William Bowman

“Cool Kids”

April 28, 2014

**Cool Kids**

1.

Thomas Crane’s suicide was on the news again.

 Deryl Lewis’ deep news-anchor voice buzzed across the room. The atmosphere was almost holy: no one spoke too loud for fear of blaspheming the shrine of all things manly that was the Kaleidoscopes pool hall. Dozens of low voices like whispers in a church. Cracks of numbered balls like tinder strikes. Cigar smoke like incense, and lights like upside down wine glasses burning cones into the gray. Shrines of baseball figurines, stain-glass LED blinking beer signs. And above it all, the constant hum of the old CRT, an old disgusting thing well in keeping with the dilapidated room. Why did I come here again? I hated manly things. It was so ugly, course, and I certainly didn’t want lung cancer. But this is where David liked to hang out. We always hung out where David wanted. So, there we were, David, Phil, Ronnie, and Will, on hiatus from our game, inhaling our deaths, staring at the old television screen watching Lewis treble on about Crane and the recent West Valley bullying horror that was Thomas Crane’s suicide.

 As we watched, Thomas’s picture flashed up on the screen. In it, a soft, skinny boy with tawny hair combed across his forehead like a slash mark. Smiling, he looked about as harmless as a golden locket, like you could open his heart and assuredly find something beautiful and pure. The 15-year-old sophomore had been a cheerleader and, quote-unquote, filled the room with fresh air when he walked in. Openly gay, he’d been bullied and, as a result, had committed suicide, hanging himself from the football stadium rafters. His picture flashed away, and was replaced by an interview with his father. “Not doing anything is not acceptable,” he said. “Those who stand by and do nothing are just as guilty.” I felt a heavy sinking in my gut, like someone had just poured all 15 balls into my stomach and stuffed them down with a cue. I turned away, leaned over the table, and shot my next turn.

 “You know what I think,” said David, angrily wringing his stick like a wet towel. “I think we should ostracize every one of those fuckers, those gay-haters, those ‘cool kids’. I’m serious. Every last one, every person in this town make those monsters feel so unwelcome they just up and leave, get the fuck out of Dodge.”

 I looked at David. Like the good liberal that he was, David hated every hater. The ringleader of our crew, our own “cool kid,” he vehemently hated every gay-hater, woman-hater, Jew-hater, and every other bigot known to mankind. And it seemed, in my experience, that everyone around him tended to agree. Anyone who disagreed deserved the noose too, in David’s mind. In keeping with this, Ronnie and Phil nodded in collusion, then looked to me for my take. I looked at David. On the outside, his eyes were confident, sure of my coming affirmation. Outside, his eyes said he knew what I’d say, but didn’t give a damn even if I disagreed. But deep down, there it was, that thing I knew from past experience. That need, like two folded, begging hands, the need to be loved and accepted, a universal pull, cosmopolitan to all mankind. I looked away, back up to the screen, where Joe Crane’s comment had sparked a discussion on those who stand by and don’t speak out against acts of bullying, his son’s picture still hovering over Lewis’ shoulder, every word he said ripping like a cue into the green table-felt of my heart.

2.

The first time I wanted to be a cool kid was the first time they beat the shit out of me with sticks and stones. Not physical ones, mind you, the bell literally saved me from that. But looking back, I think words leave bigger, more longevinous scars than fists.

 That day, deep in the wooded area behind U-Park Elementary school, the area none of us were supposed to be in, Jake Jackson, Andrew Kramer, Dylan Posey, and Garret I-Don’t-Remember-His-Last-Name formed a square around me, hurling insult stobs and rocks, and hurling them hard. They called me Wilma, laughed at my then-long, greasy hair, my oatmeal-stained oversized sweatshirt I wore every day to class, hanging like a dress below my knees. I wore a hat, so I had hat hair, and the sweatshirt was the only one my mom had bought. It stank of sweat, a fact they made very well known.

 If these four had been a circus troupe, Jake would have been the lion tamer. Or no, the strongman. Muscled, powerfully built, even in sixth-grade he looked like the weightlifter he would someday become. His dad was a personal trainer, and his older brother played football for West Valley High. It looked like his brother had been slipping his extra post-lift protein into Jake’s Moo-Moo milk boxes. Jake had a sly, sarcastic smile, and his manly chortle was small-town hick mixed with thunder: a bass-heavy *huh huh huhuhuh*. He was witty, suave, ironic, confident. Everyone idolized him and he knew it too. My whole life I’d been told I needed to boost my self-confidence. If I just had more confidence, people said, my life would improve. Maybe I should have taken a lesson in self-confidence from Jake and practiced it on those a bit too scrawny and twig-like to fit in their football pads, like me. Maybe I should have joined them, become a Garret, Andrew, or Dylan, a cool kid, even if only by affirmation and proxy. But how could I even think that way? Why would I ever subject another kid to the derision and agony I myself suffered daily? No, I’d never. Couldn’t ever. Wouldn’t ever.

 Past the woods, a Chihuahua yapped. I widened my stance in preparation for what I knew this pre-pounding foreplay lead to: eight fists and me, dusty and bruised-up like an apple dropped too many times. I’d heard of it happening to other students. They never left visible bruises. I circled like a cornered jaguar—well, more like a cornered pussycat—preparing for their advance. They laughed, I breathed. A woodpecker shot a machine gun burst and then

 Ding.

 The duties growled like sheepdogs across the playground, through the soccer field, and into the woods, rounding up all the lost sheep reticent to return to class. The wolves too.

 On the way in, Jake and his group joined the growing crowd of students at the door. They posted near Vivian Bishop and Annie Bender, two sixth-grade svelts hot as mid-May recess sun with hair black as asphalt after rain. I was wrong. Deep down, I did want to be one of the guys. It was at that moment I first learned to idolize my oppressor. It was at that moment I first wanted to be one of the cool kids.

3.

The pocket knife pressed into my lower back, and Riley Jewkes hissed “I’ll fucking kill you, boy!” The locker room stank sour dank of sweat; dongs of various sizes bounced and flapped like flaccid windsocks as groups of my teammates swapped in and out for their post-practice shower. *Line change!* they screamed then whipped the asses of the oncoming sweat-caked crew with wet towels. Across the room, the knife point pressed firmly, never breaking skin. I arched my stomach forward like an early morning stretch to escape the sting.

Riley wouldn’t have killed me. His sarcastic voice inflections and the deep laughs of my teammates echoing through the room told me that. But with a knife in your back, logic doesn’t cut it. As Jake held the knife to my back, sweat soaked my forehead, dripped down onto my chest, and my heart beat harder than body checks.

 Many bullying victims simply switch schools or quit their sports. 1 in 10 in fact, and nearly 30% of LGBTQ bullying victims. Others commit suicide, or “bullycide” as some call it. Others fight back, standing up to their oppressors, in the process either eliminating the problem or getting the shit beat out of them by the school patriarchs and their admirer passels.

But me? I’ve always been feminine. I like poetry. I carry a man purse and came out of the pantry last year as a vegetarian. I hate watching sports, period, even though I played them growing up. All kinds of beer revolt me, in smell and idea, and I’ll punch next dude I hear say “come at me bro” in their subjectively large testicles. No I won’t because I’m a pacifist. But still, you get the point.

Now, call me feminine, but about this time, instead of swapping schools or committing suicide, I began desperately trying to win the favor of my oppressors. I remember UAF Nanook hockey games where, instead of hanging with those teammates like Shawn Sylvester or Wyatt Studsky, teammates who would have willingly been my friends, I followed Riley’s loud crew like a pathetic golden retriever around the rink, laughing at libidinous jokes, grazing hot dogs and nachos at every Nanook Snack Shack and taking the brunt of each joke they burped in my direction, laughing them off like the good-natured chum I was.

 One practice, Riley skated c’s down the side of the rink and snapped a 60 mph wrist shot at my net. I lunged. The small, furious piece of rubber passed my helmet and crushed into my exposed adam’s apple. My trachea clenched shut, and I couldn’t breathe. I skated off the rink, I cried, gasping for help and simultaneously trying to calm myself so my throat would slowly expand to its proper circumference. It did, eventually, but it left my voice with a hoarse ring for several days. After practice, Riley ripped loose a Velcro strap, looked up, and laughed, “You sound like a bitch, Blowman.” I hated him. How could someone be so inhuman and cruel? I’d never done anything to him or the others around that laughed as he called me a bitch and told me to suck it up. They weren’t people, but rather sycophantic enablers, assholes. I truly hated them for laughing at me, but I hated myself more for taking it. Instead of saying anything, I smiled and laughed. I did kinda sound like a bitch.

4.

In 9th grade, the cool kids donned +5 plate mail, dual-wielded swords, and rode out onto World of Warcraft battlefields and raid instances. By this point, I’d become socially adroit enough that the direct bullying I endured had lessened. Aside from the occasional jokes about my femininity, my cool-kid idols had largely shifted their target attacks to others. However, my desire for acceptance and people-pleasing had become second nature. Any person with the perceived “cool” factor and the subsequent subconscious power-hold over me was a possible target for my desperate desire to fit in.

Derek Gallagher, a black-haired, five-foot-two Mexican jukebox of car facts, Warcraft statistics, and sexual jokes, became my new cool-kid idol. Loud and ostentatious, he was the center of attention at the lunch table, but still he tolerated my greasy-haired, wannabe gamer ass tagging along to his digs. Many evenings after school we’d hop into his ‘89 Honda, turn the key, feel the twin tailpipes rumble and buzz like an oversized RC car, crank Dubstep bass to +8, and drift our way on the Alaskan roads to his mom’s house where our guild would assemble for WOW LAN nights.

 Derek played a level 60 gnome warrior named Debalzorz, a child-sized character who equipped twin diminutive daggers and plate six sizes too big for his small frame. Derek said he chose a gnome to reflect his out-of-game self--small, but would fuck-you-up nonetheless--and also so he could more accessibly castrate those he dueled in game. I played Casimir, a level 57 healing-specialization paladin who wore heavy plate and carried a mallet like a mailbox.

 In 2010, 2.7 million kids were bullied by 2.1 million cyberbullies. Near one for one, near half victimizers half victims. How could it have grown so even? The anonymity afforded by the web, I think, makes it possible for pretty much *anyone* to a bully, miles of fiber-optic cable and thousands of HP points beefing up the defenses and confidence of those who, in real life, are otherwise be far too weak and cowardly to warrant any power over those around them. People like me. Many of those LAN nights, I’d follow Derek around the battlefield as he filled the dialogue box with “I’ll fuck your motherz!” or “Pwned you, bitch” or “Want to taste my broadsword, girlie?” and heal him as he went. One time, he followed some poor level 58 mage from spawn point to spawn point, killing him repeatedly, lambasting him with insults the entire time. The level differential made self-defense futile, not to mention that I tagged along with Derek the entire time in his quest to add +10 this user’s misery points. Today I wonder, did I then realize what I was akin to? Was I aware of what I helped Derek to do? What was I becoming? Are bullies, tyrants, or their sycophants *ever* self-aware of the harm and pain they cause?

Eventually, the mage left the battlefield. Derek’s high tones buzzed over the headset, “Fucking twat, man. Healz please.” And I healed him, again and again and again, until the small blue orb was empty, and all my mana was spent.

5.

Film sets, like hockey locker rooms, are loci for sex jokes and sweat. Think about it: big, manly, iridescent lights, pricy electronics, beefy machinery, high-stress days, long nights, near-daily overtime pay, month-long shoots with margarita shots, and late-night bar sessions with the fellow crew. What more attractive career for sarcastic, witty, hyper-masculine dudes looking to make a quick buck from blue-collar work?

 Nathan Trepp was a grip, hairy as a bear and loud as an babboon (though, we all saw his ass enough times when he mooned the camera to be sure it wasn’t pink and he’d evolved at least a bit). He was obnoxious and crude, and looked like a bodybuilder who’d poured latex all over his abs, his gut drooping down into a layer of saggy, lumpy flesh: the result of too much beer and too many peanut M&Ms. And how did we know what he looked like under his shirt? Trepp had a habit of ripping it off, exposing his chest of hairs like little black pigtails. That and dropping his pants when only guys were around, touching his equally hairy testicles to the pristine steel of the $50,000 RED Scarlet camera lens. Kevin, our director, would be pissed, a fact in which Trepp reveled. Everyone ate it up, including myself. At least externally. He was the cool kid on set, and, even though deep down I thought him the most insensitive ape this side of Hollywood boulevard, I laughed at his stupid jokes. By this time, I’d begun to become conscious of my own people-pleasing. My inability to change my acts for fear of rejection caused me excruciating pain. Every time we sat around craft services, I laughed and chuckled at Trepp’s sarcastic, derisive, racist, sexist, anti-Jew, anti-Mormon, anti-pretty-much-anybody jokes along with the rest of them, stuffed my face with profuse cookies, and stewed in my self-hatred for my inability to escape my desperate need to be accepted. I wanted to be wanted. Who doesn’t? And I was willing to compromise myself to achieve it. And how many of the other crew were like me? Internally, knowing what we were doing was wrong and hurtful, but, desperate for acceptance, laughing and putting on the face of collusion for the sake of being one of the boys? Deep down, we all want to be loved and accepted, and we’ll smile at Satan’s jokes if he’ll pat us on the back and say, “You’re one hell of a guy.”

 But Nathan Trepp taught me something about the cool kids. Trepp had a girlfriend named Krista. Together, they lived in a small flat off Fairbanks Street. Lithe and fierce, the girl was a preying mantis. Despite her seeming domesticity, her hobby of sitting in front of the telly and crocheting dozens of circular coffee coasters with stick-figure moms, dads, and siblings holding hands, when she got pissed off she’d eat Trepp alive. If he said something wrong, first came the coasters and sewing box at his head. Then various furniture: a lamp, a cigarette tray, a picture frame with Van Gogh’s *Starry Night*. Then the pots and pans. I’d witnessed several of these spates during my week-long stay in their home. One night when Krista got pissed, Trepp and I migrated across the street to JSD’s bar where he ordered Alaskan Amber after Alaskan Amber and vodka shots and guffed about his black-powder gun and what he’d do with it someday to that girl back in their flat. I only half took him seriously. *You’re drunk,* I chuckled, but deep down I wanted to tell him he needed help. But I didn’t. I laughed, and I said she’d get what she deserved, eventually. Leaning in, he slurred that I was his best friend and that he really meant it. I knew he was drunk, but still, it felt… good. Like my words of affirmation mattered to someone, and that my affirmation could have that kind of an effect on his self-confidence and, simultaneously, on my own. As he talked, I felt the sting of a tear in my eye, but maybe it was just the vodka in his breath.

One afternoon we were shooting a scene in the UAF Reading Room in Pierce Community Center. Despite the character with a foot fetish in the scene, prime material for crude commentary and jokes, set had been surprisingly professional and levelheaded, bereft of sexual jokes and sarcastic remarks all morning. Trepp was late to set. Trepp was never late to set.

 We’d just broke for ten, sitting around the craft services table drowning our boredom and dissatisfaction in caffeine and peanut butter on cheapo wonderbread, when Trepp walked up the stairs. Disheveled and depressed, he silently trudged to craft services, slouched forward, posting himself on the table with one arm, and pouring himself a heavy cup of black with the other. His half-abs, half-fat gut slouched out over his belt under his shirt like a lolling tongue.

 “You look like shit, man,” said Adam, the 225 pound walking Mexican muscle, another grip.

 “Fight with the old lady,” Trepp replied, dumping sugar into his coffee like sand spilling from an hourglass.

 “Shit, man. Senorita's crazy, yeah yeah.”

A small, cinnabar scar split just above Trepp’s eyebrow. It looked recent, and was poorly dressed like he’d done it on the run. A light black powder speckled his hand; I saw it as he sipped from his mug.

 “Yeah, fuck her, just a bitch. She’s over it, now.” He sat in a chair and slumped into silence, sipped from his coffee and stared down at his feet. None of us spoke. The clock ticked, and the camera’s auto-shutdown beeped as it slipped into sleep-mode. Eventually most of the crew rose and walked back on-set. I lingered for a minute, fiddling with some peccadillo on the camera. Looking over my shoulder, I saw Trepp, still there, slumped in his chair, stuffing cookie after cookie whole between his lips like coins into a parking meter until the two-dozen box was empty, his cool factor spilled over his chest like little crumbs. For all his bluster and laugh, Trepp was just as self-loathing and pathetically starved for affection as the rest of us, just as oppressed and beaten down. He wanted to be wanted, affirmed, just like the rest of us, not a cool kid, not an asshole, but indisputably and terribly human.

After we broke, Trepp didn’t return to set for three days. On the forth, we learned he’d been arrested for shooting Krista in the stomach. She lived, but the child didn’t. Trepp went away for murder. Krista’s parents wanted the death penalty, though in the end he only got 45 in max-security.

In the next weeks, Trepp’s face was used as a poster for a campaign against domestic abuse in the local Fairbanks community. In the photograph they used of him, shirtless, he scowled at the camera and flexed his biceps like small hills. The word *Monster* was plastered in large red letters beneath the picture. Hundreds of people attended the rallies. I was one of them. But today I wonder, if they’d included a picture of him as I’d seen him that last day, would the campaign would have had the same affect? A picture of Trepp as human, utterly miserable and dejected, as lonely and isolated as the rest of us, despite his sycophants’ adoration, including my own, taking out his frustrations violently on his fiancée and child. Was Trepp any more of a monster than I was? I imagined my own face up on the billboard, grinning sardonically and confidently, the face of someone who looked accepted, loved, and centered as a result of rejecting, abjecting, and deriding others, or, at least, standing by while someone else did. The face of a cool kid. I imagined Garrot’s face. Andrew’s face. The face of my fellow hockey players. All of us who equally deserved the title of *Monster* and equally deserved to have a 10x12 picture pulled from Facebook plastered all over the small community, not a human any more but a caricature for everything that is evil and cruel in the world.

1.

“You know what I think,” said David, “I think we should ostracize every one of those fuckers, those gay-haters, those “cool kids.” I’m serious. Every last one, every person in this town make those monsters feel so unwelcome they just up and leave, get the fuck out of Dodge.” I looked down from the television. Ronnie and Phil nodded in collusion, then looked to me for my take. I looked back up at the television. Joe Crane’s comments had sparked a dialogue about those who stand by and don’t speak out, Thomas Crane’s picture still hovering over Lewis’ shoulder. Deep down I knew. I wanted to tell David I thought he was wrong. I wanted to tell him, though the bullies *did* need to be punished, that in ostracizing them we *became* the bullies, committed an act of bullying equal to theirs, and that evil toward never absolved evil from. I wanted to tell him I wouldn’t be a bully. Again. I would tell him. I would tell him I wouldn’t be a bully. I looked down, prepared to say it, and looked at him. There it was. I felt it. That thing I knew from past experience. My need, like two folded, begging hands, my need to be loved and accepted, a universal pull, cosmopolitan to all mankind. All I wanted was to be part of the crew. But I needed to speak my mind, whatever he thought of me. But to be loved.... Was it even real love if it wasn’t really me? In that moment, six eyes stared at me, Joe Crane’s voice hovered like smoke, and the clack of balls on balls like little gavels, all around. Leaning against the table, I closed my eyes, opened my mouth and said,

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