

BULLY SMILE

A bully smiles a certain way. There's no need to describe it, this smile—you know it; even if it's different than the smile I see, it's still the same, it's still a bully. The smile I see is the laughing smile of the bully of all bullies—Kevin Crowley—after he'd once again pulled my pants down, “pantse” me, in Saint Bernadette's schoolyard, the tinniest, most shriveled version of my penis right out there in the open for all the prettiest of pretty seventh and eighth-grade girls. To make matters worse, if such a thing was possible, *Free Willy*, the movie, was a box-office hit that year, and considering my name, William (Bill now, William then), this was what these sneak attacks that everyone was ready for (everyone but me) were aptly called: Free Willies.

The extra level of hell that was my eighth-grade school year. How I'd pull my belt so tight—defense against a Free Willy—that I developed a nasty infection on my hip bone, had to wear the gym sweatpants every day for a month or more, which didn't even have a drawstring, which meant very little power over my predicament, much greater odds that Crowley pulled down my underwear and not just my pants.

Some days he got me; most days he didn't. The effort, though, the effort it took to spare myself was overwhelming; the running and hiding, the *pleading* was an added embarrassment of

fuel to a life engulfed in flames. The measures I took! The ways I degraded myself just to save myself! If this here were my story, if the central focus here was the day in the life of young William Mulhern, I'd detail all the ways I forced myself to vomit in order to spend lunchtime in the nurse's office, or the morning I called in a bomb threat using a recording, an effect from my Casio keyboard, that made my voice sound like the Grim Reaper's, a stunt that I'll presume the school secretary didn't take too seriously. Or the closets and bathroom stalls I hid in, the things I licked and swallowed in exchange for keeping my pants where they belonged. This, though, is not my story, not exactly. You want my story? Here's my story, in short, the concise synopsis of the grade school section of my memoir: Free Willy (formally "the Willy Mammoth"): the fat kid with a small dick who people called gay starting in about third grade. I'll leave the details to your imagination. For me, though, those details, all I endured at St. Bernadette, all its ripples, the wrong turns I'm still today backtracking from, I do my best to avoid revisiting in too much depth. As my therapist likes to put it: "Let's leave those memories for our weekly sessions; try and live *in the now* once you're back out that door."

But Crowley's smile. *That* I can't escape. His smile is stuck there in my memory bank, an image I've tried and tried but can't withdraw from my brain, a face, a perfectly developed moving snapshot living rent free in my head now for more than thirty years. Yep, Crowley's smile is the focus here—his bully smile that appeared in my mind every morning the very second my mom woke me up for school: instantly I dreaded all the pain that was, inevitably, on its way, how none of the good Christian teachers, too busy keeping our lines in single file and their coffees warm, ever seemed aware enough—to care enough—to stop the abuse, stop Crowley from doing what made him smile.

“Eat your cereal; Mom’s gotta catch her bus” was a typical response I’d get whenever I said I didn’t feel good, which was nearly every weekday morning in those days, that I wanted to stay home. “You’ll feel better once you eat somethin’.”

Sleepwalking alone down Dubek Street was like a death march; instead of prepping for a test, mentally quizzing myself on the names of South American capital cities or the structure of a neuron, I’d be obsessing over the inescapable torture just around the corner—Crowley’s smile: at morning recess, as he swiped my workbook from my school bag—“Don’t be a bigger homo than you already are, Mammoth”—then copying the homework he hadn’t done; when the teacher left the room for any reason, to run off copies or get that triple-decker cart with a TV seat-belted to its top shelf: “Mammoth smells like cow shit.” “Mammoth needs a mammogram.” “William’s mother gives him baths—in Lake Mantiticaca.” There was a sound Crowley made, permission now for others to make the same sound, a whale sound—an ARRRRRRRROOOOOOOOOO—that would accompany spitballs being fired my way, and Crowley, turned in his desk, sitting on his knees, arms raised high, all smiles: “Harpoon the whale!” It emerged, that smile, whenever he was in the midst of doing what he was best at, the way Michael Jordan’s tongue would shoot out mid-dunk. After a Free Willy, though, having been captured and attacked, my pants down around my ankles, hunched there like a wounded animal as I cupped my hands over my “pussy” as Crowley called it, the crowd of burgundy sweaters and plaid jumpers looking on—that was what I feared most of all, when my bully smiled the biggest. “Big tits and no dick” was his favorite line for revving up the spectators. “Maybe you’re a chick—the ugliest chick ever. Wilma. *Wilmaaaaaaaa!*”

There were days I didn’t see it, the smile, in the flesh that is, mornings I scanned the schoolyard and didn’t see his army-green book bag or his Corduroy coat—*Schillcrest A.A.*

Football 1992 Champs, days I didn't hear that machine-gun laugh that could pick off a victim from across a schoolyard full of the last screams of freedom. On the mornings he still wasn't there halfway through first period—Crowley was often late, was sometimes spotted out the window of our homeroom, slamming a car door, in a screaming match with his tattooed-roofer dad or “that jezebel mother of his” (my mom's words); as he headed toward the main doors, he'd swing a stick at the cars parked along Cranage Avenue or hurl stones at the Blessed Mother near the base of the steps, or take aim at rabbits or squirrels or at his docile baby brother, “Tiny Tim” Crowley, always disheveled, always dragging behind—on the joyous mornings Crowley never moped in late, untucked and bed-headed, I'd begin then to dream he'd gotten kicked out of school for the dozens of unexcused absences he seemed to accrue nearly every single school year, or, even better—he was dead: had accidentally shot himself with one of his dad's guns he was constantly bragging about; was mowed over by a car while riding that black and purple Mongoose he'd weave through traffic, a middle finger wagging back at the beeping drivers. My young brain would start to envision a world without Kevin Crowley's smile: no more hiding; no more eyes in the back of my head; no more sticking my hand down my pants towards the end of Religion class, the class before schoolyard recess, playing with myself a little, trying to make my penis a respectable size in case a Free Willy was on its way. The heavy feeling, the cement that lived in my legs those days, would often be lifted, as I knew that smile wasn't around some corner and ready to eat me alive. But he'd return a day or two later and again I'd be his favorite prey, be the underground entertainment, a show, for hundreds of bored kids sentenced to nine months in Saint “Burn to Death.” If not for Mary Lightcap (“Bloody Mary” Lightcap) bleeding all over Justin Offenbach's fingers (a Crowley disciple) on a late-winter weekend at the wrong time of the month, and in turn wiping Free Willy from the front page, I'm not so sure I'd be here

today to walk us down this memory lane. Whether or not I'd have ever had the guts to do what I was thinking of doing, I'd been taking a circuitous route home from school—to ensure Crowley and his gang didn't catch me on the streets, do who knew what outside the jurisdiction of school's rules: halfway across the Pennypack Avenue Bridge, high above the tracks of the regional rail, I'd take one step, then two steps onto the sorry excuse for a safety barrier; kind of peeking out and down into the thundering gust the train made approaching the tunnel beneath me, I'd feel the thrill of being just one leap away, maybe, from the end of Free Willy. I think I was only feeling sorry for myself, wanted someone, some guy—always a guy, a police- or fireman on his way home from work, a burly bus driver—to pull to the shoulder, roll down his window—“Hey, kid, you OK?”—and save me. Instead, it was a girl who saved me; it was poor Mary Lightcap's succumbing to peer pressure down in Joey Wesner's basement, during a game of Seven Minutes in Heaven, and paying the heavy price—a botched tweenaged sex act saved me.

Crowley's smile, though. I never stopped seeing it. It didn't simply go away. It's stored itself in my mind, reminding me not to get too comfortable just because Kevin Crowley was at a different high school than mine, was two states away when I lived at college, was in Afghanistan, I'd heard, when I came back home to start, I'd hoped, a life for myself. Right around the time I began to sit on a psychiatrist's sofa, four years ago next month, and share the many chapters of my life's pain with a stranger I found online, journaling as I am today as a means of therapy, the strangest thing began to happen: as if my phone was listening in on our sessions, hearing “Kevin Crowley” over and over again, I began to see it again, Crowley's smile, literally see it staring back at me every time I went on Facebook, the matchmakers there suggesting that I offer him my friendship. And shortly thereafter—not before finding my most

appealing profile pic, a photo from the year earlier when I'd lost the fifty pounds I gained right back and then some a few months later—I took the suggestion of my therapist and asked for Kevin Crowley's friendship, which he accepted. Hundreds of photos, hundreds of iterations of that smile, were now mine to see anytime the masochist in me wanted a peak. On Main Street in Magic Kingdom, at Little League games, at all the places people smile for a camera and instantly mislead us as to what their lives are like. Handsome still, my bully, athletic, with all his hair, he didn't have a chubby daughter or a special-needs son. No. God doesn't punish bullies; bullies are born punished. But that smile. In every single photo! I used to be certain, as I was about many things in my younger years, it was pure evil, that smile, a smirk of a sinister born motherfuck who did what he did for the pure enjoyment of seeing the physically unlucky suffer even more. And maybe I had still felt that way, about Crowley, when my old bully became my new "friend." It's even likely I did. In time, though, living in this new world of social media that most of us now are, being privy to the details of the lives of people we haven't seen in decades, people, sometimes, we barely spoke to in our childhoods, even hated, my perspective would soon change: in time, I'd be completely convinced there was much, much more to Crowley's story, so much more behind that smile. Even Kevin Crowley, I'd soon discover, wasn't just rotten for the sake of being rotten.

You could say I became obsessed with this sudden access into Crowley's life, found myself being pulled towards his page, being there and scrolling about, sinking down the wormhole that Facebook can sometimes drag you, before I even knew I'd typed his name in the search box—I did this, too, with ex relationships of mine, a good handful of girls and woman who seemed to like me for who I truly was, only to have been suddenly scared off, I think, by the fact that this lard-ass supermarket manager not only made a measly thirty-five grand a year but shared a home with a

Parkinson's-diseased mother—her home—a row house in a neighborhood newly nicknamed the Little Middle East. Aside from the photos on Crowley's page, however, photos that painted a fuzzy picture of a smiling family man, there wasn't much else, much detail, personal information other than his support of the police (the thin blue line background photo) and that he still lived someplace local (the pictures he'd been tagged in, at Philly sporting events, old-neighborhood ball fields and Jersey beach towns, pictures with guys I recognized from my time in the juvenile gulag that was my grade school years). Crowley's life came more into focus a few years after he'd accepted my friendship. I was lounging around my apartment—I'd been living on my own by then for more than two years, my new little life slowly coming together, taking "baby steps," living "one day at a time," clichés I'd begun to believe in under the guidance of my therapist—lying there on a couch that was my bed too for the time being, aimlessly scrolling through my phone, a GoFundMe link, shared by Crowley's little brother, Timmy, appeared in my feed: *Help Support the Family of Army Sergeant Kevin Crowley*. Beneath the link was a photo of Crowley, his wife and kids and German Shepherds, a photo I'd been familiar with in my frequent stalking of his page—the family was posing, all smiles (even the dogs), in front of a Christmas tree, bells around their necks, ugly sweaters (even the dogs), possibly their holiday card from that past year. I clicked the link and began to read, about Crowley's tours overseas, in Iraq and Afghanistan, his immense popularity as a bartender at Nick's Roast Beef on Cottman Avenue, his loyalty to the Tastykake plant at the Navy Yard (formally Hunting Park Avenue), where he'd worked for seventeen years and who'd be lost without him. *To the kids of Parkwood A.A. and Saint Anselm's CYO, Kevin was known as "Coach Crowl"; to the parents who were constantly wowed by his energy and patience and dedication concerning their young athletes, Kevin was simply regarded as someone who "gets it."* Before I clicked on *Read More*, I scrolled down to the comments section, the "Words of support," where people had done what we all seem to do in times like these: save their

kindest utterances for recipients no longer around to hear them. *A great dude. A true friend. The most big-hearted person you'd ever know.* I shook my head—*hah!* Impossibilities. Blatant lies! People with no fucking sense of reality, people—bot American sheep—programed to lie, coerced by society, to speak in worn-out clichés whenever someone dies. *Kevin was a great lover of dogs,* the bio continued, *had been the handler of multiple military canines, had spearheaded a local shelter, Closest Companion, located on the 3100 block of Byberry Road in Northeast Philadelphia, that rehabilitates and trains rescue dogs into therapy pets, many of whom were malnourished and/or abused, set to be euthanized in countless cases,* which too seemed an impossibility from a guy who used to burn ants with a magnifying glass in St. Bernadette's schoolyard, pour salt on slugs, smiling, as they slowly dehydrated to death. *Many of Kevin's dogs found forever homes with adults suffering from unresolved childhood trauma, a partnership Kevin was specifically devoted to establishing more and more of each year.* There were mentions of local mental health groups Closest Companion had worked with closely, links to their websites. Then: *Kevin obviously spent his life bettering others' lives, and now it's our turn to give back.*

In closing, his brother, who authored the write-up, whose face I barely recognized when I went to his Facebook page—the years had not been kind to “Tiny Tim” Crowley—he told us prospective donors that Kevin (*my big brother* he'd called him numerous times throughout the fundraiser's story) had saved his life, was his hero. *Without my big brother, my wife is not my wife, my kids are never born.* There was mention, too, of Crowley's mom, who'd lived with Kevin and his family until she lost her battle with cancer in 2017, who Kevin *gave the life she'd always deserved;* her name I was learning for the first time was Sally—Sally Crowley—which made me unexpectedly sniffle out a laugh, then kind of stare out my front window, at the foothills of trees that were the new backdrop of my life: I was remembering the pain in her face the few times I'd gotten close enough, a

woman younger than I am now, though in my memory, so much older than I'd ever be. His father's name, which I'd seen as recently as a few years prior on the horde of roofing trucks that raddled around the old neighborhood—*Jim Crowley Roofing and Siding*—his dad's name wasn't even mentioned in the write-up. And neither was whatever had happened, to Crowley, only that his surviving family, his wife and two kids, three dogs would be the recipients of our generous donations, donations that would help in their navigating through grief in the days, weeks, and months ahead. At the bottom of the page, though, was a link to a suicide prevention and awareness site for veterans, another GoFundMe altogether, where you could donate to a general cause that went towards, well, I'm not too sure how our dollars "prevented" suicide, made anyone more "aware" that suicide existed, but money, I guess, is almost always better than nothing. I looked away from the screen, stared up at the mantel clock my mom and I had purchased together, in the spring of '87, from Ports on Godfrey Avenue, a reward, I think it was, for overcoming all the defeat she'd been plagued by, to celebrate our new beginnings, our going from tenants to homeowners; the clock was a fixed piece of our living room, for three decades, and just about the only reminder from the old house I hadn't stored away, buried in a box with the rest of my old life. Staring up there at that clock that no longer told time, still absorbing what I now knew about Kevin Crowley, I felt the numbness in my gut I used to feel as a thirteen-year-old consumed with keeping his pants girded to his waist; I heard the whale sound, even instinctually ducked down a bit the way I did when I would take cover from flying spitballs, praying the teacher would hurry the hell back to class. I thought of texting someone, one of the few people I'd kept in semi-touch with from grade school, other victims of youth who'd over the years liked to poke fun at some of the epic falls from grace that were constantly on display since social media came to be, "the most perfect karma" an old friend of mine once texted, "as if Facebook was invented for people like us to watch the cool kids fall flat on their faces." Instead, though, of seeing if anyone else had seen

this news, I drifted back to the top of the page: I took a good look at that Crowley family photo, the same photo from Facebook, mentally going back and forth between my time at St. Bernadette and the inside of a house I was envisioning as the Crowleys', imagining what "home" must have felt like to a family whose sergeant was Kevin Crowley, a young man who'd once been so frightened of the life he had that he left for war. Before I went back to doing whatever it was I was doing, which was often my best in those days—for the first time ever I was consistently putting in the work required for finding a happier life, "walking down different roads," as my psychologist described this essential component to changing for the better, escaping the rut I'd been stuck in, it felt like, since birth—before I exited the fundraising page, I made a decision that fell in line with many of the other decisions I'd been making around that time, impulses telling me, Yes, Bill, this is what's needed of you, from you, at this moment: after I looked over the list of donations, saw who had given what to the surviving members of the Crowley clan, I made an anonymous donation of five hundred bucks, "gave back" more than anyone else had.

"A victim of himself; if that's not irony at its finest—or most tragic." This was the response from my psychologist, shaking his head, leaning forward in his chair, squinting the way he does, after I'd broken the news about Crowley. I'd been going to see him by then for almost two years, in a Victorian house turned psychiatry practice on a Main Street that looked more like a Hallmark movie than any real-life place I'd ever been to. I had moved up there, to Jim Thorpe, PA, in the hopes of finding a better life; after my mom passed and the house was sold, after I realized my inheritance came out to be a good deal more than what I'd make in five years at the Pathmark, I up and left behind a job I despised and moved to this small town on the southern edge of the Pocono Mountains (which might as well have been the southern edge of the Arctic Circle for someone from Philly), thinking that "place" alone, as I'd made the mistake of thinking

in my much younger years, as Crowley, too, must have believed when joining the Army, might somehow fix things. When I realized it wouldn't, fix things, I didn't resort to doing what Crowley did of course, but there were days I was close, staring down into much greater threats to my life than the flurry of an oncoming train that that sad little boy thought might be the only way to make his pain fall away. Therapy, though, in time, with effort, persistence helped me. Therapy often causes you to see things about yourself that you'd been blind to all your life. Fundamental pieces of yourself that you were, ironically enough, too self-centered to have ever accurately focused in on. Finding these foundations of sorts is not why you decided on therapy, it wasn't for me at least: when I was finally brave enough to make the call, after all the years of defeat in my life brought me to the absolute brink, I made that call so someone would save me, the father figure I'd been in search of my whole life, who'd hug me, à la Robin Williams in *Good Will Hunting*, hug me and tell me it's not my fault. What I actually found there, though, amongst the many gifts of self-discovery, was that I wasn't so different from those I'd thought of as bullies, Crowley included. I too was mean: we often hurt others, us victims; we, too, feast on the weak—the weaker—the lowest hanging fruit; we do it like Crowley did it: with a smile. We learn, sure, moderate our selfish ways, once we realize we've become all that we hate; we get better, inject a little less of our poison into the human beings we use to numb our pain. We try at least.

I'll still spend hours lost in Crowley's Facebook page, a page now dormant aside from the Happy Heavenly Birthday wishes and the occasional therapy-dog posts Crowley's still tagged in; I'll head for his photos and swipe from one scene of his life to the next, the people (and dogs) beside him changing and changing with each movement of my finger, with each newer, older version of Kevin Crowley's smile. I wonder sometimes what it was that made him go that extra mile in inflicting pain, how much pain *he'd* been in then, how much more pain it

had spiraled into by the time he reached the point of being too far gone to attempt a comeback.

It's a part of my routine these days, doing this, seeing that smile he wore through it all; it's a place I take refuge as I navigate these roads of life now with the clearest lens I've ever had to look through, a better understanding, more hope, in knowing where the hell I might be headed.