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Robert-John in Memories

On one of the days I actually ate lunch during high school, I sat in the hallway outside the cafeteria with a group of people I didn't know very well. The girl closest to me blared obnoxious music through her earbuds. I recognized the sound of Chiodos bellowing into her eardrums. I tapped her shoulder and she pulled one bud out of her ear. I told her my friend Robert-John saw Chiodos live at St. Andrew's Hall. Robert-John had touched Craig Owen's pants when Craig crowd surfed. The same night, Robert-John was thrown over the stage-barriers in a fistfight; he broke three ribs. I wasn't sure if the story was true, but I told it anyway, as if there was no doubt in my mind that it was.

I can't remember a time when I didn't know Robert-John. He is a year older than I am, and we grew up together on the same street. I was born into royalty; we ruled the street as King and Queen for a decade.

Robert-John retreated to his basement to play an old video game console when he was upset. (I can't remember what it was. Maybe a Nintendo 64?) I only saw him playing once, after his sister and I gave up being friends. I went looking for him to make his sister jealous of our friendship. He handed me the controller after I sat down on the couch next to him. He was playing Wheel of Fortune. He told me that figuring out the clues helped him to think better; making words helped to clear his mind.

He kept his drum set in his basement. He sat for hours staring at the dented drum heads that a Target sales-associate's paycheck could manage to buy for him. The bruised, white, plastic drums were his only possession; they were the only object in the house that was not to be touched. He hid his drum sticks so they would never fall into the wrong hands. When he played, he would lock and barricade the door to the basement; when Robert-John drummed, no one but Robert-John would hear the sound.

We used to talk on the phone every other day. He talked about work, shows and sex, as if that was all his life was made up of. I still fumed at him

for the time he had called me while he was fornicating with his ex-girlfriend. I stabbed him every chance I could. This particular time, he didn't swear at me and hang up. Instead he promised it would never happen again; he was gay. I didn't believe him. He decided a little over a week later otherwise. He called to tell me. I was in school when he called so he left a message: Hey, it's me. I'm bisexual. I'm moving out of my mom's house.

I couldn't say what Robert-John's most embarrassing moment was. He isn't the type of person to get embarrassed. He is the type of person who gets as drunk or high (or both, really) as he can without killing himself and does stupid things, then wakes up the next morning and is proud of himself. If I had to, I would say Robert-John's most embarrassing moments were all those times he was sober.

It had been a few years since anyone in the Van De Velde family had talked to me. I was a junior in high school. Robert-John was a senior. It was a late night, sometime in April, when Paige Van De Velde called me: RJ was missing. It took me a moment to realize that she meant her brother. He started going by his initials. The change made sense to me. He sold drugs; the less of a name he had, the better. He refused to answer calls from his family. I called. I was surprised when the phone stopped ringing. He acted like we were best friends, happy and laughing. I hung up and reported back to his sister; he moved in with his fiancée. He was getting married.

Robert-John's favorite thing was alcohol. Robert-John's favorite thing was alcohol and drugs, actually. He would have told anyone who asked, too, but he was too inebriated to be able to.

I put together a photo montage for my graduation party. In almost every picture from my childhood, Robert-John stood stupidly smiling next to me. His chocolate eyes huge and innocent, his hand clutching some toy whose fun was paused for a picture. His laugh had always echoed mine, and my family could make no mistake as to who was in the picture with me. My last picture with him was from when I was 9 years old. There were no pictures of us together--happy--after that. Robert-John's mother had cried during the photo montage with Paige and his youngest sibling, Jason. Robert-John didn't show up to the party at all.

Summer of 2008, I heard from him. Wheel of Fortune music sang in the background of his phone call. His voice cracked when he spoke: his parents were getting a divorce. His dad cheated for the third and last time; it was really over. He mumbled something about buying a vowel. He grunted and

glass shattered on his end of the line. I heard his brother's fish tank drain onto the dusty floor of his basement. I saw the hole in the tank the controller made when he threw it. I could imagine the goldfish flopping on the floor, suffocating. I could hear Robert-John choking on his tears as his life tumbled over, burying him beneath the rubble, suffocating. I couldn't save either one of them.