

Do it, I'll Love You Anyway

A dirtbag hippy once told my high school best friend and me that life was like a slot canyon—it narrows and widens, and the whole time all you can do is keep pushing forward because there's no other way out. My friend found those words to be incredibly insightful, and in that moment he gained a newfound resolve to push through the painful issues of his life. The resolve eventually faded. That's just the way things were with him. He was an avid climber, artist, and drug experimenter. Those three things have more in common than they might appear or maybe less, but I can tell you with absolute certainty my friend was in a constant search to fill an empty portion of his spirit. He sought the most intense emotions he could find, and then pushed them further. He reveled in the sheer terror of climbing a crane in the night to tag it with graffiti and basked in the relaxation of a Xanax bar with equal enthusiasm. He fell in love more deeply than anyone I know and fell out of it as quickly as he fell into it. Our brief friendship together was as Dickens would say, "The best of times. The worst of times."

He was my closest friend. When I lost my virginity, I called him first—to celebrate. When I broke my leg senior year, ending my chances for a collegiate distance running career, his was the shoulder I cried on. For every victory he was there and for most of the defeats. No matter what I did, however, I was always second fiddle to his pursuit of authentic, unadulterated, raw experience. He would constantly flake out of commitments and even, at our lowest moments, ghost me for weeks on end, only stopping by for a free meal or favor. He was often a terrible friend to me, but I couldn't help but love him anyway. Back then, I couldn't understand that he celebrated a skinned knee because the pain and blood reminded him of the fragility of his life. He loved to fall while climbing as much as he loved to reach the top of the route. I couldn't grasp

that he tattooed ridiculous images onto his body—a pineapple headed woman and the owl from 1700 W. Broad—because he was a unique, reckless spirit that I would never be able to tame. The woman looked cool, he said, and the owl was for wisdom and to scare away the crows. I thought he was a fool, knew it even, but his lust for life was infectious.

I don't think we would have been friends if I didn't have bipolar disorder. In some ways even though I followed him on escapades out of school boundaries at night and helped sneak girls into his dorm room to lay in what one teacher called the, "supine position," together, he was the one chasing me. I never had to do a drug to feel euphoric. I would go days without sleeping, writing what I believed to be the next great American novel, poems that could take a man to Mars. I was agitated at times, it felt like worms were crawling under my scalp, and I would violently tear my hair out to get rid of them. My mind would race so fast that I would bang my head against cinderblock walls hoping to knock myself out, make them slow down. I too, chased thrills, chased feeling alive, but while my friend was motivated by an emptiness inside him that he needed to fill, I was motivated by a fullness that was bursting at the seams. My thrill of choice was fighting. When my mood was elevated, I would fight at a moment's notice. I would start fights out of boredom, as a form of retaliation, or simply because I could. I never felt as alive as getting punched in the face. Well, except for when I was doing the punching.

No one was immune from my quick temper and propensity for violence. Not even my friend. In fact, my friend was often the victim of it. Maybe it was because we were so close that he seemed a safe target, or maybe it was because he would wound my psyche so deeply when he abandoned me that the only way I knew how to express my pain was to make him hurt the same, only with his body, not his spirit. I could never bring myself to crush his spirit. Even at my worst,

most agitated and ego-inflated moments, I knew his spirit was special and vulnerable, something to be cultivated and protected.

If my highs were damaging to my relationships, my lows were damaging to myself. I would frequently skip classes to sleep. The depression drove me to at least one, conscious suicide attempt and many more attempts at self-sabotage. Every birthday felt like a milestone, and I never expected to see the next one. My friend's support was the furthest thing from steady, and that certainly didn't help my depression. Our friendship followed a pattern for the three years I knew him. During the fall trimester when I was more often manic, coming to school still high off the summer, we were best of friends. In the winter, when my depression would begin to worsen and the days darkened, he would begin to distance himself, bored with what I had to offer. By the time the cloud over my head lifted in the spring, we would hardly be on speaking terms. The spring trimester was when we fought.

The last fight of our relationship came after he bailed on our plans for the second time in as many days, and I caught him frolicking with some of his other friends, his drug using friends. I found him in the dorm later that night and confronted him. I was on crutches from a broken foot and swung one at his chest. He was caught off guard, and stumbled to the ground. I pounced like a leopard or mountain lion, springing off my one good foot, landing on top of him. I wrapped my left hand around his throat and squeezed, cocked my right hand back over my head prepared to bring it crashing down onto his face. We locked eyes, and through gritted teeth, he said, "Do it. I'll love you anyway." I lowered my fist, climbed to my feet, and crutched off towards my bedroom. We never spoke about that moment. We simply pretended it had never happened. Perhaps for the best, but probably for worse.

While my moods fluctuated throughout high school, one thing remained regular—my friend’s drug use. He steadily increased the variety and frequency of his use for as long as I knew him. His tenth grade year he simply smoked marijuana, but he soon expanded his palette to LSD and Adderall. By senior year, he was using Xanax and opioids every day. He somehow developed a love of Morphine. I don’t know if he ever used heroin, but it wouldn’t surprise me if he had. The drugs destroyed his life. He would regularly have panic attacks and his cravings were something awful when he couldn’t find a fix. I was his sober friend so, of course, he came to me when he was in trouble, when he needed to get clean.

I was far from the best friend to him when he needed me most. It wasn’t malicious. Truthfully, I was struggling so much myself that I hardly had the brain power to empathize with his struggles. I conceptually knew why he couldn’t simply stop using, but I could never understand it. Where he had met me with love when faced with my aggression, I met him with judgment for his addiction. It was not unwarranted judgment, but it was ineffective at helping my friend. I don’t know if he knew that I would love him anyway, on or off drugs, just like he’d love me anyway, punching him or not. I certainly never told him that. I believed that him being off drugs would better his life, but I did a poor job of helping him get there. I recall one particularly heated exchange when I told him that if he didn’t stop using, I was going to have to go to his funeral. I told him I didn’t want to do that, begged him to stop. He was having none of the conversation that night and snapped back, “You take drugs everyday.” He was referencing my mood stabilizers which was an unfair and intentionally hurtful comparison. He knew the button he was pressing. “True,” I responded, “I take drugs to make my brain normal. You take them to make your brain look like mine.”

Still, for all of the hostility, when he was at his lowest, I did everything I could to help. I encouraged him to enlist in the drug-free program at school and get the counseling he needed. He was tested weekly and for the second half of our senior year stayed clean. His period off of hard drugs is when his art truly flourished. I'm sure he continued using LSD because the school couldn't test for it, and that probably heavily influenced his art, but regardless, he truly came into himself. His art reflected his love of intensity. His brush strokes were bold and intense. His ink and graphite work was full of sharp lines and shading. Even in his fine arts classes he kept a graffiti-esque style. He was unapologetically authentic, and he grew as an artist because of it.

When we graduated, he went to The Savannah College of Art and Design. I went to Emory University in Atlanta. I had no clue what I was going to pursue as a realm of study, and he wanted to major in graphic design and paint on the side. He flaked on me again the summer before college. He had the whole summer to come visit and never did. I was angry and vengeful. So when alumni weekend came around, and our graduating class reconvened for the first time as alumni, not students, I skipped, hoping he'd miss me as much as I had missed him. I thought I would show him how I felt, but I didn't know it was the last chance I had to see him.

He relapsed his first month of college, got into legal trouble because of it. He never told me. Then, one week after he made bail, he took LSD and dove off a bridge, taking his own life. I went to his funeral just like I said I would. I cried. I loved. I even laughed a little, and I guess for a moment I knew what it was like to be him, to have an impossible to fill hollow spot inside of me.

For a long time, I blamed myself. I wasn't a good enough friend. I cast too much judgment. I never listened, was too problematic, wasn't close enough with him to be a positive influence. I resented him for taking his own life too. How could he be so selfish? Did he not

think about the pain he was going to put us through before he jumped? I wondered if I had told him, "I'll love you anyway," would he have called me for help? Could I have saved him? Got him back on track? As time went on, these emotions dulled, the pain faded. The questions never were answered, but it didn't matter. I wasn't the perfect friend, but he loved me anyway, and that was enough for me to find peace in. I couldn't stop his self-destruction, but he loved me anyway. If he could love me through all of our ups and downs, then I could learn to forgive him and myself. Because I do; I do love him anyway.