

# Peace Is Only Real in a Photograph

POETRY

Phoebe DeAngelo, Grade 10. Waring School, Beverly, MA. Gold Key, 2017.

The ocean behind me seems at peace.  
It sits still, no waves in sight.  
As if all the bad in the world was paused  
For just one moment.  
On the horizon, a rock wall separates  
Sea from clear skies.  
A few boats float in the distance  
But they're blurry and they lack importance.  
Sand ascends from the water,  
Creating a hill of craters in the foreground.

My uncle's name is John,  
But we call him Johnny.  
It just always seemed to fit him.  
He is the center of the photograph.  
His right knee is propped up,  
Providing a seat for my sister, Cecily.  
I am plopped on his broad shoulders.  
His hand grasps my ankle for support.  
John and Cecily look forward,  
I stayed focused on the hairs of his head.

Uncle Johnny kept us laughing.  
Burning mixtapes for my sister and me,  
Labeling it "Girls rule, boys drool."  
I still have it.  
It's too scratched to play  
With a big stripe of red nail polish.  
"Follow Me" by Uncle Kracker  
Stays in my favorites on iTunes.\*

\*The lyrics of "Follow Me" by Uncle Kracker have significance for Phoebe. Listen to the song and read the lyrics, and imagine what those words and music mean to her.

I can hear his laugh echo in my head  
Thinking about all the times he got on all fours,  
To act as a pony since I always said I wanted one.  
The laugh that's contagious.  
That hurts your sides.  
That makes your eyes well up.  
My aunt was always mad at first.  
Muttering something about how he's going to hurt his knees.  
He never cared.  
Never stopped.

His smile always bigger  
Than anyone I had ever seen.  
It pauses time,  
Makes everyone forget.  
It forces everyone to think about  
Only important things.  
Happiness, Laughter, Positivity.  
He lightens up a room in a way  
I always wished I could have.

He fell in love with my aunt Kim at UMass.  
A beautiful blonde undergrad student.  
She can recall the moment she first saw him.  
"It felt like I had known him my whole life."  
They quickly thought about their lives together.  
A home,  
Children,  
A family.

This photo was taken on July 10, 2003.  
I was two-and-a-half.  
Five hundred and fifty-two days later,  
We lost him.

My uncle's name was Major John Ruocco.  
When he was a junior in high school,

He was in a head-on car crash.  
The driver was killed.  
He decided he wanted to go into the Marines.  
To make up for his best friend's life somehow.  
He graduated college wanting to be in the Infantry.  
Scoring so high on an entrance exam,  
He was convinced to be a pilot instead.  
He completed 75 missions in Iraq.  
Leaving his two young boys  
And beautiful wife  
At home.

He came home different,  
Changed, unrecognizable.  
Awoken with nightmares,  
He struggled  
To connect with Kim and the boys.  
The problem became obvious  
When he told his 10-year-old  
He forgot to watch the Super Bowl.  
Joey handed the phone to Kim.  
"Something's wrong with Daddy."

She flew across the country to California.  
John had two days before he was deployed.  
She went to the base first.  
"I don't know what to tell ya,  
He didn't show up this morning."  
In panic she went to his hotel.  
She sprinted through the hallway on every floor.  
Hysterically calling his name.  
There was a large man kneeling  
Head to toe in camouflage.  
It wasn't John.  
This man stood next to an open door.  
Without saying a word  
Kim walked in.

He had taken his own life.  
He couldn't handle it.  
He gave up.

The photograph is loosely taped to my wall,  
Squashed between pictures of my closest friends.  
Everyone who made a difference is up there.  
It blends in with the ones around it  
Yet it's always the first one I see.  
It's my favorite one of us.  
Not because it's the best picture.  
But because it's the last.

I see his smile first,  
But then his eyes.  
I see joy, love, compassion.  
Five hundred and fifty-two days.  
Only five hundred and fifty-two days.  
I settle back into the ocean,  
It just looks dark. ■

### Discussion Questions

The word *peace* is mentioned only once in the poem (describing the ocean, "still, no waves in sight"), yet the author reminds us that how we appear in photos, or face-to-face, can hide the underlying sadness and even turbulence in our lives. **How can we reveal our sadness to others?**

Joey is Uncle Johnny's 10-year-old son in the poem. **How did he know something was wrong with his father?**

### Writing Prompt

The photograph of Uncle Johnny, Cecily, and the poet launches and inspires this poem. She tells the story of her uncle through this one image. Think about a photograph of yours, perhaps the last photo of you with a friend or family member. **How would you tell a story about this person in your own life?**