

CONNECTIONS

# REMEMBER FLORIDA

As kids, Julia Scheeres and her adopted brother longed to leave their stifling hometown. Only one of them would.

WHEN WE WERE kids, my brother, David, and I hunted box turtles in the woods of our small Indiana town. We played hours of Monopoly and war in our blanket fort under the Ping-Pong table. We crossed the frozen Wabash, gripping hands as the ice fissured beneath our Moon Boots. We traded silly faces during tedious Sunday sermons, summer beckoning through the church's stained-glass windows.

And we encouraged each other with a single word: *Florida*. When we were in fifth grade, our family began vacationing in a budget condominium in the Sunshine State, and it was there that we stumbled upon a kind of utopia: kids of many colors forming fast friendships around the kidney-shaped pool. Back in Indiana, David (his friends called him Dave) and I were often marginalized because our family was different: My white parents adopted David, who was African American, when we were both 3 years old. At our neighborhood pool, a gang of siblings once jumped us as we left the locker rooms, angered that we had "polluted" the water. But in Florida, skin color was as inconsequential as eye color. What mattered was fun, your ability to spout Michael Jackson trivia, the size of your cannonball splash.

In Florida, our minds were opened. There were other ways of being. *Florida* became our password for hope, symbolic of an Eden we'd enter after crossing that magical threshold into adulthood. "Remember Florida," I told David after a redneck kicked him

in the crotch on the first day of high school. "Remember Florida," he'd say when I ate lunch locked in a bathroom stall to avoid bigots in the cafeteria. David would crack a corny joke or persuade me to go on a bike ride, and soon we'd be laughing, feeling powerful, feeling, in advance, the freedom that would someday be ours.

We were still mulling over Florida at age 20, when I was a college sophomore and David enlisted in the Indiana National Guard. He bought a secondhand Plymouth Turismo—black, with red racing stripes—and on August 1, 1987, was driving over to show it off to me when he lost control on a gravel road and slammed into an oak tree. He died four miles from our childhood home, and 900 miles from Florida.

A part of me died that day, too—the hopeful part. The unfairness of his death, occurring just as his life was becoming what he wanted it to be, astounded me. It enraged me. I spent the next two years of school haunting the library and eating from vending machines so I didn't have to interact with any ebullient, carefree college kids. How I resented their unstained hearts and unclouded futures. My anguish morphed into physical pain: chronic migraines, heartburn I tried to quell with peach schnapps. I no longer had David to counterbalance my tendency toward gloom. He'd always believed that life could—would—only get better. He had been wrong.

After graduating with a degree in Spanish, I flew to Spain, vowing never to return to the U.S. Overseas, I tried to forge a new identity. When asked about my family, I'd never mention David. I distracted myself with men



The author and David on his fourth birthday, June 1971; his Snoopy doll (below), now owned by the author's daughter.



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and dancing in remote, sunbaked villages. I fell in love, and then that love fell apart, and I was forced to come back.

I enrolled in graduate school to become a journalist; I wanted to focus on lives other than my own. But with time, I let David come back to me: in my memory, in my writing. I remembered his ability to make me laugh. And the feeling of security he gave me, the way he'd always had my back.

I never did move to Florida. I chose somewhere more progressive and diverse: California. Today, as I walk down the street, past all kinds of people, I sorely regret that David didn't make it this far. After so many years, that fact is still a sucker punch to the heart. But then I'll look down at the hand often nestled in mine. My 9-year-old daughter, Davia Joy, is my brother's namesake. Davia celebrates her birthday one day after her uncle's and sleeps with his stuffed Snoopy in her arms. They share a nickname: Dave. Davia cherishes stories about David. When I say, "I love you, Dave," I'm telling both of them.

Because love, I've learned, doesn't end with death. It lives on. Even if it's painful to remember, we must. Once I let myself think of David after years of running from the sadness of losing him, I felt relief. Now I accept my grief—as part of the beauty and devastation that pulse, side by side, through every life.

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