

Sticks and Stones

by Danny Mastrangelo

April 10th, 2007

Somewhere among the low rock of the canyon laid Brian McCastle. He was very much dead. So dead, in fact, that they had to bring his uncle in to identify the body. His head had been smashed like a Halloween pumpkin against the rocky ground, but with a little help from his dental records, all fears were confirmed. It was Brian; Brian was dead.

When he was alive, he had the body of a boy and both the powerful imagination and insatiable curiosity to match. For several years of his early life Brian read constantly. His persistent hobby had resulted in a massive amount of intelligence and bad case of nearsightedness. Because of this, Brian had always worn a large black pair of thick-lens glasses – until now.

His glasses were found some twenty feet away. They must have been thrown from his face when he fell. There was a small crack in the left lens where there had always been a scratch. The right lens was totally missing. Even though it was sure that they fell off of his face, he must have hit his head before they did at least once. There were spots of dried crimson on the black frames.

Brian's sister had found the glasses and pocketed them. For her, they weren't evidence. At least not the sort of evidence the police were interested in. They were evidence that her brother had once been alive; a person. He wasn't this empty shell of existence that was being zipped up in a bag like a roast beef sandwich.

Brian stood by a tree. He stared blankly at me. I had never seen him without his glasses; it was odd - his face seemed somehow naked. His eyes drew me closer to the scene.

The tree sat next to a pile of rocks which were sprayed with something that resembled Kool-aid. I tried to close my eyes, to shield myself from it all, but I couldn't; Brian's gaze wouldn't allow it.

Just then he opened his mouth and though not a sound was made, but I heard every word that he said: "Keith. I'm not in the woods."

And that was when I knew - Brian was dead.

My eyes opened slowly; I was shivering, both the rain outside the car, and the vision of Brian had left me cold. I wrapped my jacket around me a little tighter and blew hot breath into my hands. I winced at this – I desperately needed to find a toothbrush.

For a moment my eyes looked to the other seated passengers. Had they seen Brian too? I thought that maybe I should say something, ask something, but I decided not to. I kept my mouth closed. I was worried. It was Brian's choice of words; "I'm not in the woods."

I thought back to earlier that day, and the conversation I had with my friends. "I'm sure he's fine," I had said, "he's probably just lost in the woods. You know Brian." I shivered again and pushed the thought away for the moment. It would be another 24 hours before my vision became a reality.

The police had already been searching for two days. Everyone seemed to be worrying themselves to a point of insanity; everyone, but me, that is. I knew, or thought I knew, what had happened to Brian. "He's probably just lost in the woods." The words now echoed ominously in my mind. But then a message came in from the police. They had found Brian's car just outside the woods. Suddenly all of my hope rested on that small detail. It didn't last long.

On the next morning they found him. Brian's parents called my house; I was sleeping. Everyone had been staying with me and my older brother Dave. I woke to the sound of knocking and when I answered the door, Dave stood quietly on the other side.

He told me that the police had found Brian about an hour ago. I gave an involuntary inward sigh of relief. After all of my worrying, and three nights of tossing and turning, my fears were finally put to rest. They had found him. Brian was safe.

That was when Dave told me that the police found Brian at the base of Lamas Canyon. Brian was dead. The preliminary examinations said that his death was probably instant, but there was no way of knowing how long it took him to die.

Suddenly, the breath left my body, and I was paralyzed. Tears began to fall and a series of emotions began to wash over me - first sadness, then confusion and finally rage. It had not yet occurred to me that Brian's death was a real possibility. I had dreamed it, and dreams like that don't come true.

I was in shock. Downstairs I could hear a friend slamming his fists into a wall. We all felt the same way. Nothing made any sense – nothing but surrendering to our grief and allowing it to fully release.

I sat down on the floor, picked up a controller and began playing a videogame. I came to an area I knew to be filled with enemy soldiers. They never stopped coming. The program was designed to be perfect – a constant barrage of enemies, hesitate and you die.

I fired round after pixilated round into the polygonal enemy soldiers that came my way, but they just kept coming. They came down from the mountains and jumped out from behind the rocks. They threw grenades, or ran at me on kamikaze missions, but they kept coming. And they were going to pay. They were going to pay for Brian. Someone had to.

I never stopped firing. If there were no enemies around, I would shoot at whatever was behind the last soldier that I killed until a new one showed up.

And then it happened.

My radar went blank. A single green dot representing my character was all that was left. They enemies were gone.

It was impossible. It wasn't even fathomable. It was absurd.

It was true.

He was gone.