

## A Pretty Short Story

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It was always Jeff and him. That's the way it was for years. All through grade school, and now high school, they were a team, always side by side.

Late one night, Tony was in bed, thinking about things, but mostly about Jeff. He thought a lot about him, Jeff was the only real friend he had. While reliving some of the times they had, Tony is reminded of the time he first met Jeff. It was quite a while ago, at least seven or eight years. Eight years to a 16 year-old is a pretty long time.

Tony's mother had spoken about their new neighbors, and about how they looked to be quite wealthy, but never had she mentioned any kids. But one evening, after dinner, Tony walked out in the yard, and there he was, skateboarding on his driveway. He had obviously picked Tony's driveway because it was the flattest and biggest cement drive on the block, and Jeff's drive was not yet poured. Tony, being jealous because he didn't own a skateboard, told Jeff to move on. When Jeff said he wouldn't, Tony ran up to and shoved him, sending Jeff to the ground and his skateboard zooming out into the street. They wrestled a while and eventually Tony wound up on top, being the bigger of the two. He sat on Jeff, holding his arm, twisted behind his back.

Jeff's older brother, Steve, had watched this scene take place from across the street and ran over to pull Tony off of his brother. Steve made the two make up and shake hands, an idea which didn't sound too bad to Tony, since he had come out on top in the scuffle and he kind of liked the idea of trying out that skateboard of his. From that point on,

Tony couldn't remember fighting one time with Jeff.

They really were best friends. Tony always hung close to Jeff because he didn't have any other good friends. He was a tough kid to get along with, and most kids just left him alone. Jeff was always by Tony's side because he felt protected with him. Tony was a big kid and Jeff had a mouth that got him into trouble a lot.

Jeff was a real bright kid. In fact, he was the smartest boy that Tony had ever met. Jeff would constantly make up these crazy little games, like; who could guess the amount on a grocery receipt, or who could guess how many cars they'd pass on the way to school. And, Jeff would always win.

Tony thought a lot about his best friend that night, it was getting late, he couldn't sleep. He remembered some of the crazy things Jeff would talk him into doing, and how he would always follow right along. He thought of the time Jeff rode his bike down the stairs at the library and fell off, almost breaking his neck. And Tony had to try the same thing, just because Jeff told him it was fun. Jeff had lied, but Tony loved him that much.

The two boys shared everything. They even cut their hands with knives and went through some blood brother ritual Jeff had read about in a Mark Twain book. The thought seemed a bit corny to Tony, as he thought back on it now, but it was something they both shared, something sacred to Tony.

At 11:30, Tony was still in bed, too wired to sleep, but too drunk to join his mother in the other room, who was watching some late night movie. Tony had been drinking that evening, it was Jeff's birthday. Jeff's older brother had bought them a lot of beer. So, they drank a lot of beer.

Coming home drunk and fooling his mother was never too hard to pull off. In fact, Tony was tempted to go



into the next room and watch a little T.V. right next to his mother. You see, Tony was a little young to even be suspected, being only 16, and besides, that movie was sounding kind of interesting to him. He had been listening to it for several minutes, trying to picture what the actors looked like. It sounded a little corny, but still he was dying to get up and watch it.

It was about a fighter pilot in the war, whose wife kept falling apart every time he'd leave her, even if he was only going next door or something. Even the title was corny. After a commercial break, Tony thought he heard them say, "now back to 'Don't Miss Me Till I'm Gone'." A corny title for a corny movie, he thought. And he was just getting out of bed to watch it when the telephone rang.

Tony heard his mother talk clearly in the next room. He knew that it was Jeff's mother on the phone. He knew that Jeff was in some kind of trouble, and by the tone of his mother's voice, so was he. All of a sudden, he felt like he had to throw up. He would've too, if his mother hadn't walked in.

"Tony, are you awake?"

"Yes."

"Tony, do you know where Jeff could be, I thought he was with you tonight?"

"He was. Maybe he's over at Steve's." Jeff had driven to his brother's so that he wouldn't have to face his parents in the condition he was in.

Tony wanted badly to throw up now, but he couldn't. Jeff had just turned 16 that day, Tony knew he shouldn't have let him drive to Steve's. He waited all night for the phone to ring again. It never did.

He and Jeff used to play this game. They'd hear a siren in the distance, then have to guess whether it was a cop car or an ambulance, before it turned the corner and came

into sight. Jeff would always win. He always knew.

At 3:30 in the morning, Tony finally heard it. And not even Jeff could beat him that night.

The sun was bright the next morning. Too bright, thought Tony, on his way to the hospital. He hoped that Jeff couldn't see how sunny it was that day—he couldn't. Jeff's room had windows on two sides. The sun bounced off the walls like a goddamn prism, Tony thought. Why didn't they lower the blinds or something? Tony moved slowly to Jeff's bed like a fly across a window pane. Then he knew why.

He talked through the bandages for hours, thinking that Jeff could hear him, though the doctor told him over and over he couldn't. He told Jeff about how he fooled his mother again, and all about the movie he listened to the night before. Jeff made some noises now and then, and one time, just before he left, Tony almost understood something he mumbled.

Impossible, the doctor said. Too much brain damage.

But, on the way home, Tony knew what he said, or at least what he wanted him to say. And that was all it took.

He knew he could beat his parents home if he hurried. He rushed inside and right to the knife drawer. He didn't even think about what he was doing until it was over. But it didn't matter. He had to. Anyway, that's what the pilot's wife did when he crashed, Tony thought. I can't get showed up by some corny late show.

Tony wasn't much on making his own decisions. Jeff was always there to make them for him. This sure was a big one though, Tony thought. He didn't like it much either. He hoped that it would be his last one, also. He was beginning to feel depressed for the first time in his life. He couldn't believe that his entire life had boiled down to a friend and a stupid goddamn late show.

What a time for depression to hit, thought Tony.

Tony lay on the floor and bled. A lot. Starting to regret what he had done. And thinking. Thinking how lonely he would be without Jeff. How he and Jeff just had to be together. And then, he knew. He knew that Jeff didn't hear a word that he said to him in the hospital. He knew that Jeff didn't say anything to him.

"Don't miss me till I'm gone," Tony said with a smile. "Way, way too corny."

Tony was still conscious when the paramedics rushed in.

It's 4:20 and someone's playing the siren game. If only Jeff could hear, Tony thought, I just wish he could hear. I know he'd win.

Outside, the sun lit the white linen and bandages on fire. The chrome on the ambulance bumper reflected huge rays of light. One blinding ray found Tony's face, as the stretcher folded up and slid into the back. Tony kept his eyes open. He wanted to hold onto the pain, keep it forever. For now, he shared it with Jeff. And, like the day with the skateboard, that day would always be sacred to Tony.

4:20 in the goddamn afternoon and the sun was still bright as hell. Much too bright...

... That day was quite a while ago, 20 years is a long time to a 36 year-old. But, to Tony, it's not just a memory.

Tony went to visit Jeff today, again. He walks through the door now and greets his family, in his house. Tonight, Tony will leave his wife in bed alone for a minute, as he goes into the kitchen to stab himself to death, just like he does every night.