

Loss of Faith

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Twenty years ago I lost my faith. I used to think that it was because I gave up being the pious child who discovered power in the four letter words that caused teachers to gasp in horror and classmates to laugh hysterically.

It wasn't.

Twenty years ago, I lost my best friend to the business end of a shotgun.

As I awoke on that chilly morning, I heard my mother telling me to come out to the living room. Sleepy-eyed, I stumbled out in my underwear and leaned against the back of the couch, to see the WGAL news anchor tell me that there had been a shooting – accidental, it seemed – just over the hill on Nissley Lane.

Kevin had been shot.

The newscaster seemed more serious than usual, as if they knew more than they were letting on, and likely they did. Children are fragile and a bullet – any bullet – especially of the kind that I knew Kevin's family had lying around the house – could easily destroy them.

Kevin was already dead by that point. I knew it deep down – I could see it in the newscaster's eyes – there just wasn't any 'official' confirmation. But still... in youth there is always hope. And I held onto that hope.

As I stood there while the numbness of shock crept sneakily towards me, I remembered my sister, sobbing in front of the TV after one of her friends had died. She touched the screen with her right hand... as if that would bring them back. The warmth of the tube her last link with that person... how uncomfortable I felt watching her... how criminal it felt to voyeuristically watch her weep in loss.

I resolved not to act like that. The men in my family never cried. No tears. Never. I had been branded a crybaby as a child and had long turned off the faucet of my eyes. The lack of an 'official' announcement of his death helped prop me up, made me believe that he would walk into school as if nothing had happened. Shock set in as I went through the motions of getting dressed, feeding on the favored sugar coated cereal of the day and trudging out to the bus stop amid the darkness before sunrise.

The fifteen minute long packed like cattle on their way to the butcher bus ride was silent and somber as if everyone was on their way to that very slaughterhouse.

Everyone knew of the accident. News of death spread fast through our rural lands, distance being no barrier to news of the Reaper.

As I sat in homeroom, I stared up at the intercom, listening as the principal's words flowed through me unimpeded, telling us that we had lost a student to the quiet of unending night.

It was finally official. Kevin was dead.

The effect of those words was slight, but unexpected considering my stoic resolve. The falling of my stomach. The black maw threatening to swallow me. But men don't cry. Not in my family. Not over this. Not death.

I walked the first two periods of class in a daze, trying to act as normal as I could. I saw his unfinished artwork lying on the desk. It was a hand drawn covered bridge, brilliantly red. Like blood. And that was when I snapped.

No one likes to cry. No one enjoys the sensation, the feeling of weakness, even if it's needed. It's only after the tears have stopped that the realization of what it does, what emotions it releases, really comes to the forefront. I cried for my friend, for my loss, for the loss his parents had at that moment and that loss they would feel in the years to come.

None of my classmates came to me in comfort. No one but my art teacher - the surliest woman ever to teach the children at Marticville Middle. She walked over, her face not concerned, but of 'now what should I do?' She bent over me and said 'take whatever time you need to compose yourself' and walked away. Compose yourself. No compassion in those words. No 'hey, it'll be alright.' No 'I'm sorry your loss'.

When I regained the control I had lost, I looked around, seeing how the others looked more uncomfortable at my display than the violent death of someone they knew. Suddenly I was ashamed.

And that was the way it was.

I felt they were all cold and heartless, their reaction so insensibly pitiless. They weren't his friends - they didn't play soldier in the woods or build forts out of sticks and logs.

They had nothing to mourn.

I did. And I felt humiliated.

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Kevin was born poor. I never knew the circumstances as to why his family had so very little. They just were. Sometimes he smelled, sometimes he was picked on for being dirty or small or hungry. Sometimes he just didn't have clean underwear to wear. He was small, like I was - rail thin possibly due to not getting enough to eat even though I believe he was on the assisted breakfast and lunch programs.

He was funny, kind, and sometimes selfish. I attribute it to not having anything truly his, jealously guarding whatever it was he had in his possession. He hated his big brother, Kyle, who picked on him because he was so small. He wasn't a star. Just a sad little boy with little prospects at a better life.

Kevin held a sadness about him, a resignation. That is what I remember most prominently about him.

His death was ruled an accident. I'm not going to go into the details of his death. The thought of what his father experienced... no, I have children now and I can't imagine the horror. '*Daddy, help me...*' No. Let's not.

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I stared down at my socks in righteous anger. I didn't have black socks to wear to his memorial. Furious, I couldn't believe I was sitting there in church with white socks around him ankles. Everyone knew that you wore black to a memorial service! All I wanted was to wear was black. Black! Why didn't my mother wash my black socks? As I looked around, I witnessed the casualness of the other mourners and it made me even angrier. They were not quiet. They were not respectable. I saw their faces. I listened to their whispered conversations. The humor they found in the situation. In his death. They weren't his friends. Not to me.

As I sat there staring at those damn white socks, I remembered our conversation from some weeks before. My grandfather owned forty acres across the street from my home. Amid a patch of forest, many forts were built. We had to protect ourselves from the Red Threat because at any time the Commies could parachute in... *'I want you to have my stuff if I ever die,'* Kevin blurted out just as the skies began to darken. He had been talking about death, about dying and I paid half-hearted attention because that's what we always talked about. We killed a thousand commies and the thought of death was something romantic – something accepted. Almost teenagers, we were filled with angst and self loathing... it was just the way things were. I repeated those same words back to him as I was the dutiful and trusted friend. *'I want you to have my stuff if I ever die...'*

It was that poignant memory that fueled my hatred and suspicion for his brother. Was it really an accident? Everything I learned was from the newspaper. And in my mind, there were many unanswered questions. I never asked the proper questions of anyone, not wanting to feel the shame I felt that afternoon and fearing what I might learn.

Kyle had been there. Kyle had seen it all. I never spoke to Kyle again, believing that he was somehow responsible. He never changed in the intervening years before he graduated and disappeared into adulthood. Still a bully – still so very imposing. I let my suspicions fester in my mind, poisoning me and my relationships.

Even at the wedding of a family member, when Kyle sat at the same table as I did, all I could do was fume and hate. And it was only suspicion and suspicion alone. I could not even then ask him about his brother. I could not let the doubts go. I comfort myself in knowing that if there was some wrongdoing, the authorities would have found it. Kyle had been there when Kevin died. An accident. Accident...

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The casket was closed. There was no choice in the matter. The weapon did far too much damage to the young man's upper body. Kevin's parents might have been there at the memorial, they might have not. I don't believe they were - that they were too disturbed by the death. I can't remember much of that night other than my anger. I was told that the casket and grave were donated. It was then that I learned how expensive death could be. It wasn't just a wood plank box and a hole in the ground, weeds encroaching over freshly turned earth. Thousands and thousands of dollars to rest a child into the ground.

The funeral itself was for family only. I would have liked to have been there.

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I know where he's buried, but I could never bring myself to go back - to visit his grave. He was simply gone. Maybe I subconsciously thought it was better to put him from my mind. Vanished. Wall it off. Men don't cry. You failed once. Suck it up. Crybaby. *Daddy, help me...*

My own thoughts of death were more prevalent during the next few years. Would the expressions of my so-called friends match those at Kevin's funeral? Would anyone grieve for me besides those that gave me life? The answer frightened me more than any boogie man or communist threat. I see now that it was childish nihilism, cloaked in the torment and pain of adolescent change, but at the time I knew I was nothing but a nameless face to most people. And in a way, I embraced that invisibility.

Now, as I watch my children bounce joyfully on their trampoline, it's a simple cheerful act that I'm not sure Kevin ever experienced. *Daddy, help me...* The words in Kevin's voice stab me deep every time I envision him speaking those words through a ruined mouth... I lost God that day and he's unwelcome to me. My children see His face, speak His name in awe and I hope they never experience anything like this to cause them to question or lose their faith. They will, I'm sure, in time we all do in one way or another, but maybe they won't cast Him off as I did.

Was this the incident that sent me spiraling downward through the dark recesses that I dwelt in for the next dozen years until the birth of my first child?

Yes. Clearly it was.