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Presence and Absence

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Presence and Absence

Author Bio

Liam Hamilton is a sophomore Classics major at Gettysburg College. Living about 20 minutes outside of Philadelphia in Delaware County, he's enjoyed writing his entire life but never pursued much of it until he took a Creative Writing class in high school. This sparked his interest to continue writing in college, ranging from fiction to non-fiction, often based on the stories that have affected his life.

Presence and Absence

1. Just because he wasn't here anymore didn't exactly mean that his company faded as well. Everywhere you went he would be staring back at you. He was on the refrigerator, in the family pictures; I could still feel him. Not literally, of course, because that would be weird.

I always called him my uncle, though technically he was great-uncle, and only through my great aunt's second marriage. I could have sworn he came from the west, with his shiny boots, dusty flannel shirts, worn blue jeans, and propped hunting rifle.

Even his beige, old-fashioned cowboy hat was brought out on occasion. He smelled of hard work—it wasn't a bad smell, but a smell that said even though he was seventy-eight years old, he would get under the porch to fix a leaky pipe.

2. I was there for the first one, but not for this one. It wasn't as exciting for some reason. The first one meant I was going to be an uncle at thirteen—that was something I'd go to school and silently beg one of my friends to ask me about. They'd start by asking how my weekend went.

Being the cool teenager I was, I'd act nonchalant and say how nothing big happened, other than I had a nephew and was now an uncle. Then they would stare at me, mouths wide open, impressed at a designation I was given not through my own actions, but my sibling's.

At seventeen, though, when my second nibbling was born, it was more common to have nieces and nephews. I wasn't really anything special. My niece's birth though, was very important to me, even if I wasn't there or excited about it. Her older brother was from a different father—her father worried she wouldn't turn out as smart because of his Polish genes. I questioned why he'd point out his lack of intelligence so often, but stopped questioning when he took it upon himself to tell me I was going to be her godfather.

3. I'd always admired my uncle's will to live. I understand most people have a will to live, but his was something else. He'd never slow down, always working on jobs too dangerous for him. He got his pacemaker when he was about eighty years old and I worried greatly for his health.

He didn't sweat it though. He leaned up from his reclining chair, his dulled teeth grinning at us, proclaiming how his new heart would just give him eighty more years to live. I had to keep up with him, I had to match his grey-stubble, deer-hunting ways.

To stereotype, he was a man's man. He was strong, courageous, never asked for directions, and fixed everything that broke in the house. His repairs emphasize

his existence the most.

The patch on the roof in the bathroom, with a slightly brighter white color than the rest of the ceiling, was him. He moved into an expansion built on the back of our house to keep him and my aunt closer—and of course he helped the construction workers build that, happily sweating away the years of retirement he earned. He'd pull out his dirtied construction belt from his youth and equip it with hammers, nails, and screwdrivers for any little occasion. The reason my new room was orange and black was because of the work from his old, calloused hands.

The blood on the floor underneath the black, puzzle-shaped carpet was his when he angrily refused to climb down from the ladder. His pride couldn't kill him if it tried—and believe me, it tried.

4. I hate when people hand me a baby; I always worry I'll drop the poor thing. When the child is your goddaughter, people want pictures, and this means you have to hold her.

I'm not one for pictures, but my niece definitely was. She'd smile her toothless smile, wave her cartilage-composed, floppy arms, and wail some incoherent babble. We loved it. She livened up the room. She calmed my heart, and when I held her, as the room was brightened by the old church people not knowing how to turn their flash off, she calmed my nerves.

Seeing her made you smile. Her big, blue eyes engulfed your person, and her pudgy face fought many grabs. She made our family happy, filled a gap that we didn't know was missing.

5. My warm hands held his own and my great aunt's, as we silently gazed at him. Lying in a bed in a hospital gown, with a blanket up to his chest, his weak breath puffing him up and down, his wide white eyes met the ceiling's tan glare. He was physically home, but he didn't feel at home. He was supposed to be stronger than this—a man's man.

I saw him pass, right there. He didn't go peacefully, but I didn't expect him to. I knew he'd fight it all he could, and he did.

It seemed unreal to watch him go, mainly because of his overwhelming company. I laughed at his jokes, helped him repair the house, and visited him, every single day. I was frustrated that he chose to leave me like this, especially when he promised me another lifetime.

6. Her name was Cora. I thought it was unusual at first, but now it sounds beautiful to me. It rolls nicely. I said it to myself in my room when I was told she was born. Your mouth "ooh-ed" in the "Cor," and "ahh-ed" in the "a." A child so fabulous deserved a name that represented that.

She was too young for my godfatherly impact to matter. She didn't even really know who I was. But I would always throw my backpack off, rush to the living room, and slowly peer in, until she noticed some new entity in the room, her brain chugging along until she turned back to look.

Her gorgeous stare toward the new-to-her being in the room created an even bigger grin on my face. I felt humbled to know this little girl who flaunted her natural ability to grab others' attention was allowing me a chance in the spotlight, even if only for a second or two.

7. His passing left me emotionless for a few days. I gloomed around the next few days, in disbelief of what I saw. The sadness that emitted from my elderly great aunt and the rest of the family affected me more.

I stared at nothing, reflecting on nothing, feeling nothing. He always made me realize I was important. I valued him, and he valued me. I wasn't his nephew, not his grand-nephew, and technically not even his great-grand-nephew, but he made me feel loved. I could feel my stomach and heart swell a few days after his passing, and I had to hide away.

I saw all the boards he built around the house. I saw his joyous smile reflected in a picture, right above a picture of my nephew, and right below a picture of my niece. I saw that one out of reach spot that he extended his arm toward to finish painting.

I didn't take his spot at the dinner table. Physically I might have, but I could not fill a gap that big spiritually. My father now had more responsibility around the house, and so did my brother and I. It was fitting that it took three men to fill in his rough, brown cowboy boots, hidden in a closet behind his button-up shirts and tightly-framed glasses.

8. Going to college has brought me farther away from my niece, but going home she is such a sight to behold. I gave my room back home up as a spot for her crib. I couldn't even be jealous when I first came home, walked up the wooden stairs, through the white door my uncle helped paint, and saw her leaning on the railing, smiling back at me.

She made me forget my troubles. I was wrapped in with everybody else—this one-year-old stole my time when she was around.

Whether it was the godfatherliness I had to live up to drilling in the back of mind, or the actual love she drew out of people, I slowly raced toward her and swung her out of her crib.

9. I cried a few days after his death, hidden in the empty room he helped repair, the one my niece would soon fill. I didn't let anyone see, because he wouldn't have if he was in my position.

He was a teacher to me—his rugged words escaping his wrinkled mouth in a powerful and commanding way. His shapely muscles complemented his extended gut. This feeling wasn't sadness for his absence, but gratefulness for his presence.

But most of all, it was his elderly, wrinkled smile, his rough hugs, and firm pats on the back when I managed to screw that tough nail in that allowed me to survive through my day.

10. Nine months after my uncle passed my sister announced she'd be having a child. I would soon have another nibling to look after. I widely smiled a few days after her birth, in the living room she would soon overtake with toys. I tried to act cool about it, but others clearly saw as I reached out to gush over her. After that I couldn't help but adore her presence, though I hid it well from the family, like the edgy teenager I was trying to be.

She was a student to me—to be properly raised morally and religiously. Her chubby face mimicked mine, complemented by her double-chin. When she left with my sister, I wished for her return, not in sadness of her departure, but in gratefulness that she'd return.

But most of all, it was her youthful, smooth smile, her loving hugs, and playful pushes at my arm when I managed to knock her dinosaur down that helped me endure each day.