

That Friday I had to tell Professor Bragg I would miss class for the funeral. I found myself presenting the same monologue I had already delivered so many times that week. I didn't mind so much; it was my duty, I would tell myself. Tom didn't want to have to tell the story, not over and over again until it became only a string of strange words that no longer had any significance or identity. So he asked me to do it. I said, 'Yes, of course I'll do that.'

I had always admired Dr. Kurt Bragg. He taught international politics and specialized in third world development. I always had a certain reverence for his outlook. He was a depressive, that much was clear, but even so all he wanted was for people who were wronged to experience justice. Dr. Bragg insisted his students call him Kurt. He felt uneasy, I think, in a position of authority, but more than that he wanted to be twenty again. Twenty forever.

He was kind of a mess at the time. His wife had left him that year, but it seemed to be a long time coming.

I imagined his house with his wife: a kept but otherwise unspectacular pre-war home just off the lake. A kitchen newly remodeled. The house decorated with rugs and busts and goddesses. Maybe some buddhist shit. And then I would imagine his apartment: two decades old, white walls, white carpets white linoleum. A melancholic fluorescent in the kitchen and just the one lamp in the living room. The couch, navy blue, would squelch when he plopped into it to read Al-Jazeera and drink a twelve pack of some drab winter seasonal ale or maybe a bottle of Dewar's.

Bragg didn't sleep well, that much was obvious. And it was obvious too that he was on meds and was drinking. His face had become redder in the past year but he never bloated. He still had a twenty year-old's jaw and long greasy brown hair. He never wore blazers or slacks of

even khakis. He had maybe two pairs of corduroys and some flannels and wore hemp bracelets. He shaved maybe once a week.

But despite all that Bragg was a good professor. He taught us well and more importantly he cared about what he was teaching. And he was a good man, kind and gentle. Even to his students.

When I told him what happened, ‘Thomas’s brother passed away,’ he echoed, ‘Thomas’s brother passed away.’ He wasn’t asking but seemed to affirm the news to space and time around us.

‘Yeah last week,’ I said. ‘That’s why he missed his finals.’

‘I didn’t know,’ he said, looking at the ground as he spoke. ‘He had a paper for my class. What happened?’

‘Motorcycle accident.’

‘Oh...’ he sighed, now staring directly into my eyes with his own sad pair.

‘It was late thursday night, I began. He had just left work and the roads were wet, it had been raining. He was on his motorcycle, an old Honda he had just bought. He stopped at a red light. Cars lined up behind him. When the light changed he stalled— he didn’t quite have the hang of it yet. Cars drove around him honking. One asshole actually flipped him off. There was a truck that had pulled up just as the light turned green. He was behind this line of cars and as the car ahead of him changed lanes he saw Simon—that was his name—but it was too late.’ I paused solemnly, then finished, ‘They rushed Simon to the hospital; he had suffered an aneurism. He lasted a week.’

I honestly loved that shit. Delivering that story. I mean Bragg actually wiped his eyes. I had it down. It was rhythmic. It was emotional. I deserved a fucking Academy Award. I deserved to be punched in the throat.

‘Life is fragile, you know? We think we’re invincible,’ he said. He stared at something far away. ‘Please offer my condolences to Thomas and his family,’ he said, looking back into my eyes with a sad smile. Then he looked at the floor once more, nodded a little nod, and walked away.

The night it happened Tom cried on the phone with me. He wouldn’t cry again after that, not in front of me at least. I never had anyone close to me die. I didn’t know what to say to Tom, how to comfort him.

‘I need you to do me a favor, El,’ he said, voice cracked and nasally.

‘Yeah, what? Anything, man. Anything I can do.’

He swallowed, ‘Me and Simon started this tree fort a few years back, we stopped when I came to school and he went down to Jacksonville. It never got finished.’

‘Of course I’ll help,’ I said.

Tom and I were close. We were inseparable actually. Everyone knew that. Not long before the accident it was us and Aaron: The Trio Clan of Righteous Man they called us. They being us. We called us. We called ourselves that.

Tom had always been quiet. I had met him freshman year. He was a Screamo kid back then. He had had mutton chops, a lip ring. He was only ever with John and Liz in those days.

There was a love triangle, he wasn't chosen, he was alienated. I saw it happen from a distance. When he didn't recover—locked himself in his room, stopped showing up to parties, played too many video games, missed class—I went and visited him. I hardly knew him, but I felt bad for the kid. We talked all night, hit it off immediately, asked each other why we never chilled before. That weekend we watched *Dawn of the Dead* and partied until oblivion. Our friendship was cemented.

'The visitation is Friday at four and the funeral is Saturday at eleven,' Tom said, his voice crackling through the cell phone. In Jackson there was no reception. In Jackson there was only landlines and dial-up, corn fields and a state prison.

'Where is the visitation?' I asked.

'Lawrence E. Moon funeral home, you take 59—'

'I'll google it.'

'Oh, okay,' Tom sighed. He was exhausted.

'And the funeral?'

'It's at our church, 1st Presbyterian.'

'Okay.'

'Aaron can come.'

'Okay. He's been saying he wants to, you know, to be there for you and everything.'

'He's an idiot,' he sighed again. He sighed a lot back then. 'I know he means well. I just... I don't want him ruining everything, you know?'

‘I think he’ll be okay, I’ll keep him in line if need be.’ I wasn’t entirely convinced I could deliver on that promise.

‘Think he’ll help with the fort?’

‘Yeah, probably,’ I lied.

‘Alright. I’ve got all the supplies, we should have enough time Saturday afternoon and Sunday.’

I tried to sound excited about the project, but it didn’t feel right. I began to think I shouldn’t be the one helping build this thing. It wasn’t my place.

‘Eli?’

‘Yeah?’

‘Thanks.’

‘No problem, man.’

‘No, I mean, for everything,’ Tom said, then hung up the phone. That made me feel sadder than anything.

‘So we get off here?’ Aaron asked, all smiles.

‘No, we get off at West Huron,’ I said again. I’d told him seven times, at least.

‘Okay.’

I turned up the music a little louder, folded my arms, looked out the window, turned the music off. I looked at the directions again, then at the mile markers. I wasn’t thinking straight. It had been ten minutes since Aaron asked last, and now we were seeing signs for Ann Arbor.

‘Fuck man!’ I said into my fist.

‘We’re lost, aren’t we?’ Aaron sounded annoyed. I hated when he sounded annoyed. He never had the right to be annoyed. Not him. Not his hyperactive ass.

‘Fuck you,’ I said.

‘No. Fuck you. Do I turn around or what?’

‘I don’t know, man,’ I say as we pass a sign that reads, *Welcome to Ann Arbor*.

‘I’m turning around.’

It took us another twenty-five minutes to get back to the exit we had missed. How had I not seen it before? What the fuck was wrong with Google maps? What the fuck was wrong with me? I was already embarrassed. I’d never been to a funeral. On TV it was all black and dresses and suits and umbrellas and rain. I should have known better than to expect that. All I had as far as sunday clothes were a pair of baggy, bootcut khakis and my one-size-too-small black dress shoes. I had gone to the Old Navy outlet before leaving Grand Rapids and bought a dress shirt, still itchy and with the fold lines, and a grey sweater. I looked like a poor fifth grader going to sunday school for the first time.

‘Open casket? Kid was on a fucking motorcycle,’ I whispered to Aaron when we finally got inside the church. I hated myself for every stupid thought like that, for whispering it into Aaron’s ear like a cruel, jealous high school homecoming runner-upper, for missing the visitation, for caring what I looked like and for not looking better, for being late, for not knowing what to say and always saying something stupid.

Aaron and I signed our names in the registry. We stood off to the side, tried not to stick out. A few minutes later Tom made it over to us. We gave him long hugs before saying anything.

‘Hey guys,’ Tom said, as if he didn’t know what else to say. He gave us a forced smile.

‘How are you holding up?’ Aaron asked before I could.

Fuck you, Aaron. You shouldn’t even be here.

‘I’m alright,’ said Tom. ‘How’s may term?’ He asked, clearly intent on avoiding the subject of death—his brother’s death, his *nineteen-year-old* brother’s death—even with Simon’s cold, discolored body laying only a hundred feet away.

‘It’s fine, easy,’ Aaron said while looking around the room for any fine, easy high school girls. I glared at him then rolled my eyes. Tom didn’t notice any of this, as soon as he had asked the question he had gone back inside himself. He was a master of disguise.

‘I’m gonna go see Simon,’ I said softly, cautiously.

‘Oh yeah. Right. Of course,’ Tom said with the same forced smile not looking at me.

Simon’s body was the first corpse I’d ever seen. Even all done up he looked eerily bloated, his skin waxy and grey. It seemed like a cruel joke, a crude imitation, an ersatz Simon. I couldn’t understand how Mr. and Mrs. Gossner would want to see him like this. They had even placed a red, green, and yellow striped beanie on his head at an unnatural angle. According to the photos he wore the hat often.

The whole mess became suddenly real to me. Tom’s evasions, up until then, had been enough for me to deny the unassailable impact this would have on his life, on my life, on our friendship. But now it was clear. Now—with Simon’s lifeless body, with Mrs. Gossner’s infinite

sniffing, with Mr. Gossner's angry breathing, with Teddy Gossner's fidgety hands, with Tom's blank stare—it was all real.

The accident happened the day before finals week of our Junior year. Tom flew down and waited with his family for his younger brother to die. Liz was in New Zealand that semester. Tom was supposed to go visit her for a month. He was supposed to leave the day after Simon died. He had told her what happened, obviously, but when he told her he'd be unable to come it didn't seem to compute, like maybe she thought this was all some ridiculous prank.

He told me this in that patient voice of his. Always patient. Patient with Liz, with Aaron, with me. Since we met, I was his emotions. Outwardly anyway. I got angry for him, sad for him, annoyed for him, even the good ones: excited, joyful, happy. Now I was livid for him. She never understood anything. She was socially inept. But this was different, this a child would understand.

That anger wasn't fair though. She was the most feeling person I ever knew. I couldn't understand the many different ways people act in grief and shock and sadness and anger. If not for Liz, actually, I don't think Tom would have ever come back. Come back from that long dark shadow cast by his brother's headstone.

It wasn't until a few weeks after the funeral that Liz got back. Once she did they retreated to her basement room in Grand Rapids, her safe cave, and slept for a year. She loved him so strongly that he had no choice but to let himself be alive.

But as for Tom and I, our friendship couldn't thrive like that, it could only survive on the scraps and the rain water.

We got back to the house around six-thirty. The funeral was long and afterward we went to some friend-of-the-family's house. Back then, in the summer, in Michigan, the sun stayed up until almost ten-thirty. I could tell Tom was itching to change into work clothes and head out to the fort to take advantage of that light, but we had to stay inside for awhile. Stay with his family and their friends. He had to force a chuckle at Mr. Uriarte's stupid joke ('The only thing hotter than my *pico de gallo* is my wife's ass'). He had to chat with Mr. Thurber—the history teacher at Jackson West who was also his dad's poker buddy—about how well Simon did in school, that he should have been at MSU or someplace, even though we all knew Simon hated school and barely finished.

I would call Tom everyday the week after the accident. 'How is he?' I'd ask. 'His brain's still swelling,' or, 'The swelling has slowed,' or, on one hopeful day, 'The swelling has gone down a lot. They were able to drain a lot of the blood. They're doing tests now to check his brain activity.' All this time, Tom never seemed overwhelmed. Sometimes he would express concern over his parents, their well-being, but never was their any sense of worry in his voice. Then, one week later, almost to the minute, my phone lit up, vibrated twice. I answered without looking at the screen. 'Hey,' I said. 'Simon is dead,' is all he could say.

It was a quarter to eight before we made it outside, changed, tool belts on, and ready to work. Tom wasn't excited so much as determined. As we walked through the yard I wasn't able to get that image out of my mind: grey, bloated Simon, that damn, silly looking beanie on his still

bright orange hair. I looked at Tom's head as if to make sure his hair was the same flaming color. It was.

Aaron was a few yards behind, dragging his feet, clearly annoyed that we were going to do manual labor. It was already clear to me that he would not be helping. Twenty or so yards into the woods he was all whining, 'These fucking thorns, man,' and, 'Why the hell are we trekking back here again?' Of course he knew. I had told him before we left. Told him to bring work clothes. That this wasn't going to be fun. He said, 'Well, *obviously*. It's a funeral. *I've* actually been to a funeral before,' as if he had some sort of macabre bragging rights, and not realizing how little that had to do with anything.

Before long we came across a clearing that was grass and weeds all over and in the middle a lone tree. No wonder they built a fort here. It looked like a Mark Twain novel, greener and more secluded than anywhere I'd ever been. That tree, all-powerful out there in the middle by itself. It was peace embodied, mother nature's perfect gift, a hideaway. It was any description you would find on a nature preserve brochure. I looked in the tree for the fort, but there were only the remains of what looked like a few two-by-fours nailed between branches. I let out a slow, low whistle. Aaron mumbled something about, 'rocks in my shoes,' and, 'fuck this.' Tom just lifted his arms a few inches from his sides and dropped them again, making a small slap noise, then began the last few strides over to the base of the tree. I followed. Aaron plopped down, opened his backpack, and pulled out some whiskey.

'Are you kidding me?' I said, turning back to him, and just then realized he had already indulged in a few hundred milliliters of the stuff.

'Um, no,' Aaron said. 'Why the fuck do you care?'

It shouldn't have surprised me, but it did. Every time Aaron would pull a stunt back then I would be surprised, angry. I wanted to shout at him, take the whiskey and throw it, but didn't want to make a scene, not in front of Tom, not right now. I glared at him maliciously, psychically embedding my numerous threats somewhere in the back of his skull, hoping that they would evoke horrible night terrors forever after. He flicked me off and took a swig. I clenched my fists and continued on towards the tree.

Tom and I worked hard that night. We climbed the tree and tore down the remains of the fort. It was hard work in that muggy summer air. There were bats and bugs. None of this bothered Tom, though. He seemed the most content he'd been since the day this all began. We worked until nightfall, saving what was salvageable, collecting the rest into a pile in the field at the base of the tree. When it was beginning to get dark under the shade of the tree we called it quits. We climbed down and returned to where Aaron had stayed all this time, drinking his whiskey and playing Pokemon on his Gameboy. He didn't look up at us, 'About time'. My fists clenched. 'Pokemon Gold?' Tom asked. I did not understand his patience for this. 'Yup. I'm kicking ass,' he said, simultaneously concentrating on his game, handing Tom the whiskey, and being a complete dick.

The accident happened two thousand miles away. I didn't know until the next day, maybe twelve/thirteen hours after. Tom didn't even know until the next morning, about seven hours after. I was the first person he told. Well, me and Aaron. That means he kept it to himself for at least five hours. That he went to work, he swept, mopped, waxed every damned whitish tile in the music building he would never step foot in again. That he went home and showered, maybe

made breakfast and coffee, packed his bag, and went to class. That he killed an hour or so, sitting in his room, crying maybe; maybe trying to get a hold of his mom or his dad or his aunt or his cousin. That he probably sat and stared at his Skype friend list waiting, hoping Liz would sign on, that she, somehow sensing his despair, would wake and turn her computer on. It means that he walked down to the dining hall, handed his card to the overweight woman whose story we never knew, got a still damp tray, stood in line, asked for chicken fried chicken and peas or one slice of pepperoni, one of cheese. That he walked to a table where we sat, all his friends, sat there and ate without saying a word. And that I sat and joked and talked about school or music or any other unimportant thing, and that I mocked his bad mood.

After all of that we walked back to Aaron's room and I asked what his *bog* was, as we would say. It was then that I noticed his face.

We got real good and drunk that night. Unsurprisingly Aaron had a second bottle of whiskey in that backpack of his, and a few warm beers. *How hadn't I noticed the clanking*, I wondered. We sat by the discarded wood pile that we had lit to make a bonfire. I was hesitant, I knew we had to wake up early, go back to work on the fort, but Aaron convinced Tom, and I wasn't gonna sit there, the only sober one. Aaron was always the instigator. He always got us going.

As we sat around the fire we were all chuckles and insults and talks about the girls back at school we'll surely date or bone. But as the fire began to die down and the bottles were down to drops and I was lighting the last Camel Filter, Tom walked off into the pitch dark, alone. It

took me a moment to realize he wasn't just taking a piss. Aaron was passed out. By the time I was chasing after Tom, I lost him in that pitch blackness you only find in rural America.

'Tom? Tom! Tom!' I shouted too loudly, what with the whiskey in my blood.

Nothing.

I took a deep breath, the fire was already far back. I closed my eyes and rubbed them, I saw a yellow, green, blue dot of light. When I opened my eyes it was still there. It took me a moment to realize it was a firefly, not the same dot. They were all around me now, floating lights in the night. I was in a drunken daze, I knew nothing but these floating lights all around me. It felt like peace. I forgot all about Tom and his brother, about Aaron. I forgot who I was. Nothing mattered.

Then, pulling me back, was the sound of Tom's retching. I followed the sound, creeping further and further into the darkness. I heard him vomit again, the splash of the vomit in the toilet—no, not a toilet, we were outside—then I heard the stream. I kept following the sounds, and soon I saw him. It was brighter there, my eyes had adjusted, I saw him laying at the edge of the water. As I approached him I said his name, Tom? Then, in a flash, I realized he was face down in the stream. I ran the last couple of steps, pulled him out of the water. Slapped him lightly, then harder. Now my heart was pounding, beating 1000 times per second.

'Eh, what?' he slurred as he woke.

'I thought you were dead for a second there,' I shouted at him. 'Jesus Christ,' I whispered as I dropped him and sat in the mud.

'Oh shit. Sorry man. I'm really drunk.'

'I know,' then, as if realizing it for the first time, 'Me too.'

There was only the noise of the stream for the next few moments.

‘I miss him,’ Tom said. ‘I’ll never see him again.’

‘I know,’ is all I knew how to say. I lifted my arm, and dropped it clumsily around his shoulders. He didn’t cry and this time I couldn’t do it for him.

I woke up on the floor of Tom’s bedroom. My head had been split in two by an axe made of whiskey and sadness. All light attacked my eyes, forcing me to squint. My skull was empty, my brain had been removed or shrunk. My stomach was replaced with a grinding mechanism, my lungs were caked with muck. I lifted my head, only to drop it back on the pillow. I didn’t remember anything after a certain point: laughing, joking. Then I remembered the creek. But no matter how hard I tried I could not remember anything after. Just blackness.

I tried again to lift my head, look around me. There was Aaron next to me, his sleeping bag was wet at his crotch. Tom was rubbing his eyes in his bed. I groaned and said, ‘What the fuck happened? How did we get back?’

‘You don’t know?’ he asked, lifting his head to look down at me, then plopping it back into his pillow. ‘I was hoping you would remember.’

‘I don’t remember anything after the creek.’

‘The creek?’

‘Yeah, you don’t remember being down by the creek?’

‘No. Why were we down there?’

‘I don’t know,’ I lied.

He didn’t say anything for a few minutes. I wondered if he had fallen back asleep.

Then Tom said, ‘Fuck man, it’s two o’clock.’

‘Shit,’ I said, more at the recollection that we were supposed to work on the fort than the time. ‘I can’t even move.’

Aaron loved to drink. He had a way of convincing you that *this* time it would be fun. That he wouldn’t get wasted and piss himself. That we would just have a few drinks and laugh. Every time, though, it was the same. Once we missed a bus to Chicago because we didn’t wake up on time, another time we all missed our final.

I guess it wasn’t all his fault.

So we went back out, without showers and without Aaron. We trekked back through the thorn bushes and came upon the field. It looked far less majestic as we passed the burnt-out bonfire. The field that was green, beautiful, pristine the evening before was littered with empty liquor bottles and beer and packs of cigarettes, cigarette butts, an empty bag of chips, Aaron’s backpack and Gameboy, and a t-shirt (also Aaron’s, we assumed). We came to the tree, also less majestic, the whole mood of the place having been diminished. We brought wood, nails, hammers, everything we needed.

We worked a few hours, somehow managing to ignore our hangovers, until Aaron came crashing through the brush shouting, ‘What’s up homos!’

I rolled my eyes, then immediately puked from the tree branch I was sitting on, down to the burnt wood below, where it landed with a mighty splash. ‘I think we should take a break,’ Tom said, stripping his sweat-drenched shirt. I hopped out of the tree, but fell when I landed, scraping my forearm on the trunk. Aaron laughed. I laid there, only inches from my own vomit.

'I'm starving! Let's get some food,' Aaron shouted.

'I could eat,' said Tom. 'What're you thinking, El?'

I just groaned.

'Cool, let's go,' said Aaron.

I got up, half mad, half thankful for the break. I wanted to shower. My hair and skin were now a horrible mixture of grease and sweat. I stank of booze, cigarettes, and puke. Plus grease and sweat.

It was two hours before we got back. After McDonald's Aaron coaxed Tom into giving us the tour of Jackson. All the while Tom had that same patient look on his face. I couldn't decide which was worse, that blank stare I had seen at the funeral home, or this.

We were about to head back out to the field when Aaron noticed an iPod on the counter. 'Nice, when did you get that?'

Tom looked at the iPod, and his patient smile melted, 'It was Simon's.'

Aaron just stared at Tom.

'I think I'm gonna take a nap,' Tom said without looking at either of us. 'We can work on the fort afterwards.' He took off his work belt, walked slowly up the stairs, and closed the door gently behind him.

We never finished that fort. After waiting a few hours I went and checked on Tom, he pretended to be sleeping. I did this twice more, the same act both times. An hour before nightfall

Aaron started complaining that we needed to head home. We grabbed our bags and left without saying goodbye.

I talked to Tom a few times on the phone in the next month, every time he was distant, hollow. He wouldn't say much beyond small talk, he was always a master at shootin' the shit without actually gettin' into the shit. Liz came back to Grand Rapids and Tom came too, a few days later. He lived with her, rarely came over or answered my calls. Aaron complained about these things. I was hurt too, but I thought I understood. I only wished Tom would have seen those fireflies that night. I only wished he would remember the moment at the creek. Maybe then he would realize that it was okay to miss somebody.