Kings Fallen: A Story of Lost Boys

“Woman hold her head and cry
Cause her son had been shot down in the street and died”

“I wanna tote guns and shoot dice
All my life I been considered as the worst
Lyin’ to my mother, even stealin’ out her purse
Crime after crime, from drugs to extortion
I know my mother wished she got a fuckin' abortion”

-Notorious B.I.G.

We listen to this song probably twenty times on the way to the beach. Brett, Kel, Sean, Tim, Nate, Cory and I, all sitting in a bus full of fumes. I’m a little girl, the only girl, trying to keep up with the big boys. It is April, 2006.

“That’s awful...”

My statement trails off, not spoken to anyone in particular. My eyes are stinging so badly, and tears trail down my cheeks from all the smoke caught in the suburban. Sean looks at me and smirks sadly.

“It’s true.”

His face disappears, and all I see is his mother’s features, heartbroken at the thought of her son believing she would be better off without him.

The smoke is really getting to me. Tim looks at me angrily, like my twin Nate does when he wishes I’d quit my complaining. I’m dizzy, I’m deaf, I’m so sleepy all of a sudden. The bass is vibrating my whole body. Sean runs his hand over my head and grins.

“Like, one more hour, sugar.”
He lets the R run on at the end of the word in a mocking way. He puts his darkly tanned arm around my shoulders and I lay my head against it. One more hour to the beach, one more hour till I’m drunk and no longer whining; one more hour till this spring break trip really kicks off is what he means. As Sean and I continued to flirt mercilessly, I watch Tim staring at the window, blindly, not seeing a single tree that screamed past. He is lost in thoughts I will never hear or understand.

This was eight months ago. Some of the details are concrete and easily recalled, and some blend together depending, I think, on what I prefer to remember. I can see most clearly that which doesn’t cause me pain. When we came home from that beach trip, Tim and Sean stayed only one night. They made several stops in our city, stealing money or drugs or clothes. They never actually made it back to their houses, and they left town again the following morning. The next time they would see their parents would be through glass, nearly a month later, speaking into a filthy plastic phone, black in color just like you see in the movies.

“I’m the man in my city ain’t nobody fuckin’ with me, you can ask the real niggas and all the bad bitches. I’m a known drug deala’ I always had fifties and the thugs and the killas was all in class with me.”

-T.I.

Presently, Tim and Sean are both sitting on death row. They are behind bars, dead in most ways with the exception of their beating hearts. They left us that same April, of 2006. On Thursday, September 7, 2006, they appeared in court for the second time, prior to which papers were filed requesting the death penalty as punishment for their crime. A man - a brother, a son, a father - is dead, and one or both of them is at fault.
It seems an immense and convoluted sequence of events led to this, but in actuality very few terrible decisions claimed my brothers. We were related not by blood, but by landscape. The overwhelming part of a life that is spent in high school forced us to cling to one another and we were blessed to share a past and a present, but no longer a future. In the urban culture of the south, it is a status symbol to evade the law and taunt the police. In youth, there is little here that is off limits. We take our cues from the rappers that grew up in the places we live. It seems Tim and Sean were the hustlers and became the killers immortalized and glorified in the lyrics that so harshly came to characterize our group, our actions and our lives.

When you think of a murderer what do you see? When you imagine the man’s character as they flash mug shots across the evening news, do you not automatically assume these people are the scum of humanity? Their faces are distorted, with dreadful features; they are men with black souls, cold hearts and no conscience. They often look dirty and strung out, people I see everyday in my city. But the boys I spent my days with weren’t these men. They were good looking boys, with square jaws, muscular bodies and piercing eyes. They were kind to me. They drove me places and opened doors when we got there. Sean held my hand and Tim protected me like an older brother. My relationships with them will stand as open wounds forever, because I will never have them back.

Sean and I hated each other for a long time. We never got along for some reason. But it seems after being trapped in the same confined areas with each other so many times, we gave up our anger in favor of playful flirting. I suppose it was a virtue of sharing the same interests, of seeing someone’s face over and over. Considering I don’t date and he was not one to be put on a leash, it was never more than silly back and forth teasing between the two of us. It was never more than a few intimate encounters. He was close to my heart from the beginning, though, perhaps because he was beautiful. Perhaps because of his square jaw line and piercing eyes, I
remain obsessed. Or it may have been that he was an utterly compelling human being and like no one you will ever meet. He had this power to make you believe with your whole self in anything he wanted. To this day I pride myself on our private relationship despite what has happened. Our intimacy seemed to become very intense when were at the beach, and despite his reputation and my aversion, I convinced myself something would come of it.

We share the same seats on the way home from the beach. I ride in the middle, between Sean and Tim, with my head pressed against Sean’s shoulder. His thick fingers are intertwined with mine and he runs his thumb up and down the outside of my hand. The smoke curls itself around our figures as it had done the entire week, in the hotel rooms and now, in the truck. I shudder as I swallow too much liquor, and momentarily realize that the entire vehicle reeks of whiskey; I reek of Marlboro Menthols and pot.

Everything is hazy. I think, “As long as the driver isn’t drunk, we can be, right?”

Tim leans in close to whisper in my ear, his breath overpowering with Jack Daniels, “You don’t wanna do that.”

He eyes Sean like the plague. I smile drowsily, but am cut off in response as Young Jeezy growls through the stereo, “I’m not just stuntin the vodka done it, this how a alcoholic act when he got lots of money (holla) I started drinkin at the age of 12, in the club hollerin I’m rich...” The boys get so loud as they scream in agreement that I can’t get in a single word. I just close my eyes and pull myself in closer to Sean.

Tim’s relationship with me was never a romantic one. He was like my second brother. Knowing him since the first grade, I remember even as youngsters he was my brother in every conceivable way, up until the DNA disproved us; he picked on me just like my brother, he came
to my birthday parties, he answered my questions about life and love and sex and I never doubted his knowledge. As we got older, he never missed a beat when I did something my boys deemed unacceptable, and he was always the first to lay into me.

These wouldn’t be traditional rules I was breaking, though. It was desirable that I fit into the category of the “bad bitch,” the girl all the gangsters want in their immediate vicinity. I was to be sought after sexually, but not to be sexual; I was to handle the drinking and the drugs but not get lost in it and turn into a strung out little girl. He saw to it that I was the image but not the real thing, allowing me to be a prized part of the group, but still a good girl in their eyes. Perhaps if I had done a better job of scolding and looking out for him he would still simply be the image of “hard” and not the real thing.

The fate of my sweet boys leads me to believe that we are not invincible because we are young, an idea I would have once backed with certainty. We think ourselves untouchable only because we have not been slapped by the hand of experience yet. If we would only look hard enough, it seems the ability to use youth as a shield against hurt and anguish can easily be shown ineffective by the countless examples of the young who refuse to learn from their mistakes.

During the summer before our senior year of high school, about eight months before our beach trip, Sean was in a violent car wreck. There was nothing left of the car but smoking pieces of rubber and charred metal on the side of the road. He was with a guy named Andrew, who was not part of our immediate clique, but still resided somewhere in the peripheral vision of our social sight. Andrew was the one driving that evening, toting two minds that were blank with chemicals. This allowed for both parties to be spared the entire episode, a horrific collision of metal and crushing of skin. Andrew was in a coma with two broken legs for only a few days before he died. This tragedy is not to be blamed on the drugs; it is not fair to say simply that the
drugs were at fault. They are part of everyone’s youth and the fact of the matter is that we lost someone close to us, and nothing changed. We still lived dangerously. It was unnecessary and we did not think a thing of it.

We would wake up in the mornings that followed to tell each other about the strangest dream we just had, how there is a horrible car wreck in the dream and Andrew dies, only to be jolted back to reality. It is the unconscious exercise of the psyche to rewind time to before the unspeakable has happened, in dreams and thoughts. Tim and Sean are in my dreams all the time. Acceptance is a long journey.

Sean came out of the accident relatively unscathed, with deep gashes on his hands that would turn into mean looking scars. But he would be much quieter after this incident, and you could see in his eyes that the damage went deeper than his flesh. We attended the funeral three weeks before school started; we sobbed, we spent weeks mourning, we reflected. But after this procession of sadness through our present, we went back to life exactly as it was, without any more precaution than before. We have taught ourselves to look past our wrongs in favor of instant gratification and the comfort of acceptance in delinquency. Our inability to learn from bad decisions and our rejection of change seems to me a product of the culture in which we were raised, one of ever growing popularity.

The ghettos of the south are unlike the unforgiving concrete of the city ghettos. They are surrounded by the green lawns of the suburban middle class, the military men, the tire plant workers, the truck drivers. We come from this mundane and well-provided- for landscape. We don’t do hard drugs to escape the painful circumstance of our lives; we do not sell drugs because we need to make money. We hustle and use to boost our egos and alleviate boredom. Cocaine use is an unnatural rebellion against authority. It is played out by the boys I know in response to repression by the people who are terrified of our culture. This is a terror that is
rightly felt and expressed, I must note. But when Rick Ross says he’d kill a nigga for a dime, and
that most of his “niggas still deal cocaine,” and Field Mob screams “I’m the man...got no white
but the white be my girlfriend,” the idea of hustling and using becomes glamorous and the evil
fades into background, lost in the beat. The city where we live, our culture, and our family of
friends within these larger spheres are based increasingly on the desire to play out our lives like
Tony Montana. We have attempted to force this fictitious movie-scape into a reality, where
drugs are the easiest avenue toward money and money allots you power, the most sacred of
possessions. It is my belief that, to this end, Sean and Tim began to chop cars.

The music that beat through our speakers spoke to no end of the ways one makes
money in our urban south. Cars with candy paint and peanut butter leather are worth more
than lives here. This operation of stealing cars and selling the parts is never one begun on a
small scale, nor does it end on one. Protective as they were of the girls in their lives, I didn’t
know what was going on until the night after the arrests. It was over and it was too late to
reprimand.

It’s late October and Tim picks me up from my house around ten. I told my parents one
lie or another so I could stay out that night, and Tim and I go on our way. We drive from one
house to the next, slapping hands and drinking vodka, and I end up slouched in the front seat of
his Eclipse before we get to the Waffle House at about four in the morning. Tim explains the
specifics of the day they got caught, as I squint at him through one eye. I’m drinking my coffee
black and I seem to slosh it over the side of the cup every time he raises his voice. I push smoke
through my nostrils and listen to the red vinyl of the booth squeal as he gestures.
Skipping school, as was common for them, Tim and Sean began ripping at steel and speakers, cutting wires and sawing off doors. They were interrupted soon enough by the flashing of blue and red lights. They had been rattled out by a friend. It is the curse of a guilty lifestyle that trust is found in people few and far between. Court dates came and went and it was believed they would be charged. The most severe sentence they would have to serve would be a maximum of twenty-seven years. I remember this threat of jail time was the most concrete reason I was given when Sean and Tim told me they wanted to leave home and not come back. With little evidence to incriminate them, though, they would never have had to serve time at all. None of us were aware they would go unpunished until our best friends were too far gone to get back.

It seems that I unconsciously condoned these events, knowing that these boys were committing severe wrongs but unable to find fault in them. I let the events roll off me, hearing much worse in the music that constantly surrounded us, not allowing myself to think of the people on the other side of these events; how their lives were painfully changed and how much they had to suffer for the status and gain of my friends. They were so good to me and I loved them too much. My vision was clouded when an outside perspective would see need to immediately take action.

Our goodbye came without much warning. We planned our a spring break beach trip lazily, not knowing what hotel we would stay in or for how long, just that the seven of us were going to see the ocean. We left the Friday we got out of school, April 8th, 2006. I found out this vacation would be our last together as a band of brothers a day before we left. But maybe it was two days, maybe three? Instead of 20/20, my vision seems to blur the events together in hindsight, so I won’t have to blame myself for inaction.
It is the first Wednesday in April. My brother yanks me into the kitchen, away from the TV where I’m zoned out. Our parents, dozing off, now seem a bit startled.

“You’re not supposed to know this and if anyone finds out before we leave I’ll kick your ass.”

“Huh?”

I have no idea what’s going on, and I feel my mom resisting the urge to come see for herself. My twin must sense this too because he talks fast.

“Sean and Tim aren’t coming home. They are still going with us, but when it’s time to leave they’re gonna stay.”

His eyes get really serious and he looks at the ground. His features display a look of loss I had never seen on his face before and haven’t seen since. It was like he knew what was coming next. I followed him around spouting questions for what seemed like hours after he said this, only to have his bedroom door shut in my face.

We have learned in our society to see males as nearly emotionless. In the culture of killers and drug hustlers, filled with boys who pretend not to give a shit about anything, there are no tears and no goodbyes; there is merely acceptance and respect for those who are strong. Tim and Sean did come back with us, but left directly afterward. The last time I saw them in person was at a car wash on a street corner where we sat often. It seems like I cried everyday for weeks afterward. And it was tolerated because I was a “female,” but I felt like a little girl. I have seen the boys cry since we got the news. In private, when it is just me and one of them, talking. Never, not once did the boys cry openly with me, though, no matter how overwhelming their pain.
We are all gathered at Cory’s house with our liquor and our smoke, dulling our pain; we are all in mourning even though we don’t know it yet. Lauren, Tim’s girlfriend, is sitting Indian style in the driveway with me. It is May 5, 2006. The rain is coming down so hard it stings when it smacks our skin. The house seems oppressive somehow; too small to contain all our emotions in the wake of what is happening. We pass a bottle of rum between the two of us, the tears and rain running together down our faces, silently forming streams. Suddenly her face becomes very still and she looks through the wet strands of her hair into my eyes.

“What if they never come home...what if this is it?”

She puts her head in my lap and sobs. I take a swig from the bottle and gently set it on the concrete, lighting a cigarette. I run my hand through her hair, just like Sean ran his fingers through mine on our way to the beach. I begin to feel overwhelmingly guilty. Couldn’t I have done more to stop them?

Their arrests came later in May, the May after the beach trip, the same May we would have all graduated together. The news that there had been a murder came only days after this. The boys and I knew this must be another rumor, another ridiculous theory among many. We were not even remotely concerned that it could be true. When it turned out to be just that, it seems to me everything got very quiet. We would go to the same places and do the same things, but for some reason we could think of nothing to say to one another; the current events played themselves in our heads over and over. We tried to move past it; I tried to stop my tears. But we couldn’t help but ask ourselves, how is it that someone you spend every day with could be a monster? How can someone you love be capable of anything so horrific? The most frightening part of these events is that the silly delinquency of childhood can turn into something far more consequential than dropping out of school or drug use. Our mischief can be deadly, a very real
result of this sequence of events. All the signs were there, yet we refused to see the red flags; we refused to do anything about them. Even after their arrests for the stealing of cars, our parents continued to condone our spending time with them. We were smarter than to steal cars, right? But of course, so were they.

The article is laying on the kitchen counter, the faces in the mug shots glaring up at me while I am still rubbing the sleep out of my eyes.

“Two Fayetteville Teens Charged In Texas Man’s Shooting Death.”

It makes me physically sick; my bare feet hit the floor hard and I throw the door to the bathroom open as fast as I can. Somehow I make it up the stairs to my room and I am putting my clothes on in a trance; my mind is blank. Suddenly I am in the truck with Nate, suddenly I can’t smoke enough cigarettes. We are going somewhere, somewhere where Cory is, where Brett is, we are going somewhere really fast. I am asking Nate to turn off the music; it seems everything that is being voiced through the speakers is acceptance of violent death, of murder, of unnecessary grief. Have these songs always sounded like this?

“These streets, they’ll swallow you whole, mind, body and soul, leave you in ditch cold with no shoes and clothes...I seen a man cut with a dirty bottle, blood squirted on his shirt and collar. I heard him holla a sound I can’t forget. Ran home, watched cartoons and ain’t said shit.”

-Lil’ Scrappy

I need absolution, I need closure. And I know I will never have it. There is a guilt that will never leave me over what has happened. Sean and Tim were so close to me and now there are no more beach trips or parties or talks, there are only memories. They were
with me right before they left; I feel like I had the power to prevent the whole tragedy and I just let them walk away from me, willingly. My boys will be eighteen for the rest of their lives, trapped in this moment while the world moves on without them; they no longer have the chance to grow up. But a part of all of us will be eighteen forever too. Part of us will never get over it, no matter how old we get.

The absence of my friends follows me wherever I go, and there is not an hour that passes that I do not think about what has happened, what is still happening; not an hour goes by that I do not think about what will happen to my boys. The whole thing has yet to become an event that I can look back on in order to reflect and understand. They are still my friends; I still love them very much. I do not know the people who did this. They are not who I spent high school with; they are not who I went to prom with; the boys that committed this murder are sadistic and cowardly and they deserve punishment for their wrongs. The boys I love deserve to come home; we miss them more than it is possible to explain. Their absence haunts all of us, every moment of everyday.

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“Kings Fallen” by Megan Brannum received an Honorable Mention in the University of Pittsburgh’s 2006-07 Composition Program Writing Contest

Judges’ Commentary on “Kings Fallen: A Story of Lost Boys”