

## Tommy and Me

Seeing Tommy's body spooked me, it really did. It was a few months ago, right before my 15<sup>th</sup> birthday. I guess it doesn't matter how old you are when you see a dead body for the first time, it's going to spook you no matter what. It happened at a viewing. That's the part where the casket is all open and everything, and you can see the person who you knew, and it's a way for you to say goodbye to their face, which is lying all still and unnatural, and the dead person's loved ones are standing nearby, and you're supposed to offer them your condolences. Why would they want my useless condolences? That's what condolences are: useless. That's what viewings are, too. I really wish I hadn't gone.

I planned on skipping the viewing. We had had some wild times together, Tommy and me—I swear he laughed at everything I said—but I had never seen a dead body, and I didn't want to start with Tommy's. I only ended up going because my best friend said he needed me there. He cried when he saw Tommy's body, and he even made me hold his hand while he cried! I didn't cry, though. There's no use in crying over spilled milk, or in crying over dead people, that's what I think.

I went up to the casket with Lake. There was this flat bar near the floor that I saw Lake kneel down on, so I kneeled down on the railing, too. It's a religious thing I think, that railing. I'm not really religious. Lake didn't pray when he kneeled down, he comes from a bunch of nature-loving types. I didn't pray either. What was there to pray for? That God start Tommy's heart back up and fix all his injuries? God's not in the business of sending people from Heaven back to Earth

once they die. At least, He hasn't done that for a while. That's funny, isn't it? I like to joke about God.

I looked at Tommy's unmoving body—was it even his body anymore, now that he was gone from it? Seeing him lying there all dead and gone like that, it freaked me out. I didn't cry, but boy was I pretty shaken up. My heart was beating all fast and hard. I could feel my own heartbeats banging around inside my skull. There was about ten pounds of makeup all over Tommy's face, I swear there was. That was some weirdo's job, to make him up like that. The weirdo who worked on Tommy did a good job, that's what all the adults thought anyway. They said Tommy looked peaceful, like he was sleeping. That's bullshit. He looked awkward, and fake, and wrong. The image of powdered, lifeless Tommy won't get out of my head. I've had a few nightmares about him. The worst part was that Tommy had been a pretty good-looking guy in life, but they made him look all spooky in death. And his body smelled weird, too, like chemicals or something. I had never smelled that smell before. It made me dizzy. His hands were folded together, they were clutching some religious beads. More bullshit. Tommy's dead hands holding some religious beads wouldn't make him get into Heaven.

Lake was really losing it next to me during all this. He was crying all over himself, and this gross mixture of snot and spit and tears and grief was streaming down his face. He wiped the pathetic goo away with the back of his hand every so often. It was a sorry sight, almost sorrier than Tommy's dead body.

I stood up, and Lake got up with me. It was our turn to see Tommy's parents. His dad was all tall and fat and bald, and his mom was all small and skinny and sweet. I was thinking that Tommy's parents would be grossed out when they shook hands with Lake on account of all the sad goo on his hand, but Lake went right up to Tommy's mom and pulled her into his chest, which left me with Tommy's dad. I didn't want to make eye contact with him. What if he was crying all over

the place like Lake? I shook his sweaty hand and muttered, “Sorry,” without really looking him in the eye. I didn’t see how my saying sorry helped. Words wouldn’t bring Tommy back. Lake and I switched positions. Of course Lake hugged Tommy’s dad. I had barely extended my hand for Tommy’s mom to shake when she pulled me in for a tight hug. I felt her stretch up onto her toes so that her mouth was right up next to my ear.

“Tommy really admired you, Christopher. He would tell me so every chance he got. You always made him laugh. Thank you for being a good friend to my boy,” she said. She really surprised me with those words. I didn’t think either of Tommy’s folks even knew who I was. She pulled out of the hug, but held me there at arm’s length. Something inside me told me to look at her eyes, I don’t know why. They were all red and glistening, and that was the closest I came to crying in that place. I gave her an awkward, closed-mouth smile, and she let me go. I was glad she let me go, then. I’m sure if I’d have kept staring at her eyes, I would have broken down myself. I would have cried like a baby, worse even than Lake. I didn’t cry, though.

It really was unfair that Tommy’s parents had to go through this. Sometimes the world doesn’t work the way it should. Tommy died in a car accident. Everyone in town knew about it. All the kids at school were acting like they had been real close with Tommy, like they had been his best friend or something, and I bet most of them had barely ever had a conversation with him. All those rotten liars crying fake tears over the death of their fake best friend. I didn’t cry, though.

Lake and I went to sit down after we saw Tommy’s parents. The whole situation was really uncomfortable. The funeral home looked like the inside of my grandparents’ country club. It was all high class and everything, but still uncomfortable. Death and sadness hung about the place. I just remember Lake really letting the tears flow. I patted his leg all awkwardly, I didn’t know what else to do. Out of nowhere, he grabbed my hand and gripped it real tight. It didn’t hurt, but it made me feel weird. Lake was my best friend, but I didn’t want to hold his stupid hand. I felt my face get all hot,

and it just got to be too much for me to handle, so I pulled my hand away. Lake looked at me, all teary-eyed.

“Thanks for coming with me, Christopher. I couldn’t have gone through this without you. I just miss Tommy so much,” he said.

“Sure thing, Lake,” I said. I really didn’t know what to say. It was a pretty damn awkward situation. Lake put his arm around my shoulders. A perfectly good silence settled itself between us, but then Lake decided to ruffle up the silence. He told me some pointless story about how he was kicking a soccer ball around with Tommy and Tommy’s dad once, and Tommy’s dad started yelling at Tommy that he wasn’t kicking the ball right, and Tommy just nodded and started kicking the ball properly. It must have worked—Tommy was the star of our high school soccer team. I don’t know what the hell Lake decided to tell that story for; a stream of fresh tears was falling down his face by the time he finished.

“I never got to tell Tommy how much I cared about him. I won’t make that mistake ever again. I love you, Christopher,” Lake said.

“What do you mean you love me?” I asked. My face got all hot again.

“You’ve always been a good friend to me. You’re practically like my brother, and I love you. I just wanted you to hear that,” he said, tears still flowing freely down his soft face.

“Oh, that’s...nice of you to say, Lake,” I said.

A big old lump got stuck in my throat after that. My mind was all over the place. I wanted to leave, but I thought Lake needed me to stay with him. The whole thing ended a short time later, after everyone had their turn staring at Tommy.

Lake and I walked out of the viewing room, right past this old man, who I guess worked for the funeral home. He was waving goodbye as we left, that really creeped me out. I don’t know why, it just did. He was like the grim reaper or something. I hoped he wouldn’t be waving goodbye to

people at my viewing. We exited the funeral home. There were a lot of people hanging around outside. I really wanted to get out of there, but Lake said we should go see our other friends. We walked over to Nick and Michael.

“Hey, fellas,” I said. I could tell that Nick had been crying. Lake patted him on the back.

“Hey, Christopher,” said Michael, “how you guys holding up?” Michael didn’t have any traces of tears in his eyes or on his face. It seemed like he and I were the only two people who didn’t cry at that damn thing.

“I’m fine,” I said, “Lake, well...Lake just really misses Tommy.”

“We all do,” Michael said.

“Tell us one of your Tommy stories, Christopher,” Nick requested. I smiled all big and wide.

“I’ve never told anyone this one,” I said. “I’m sure you all remember the rumor from back in sixth grade that Mrs. Fordham wore a wig and all, right? So Tommy and I decided to see if the rumor was true. We put a piece of tape over the lock on the door, all Watergate style, and then when she went to lunch, we snuck into the classroom and went through her stuff to look for any evidence of a wig. Only we didn’t find what we were looking for,” I said, still grinning widely.

“Is that the end of the story?” Nick asked, obviously disappointed.

“Hell no! You know us better than that! We didn’t find a wig, but what we did find was *so* much better. We were going through the drawers in her desk and everything, and at the bottom of one of the drawers was this stack of magazines. Nudie mags.”

“What?!” said the three of them simultaneously.

“That’s right. I got all freaked out as soon as I saw them, but Tommy, man, Tommy was thinking way ahead of me. He had the idea to take one of them, and leave a note in her drawer so we could force her into giving both of us good grades. It worked perfectly, too. That was my only A the whole year. Tommy was a legend, he really was.”

The three of them just stared at me once I finished the story. Every word of it was true, too. We really did blackmail the teacher. We even got out of having to do the end of the year project, which was a major part of our grade. The shock on Lake's face was hilarious. He was looking at me all astounded like he had never seen anything like me before. Michael was grinning; his worship level of Tommy clearly shot up a whole lot after I told that story. Nick was just quiet, it almost seemed like he lost respect for Tommy right then. Screw Nick if that's true, he didn't understand Tommy like I did. Telling that story made me really miss Tommy, more than anything else that day.

We said our goodbyes then. They were sad goodbyes. I hate that stuff. Especially because Lake was still crying as he hugged me goodbye. I decided to walk home; it was only about a mile away. I couldn't enjoy the walk. I was thinking of everything, of Tommy, of that nude magazine we stole from the teacher. We took it home and used it to jerk off. I forgot to tell the boys that part of the story. I was glad I didn't tell them, they probably would have judged us even harsher. I was lost in my thoughts when a homeless man approached me.

"Excuse me, sir, do you have any spare change?" he said.

They always ask for spare change, I don't know why. They should ask for spare bills, it's more money that way. I don't like homeless people. They're always dirty, and you can bet that this one was, too. His face might have been pretty white underneath all that grime, I couldn't really say for sure. He had those cloth gloves with the fingers cut out so they just went to his knuckles. His hair was all gray and matted, too, and he didn't have a very good set of teeth.

"What?" I said.

"Change. Do you have any spare change? I'm not trying to hurt anybody. If you do right, God will do right by you. He sees, and He knows," said the man. Homeless people always say crazy shit. I like to screw with homeless people. I like to say crazy shit right back to them. Why should they have a monopoly on being nuts?

“If the sun don’t shine, it’s dark. Today’s forecast is bright and sunny,” I said. He did not know how to take that. Screw him, asking me for money on the day of Tommy’s viewing.

“Look, sir, I’m just an honest man trying to get enough money together for a bus ticket,” he said. That’s another thing. They’re always trying to be homeless someplace else. What’s so bad about my town? Is it a bad town to be homeless in or something?

“Now listen, I don’t have any money for you, you stupid bum!” I said. That was kind of harsh, but I had had a pretty crappy day.

“Okay. No need to insult me,” he said, and he walked slowly away, to bother someone else I’m sure. I wished it was him who died instead of Tommy. If the universe needed a death, why couldn’t it take that stupid homeless man? His family and friends probably didn’t care about him, if he even had any.

When I finally got home, my mom was asleep. She was probably about the only adult I knew who wasn’t at the viewing. My mom drank a lot, and then she slept a lot after she drank. She was never a mean drunk, though. I didn’t feel like having any responsibilities that day, so I just let her sleep. I went to my room to get out of my dress clothes and take a shower.

In the shower I got to thinking again. I thought of everything that had happened the past week. I was still angry at that homeless guy. I wished the whole week had never happened. There was Tommy dying, obviously, and all those people pretending they were really good friends with him. I thought about Lake holding my hand. What was that all about? I’ll be honest with you, I cried in that shower. I cried for so long that the water started getting cold, but I didn’t care.

The next Monday at school was really strange. The whole school was quieter than normal, even during lunch. Lake and Nick were still real sad, and Michael was Michael, but I was feeling weird. At lunch I looked around the subdued cafeteria and couldn’t help but think, *which one of you sad*

*jerks is next? Which one of you am I gonna have to pretend to care about once you're dead?* I finished my food and told the boys I was going to walk around, to clear my head and all.

I ended up at Tommy's locker. He and I knew each other's locker combinations. Having access to each other's lockers made it easier to cheat or to play pranks on people or whatever. I opened his locker; no one had cleared it out yet. There was just a few textbooks, a rolled up pair of soccer socks, and a few lose pencils and pens. I just stared for a long time at the inside of his locker, wishing that he was the one staring at it, not me. That was a really stupid thing for me to do, looking in his locker that day. I don't know what I was hoping to find, but I was real disappointed I didn't find it, I really was. I closed his locker for the final time, and headed to my next, Tommyless class, hoping everything would go back to normal. But I knew it wouldn't. Nothing is *normal* really, is it?