of toilet paper from the bathroom to wipe away the dark stains under her eyes and left for work, thinking about how she would explain herself. Surely someone at work would say *you look tired* and Charlotte would have the chance to reply *no, just feeling sad today*.

A girl on the sidewalk, a few paces in front of Charlotte, was talking on the phone in a strain of wet sobs. Charlotte wanted to

say something, perhaps apologize for the particularly callous traffic today, but fell too many steps behind and then remembered that she had forgotten a paper for Spanish and turned around.

Back at home, she sent an email which she knew would not be received until it no longer mattered: *Dear Scott, I won't be coming into work today. My parents told me this morning that my uncle killed himself last night. See you tomorrow, & sorry.*

After printing the paper and falling asleep in the living room, Charlotte walked to campus and skipped Spanish because Garrett had asked if she wanted to go to lunch, and even though she wasn't hungry, she thought it might provide a good opportunity to talk.

Inside the food court, the crush of bodies made it difficult to do anything but read everything on the menu over and over again in silence. Garrett accepted Charlotte's dispassionate opinion about what kind of sandwich they should split without protestation. There was a brief discussion about who would pay for it. Charlotte paid for it.

"I have to tell you something," she stated once they had both sat down and unwrapped their sandwiches. "My dad told me that my uncle killed himself last night."

Garrett's sandwich hovered just in front of his mouth. He lowered it an inch and asked, "Wait. Were you close?"

It was a test to see how much sympathy she required. The answer, Charlotte knew, must be carefully predicated upon principles of proportions and stoichiometry, but she had never been very good at math.

She supposed they were not so close.

"So . . . are you sad?"

They split the cookie, too, and Charlotte offered Garrett the bigger half while Garrett talked about his upcoming soccer game and his concern about a test.

“You’re going to miss my soccer game?” he confirmed, opening his eyes a little wider when Charlotte mentioned she had to go home that weekend for the funeral.

Later that afternoon, Harrison wanted to go to the store to buy groceries. Charlotte did not want to go to the store but thought a conversation with Harrison would improve the day.

He was pleased to see her when she picked him up, waving as she pulled up to the curb. “Where were you this morning?” he asked as he slipped inside the car. “You didn’t come to work.”

“Well—it’s a sad reason,” she began. “My parents called me this morning to tell me that my uncle killed himself last night.”

His expression overreached for gravity. “Were you close?”

After a moment of consideration, Charlotte cited the incident of having spent every Tuesday in his swimming pool two summers ago.

“Then I’m sorry.”

On the way home, Harrison was enthusiastic to show her some new music he had lately discovered. They listened to it until they were stopped at a traffic light and Charlotte hadn’t responded.

Harrison stared through the windshield. “Do you ever have the experience of talking to someone, and it’s like having a helium balloon? You’re holding onto the string, but you know if you let go of the string, it will float away?”

He unplugged the music in deference, and they rode in silence the rest of the way home until Harrison thanked her for taking him to the store when she dropped him off.

The rest of the evening, Charlotte lay in the corner of the couch with her eyes closed while Garrett stayed too late doing his homework. A few times she walked into the kitchen; her roommates pretended not to notice when she lingered behind the open refrigerator door with a paper towel to her face.

While she lay in bed, she thought about her grandfather and her step-grandfather finding the body of her uncle laying in the field behind the swimming pool and realized she had no idea what it looked like when people shot themselves—what had happened to his glasses?

During Spanish the next day, Charlotte presented a newspaper article that said suicide was the second leading cause of violent death in an Argentinian village. She also said that she had chosen the article because her uncle had killed himself two nights before, but stumbled over the preterite conjugation of *suicidar*. The professor emitted a noise of sympathy, but the faces of her classmates remained unaffected.

There was an ensuing discussion: To prevent suicide, the students in the class said it was a good idea to 1) make sure to stay close to loved ones and 2) pay attention to warning signs. Charlotte sat at her desk and thought about the last time she had seen her uncle. It was at the cabin during the summer; Jim was hanging up blue streamers for the birthday party, and Charlotte was handing him pieces of tape. Grammy had said *this is a good birthday, because the people I care about most in the world are here.*

Charlotte left for home early because her parents, certainly, would be tired of talking and would want to go bed as soon as possible. Instead, she stayed up listening to her parents complain about nearly all of the funeral arrangements, which had been organized by a family member who was not experienced with organizing funerals like Charlotte's father was.

"Shawna said he wouldn't have liked piano music," he told Charlotte. "But it's just stupid, isn't it, basing funerals off of what the dead person would have wanted. I don't think he cares at all what we do for his funeral. That's why he's dead, because he didn't care. Isn't it?"

Near the end of the service, there was open time.

"You all have a story to tell about Jim," her grandmother threatened when nobody stood up to take advantage of the open microphone. She was the one who had organized the program. After a hesitation, several people Charlotte didn't know took turns with their remarks while Charlotte watched the slideshow of pictures start over twice more. She didn't see any pictures of herself.

After the funeral, there was a luncheon at the country club, and everyone got drunk and went out on the balcony to smoke while it was breezy. Charlotte sat at the table, and the brownies weren't good, but she ate five because they were soft.

She asked her brother about the circulating rumors that he had left liquor store sales and been hired somewhere else. It was the first attempt at a conversation the last five years had seen.

"At St. Mary's," he affirmed. "Sterilizing surgical instruments."

She nodded, and her brother stood up and went outside to smoke.

Although Charlotte and her parents had wanted to go home, the funeral party reconvened that night at Jim's house, where they ate frozen lasagna and sheet cake with raspberry jam in the middle. Charlotte did the dishes, but for all the time she thought she had spent in her uncle's kitchen, she didn't know where to put the large plastic bowl or any of the knives. She left them on the counter next to the sink to fall under the control of someone else's assumption.

Her mother inquired after a set of Nana's silver that had somehow ended up in Jim's possession. Luckily, they found it in the buffet right behind the dining room table, tarnished with male neglect, and Charlotte's mother placed it carefully by the front door so they wouldn't forget to bring it home later.

Once there were enough people gathered at Jim's house to cultivate a sense of estrangement, the party stood in a large circle in the field behind the swimming pool. A few boxes of sparklers were passed around. Although the air was choking with smoke from cigarettes and fireworks, no one could seem to find a lighter, and no one was quite sure what ceremony was required when holding a burning stick.

Jim's ex-wife, holding her sparkler up, said, "We love you, Jim!"

There were other shouts. Someone started singing "You Are My Sunshine," and people murmured along, rocking uneasily to the context of actual loss. The black sky evacuated any heavenly response.

"These are the most dangerous kind of firework," Charlotte said, watching the fire descend towards her fist in a shower of sparks. "They can burn up to three thousand degrees."

But her skin was impervious to the alleged heat. The futility settled like arthritis into Charlotte's bones. Once her sparkler burned out, she stuck the wire in an empty flower pot beside the gate and went back inside the house to text Garrett about his soccer game. They had lost badly, 6-0.

Charlotte could not feel sad for him.