

I'd Rather Laugh with the Sinners

Josh Kim

Dingy - it's the only word I can think of to describe it. The walls look like they've never known a washcloth. Old Taco Bell cups left on the bookshelves for weeks at a time sit and serve as a reminder of weekend activities long gone. Workout equipment fills the far corner of the room: an Ab Cruncher, a Bowflex, a treadmill, an elliptical machine, none of them ever used except for seating when needed. The old, blue couch is propped against a support beam to prevent its backside from falling; its worn, stained upholstery is still covered with a thin, though visible layer of white dog hair. It is a filthy and unappealing place to most. But to me, it's a sanctuary. To me, this is the most hallowed of sacred ground. Scott's basement is my childhood's mausoleum; it's the place where I grew up, where I lost and found myself again, and where I learned some of the most important things a person can about life.

I was always the good kid in school, the kid people looked to for guidance. I got good grades, the teachers liked me, and I was on pretty good terms with all of my other classmates. I wasn't necessarily popular, but I was certainly well liked. Whenever my parents would get together with friends, they would always brag about my achievements and me. Life was great until around the end of sixth grade when I stumbled upon a realization: I didn't have a friend in the world. Yes, there were people at school I hung out with during the day, but none of them were really what one would call a friend, no one I would ever hang out with outside the hours of school day, no one I would trust with my darkest secrets, my deepest fears, or my wildest hopes.

I met Scott on the first day of seventh grade, in my third period, pre-algebra class. He had short, brown hair, a wide, genuine smile, and a nose that drew to a point so sharp you could cut a block of cheese with it. I'd like to say we've been friends ever since that day but that wouldn't quite be the truth. As the year went on, Scott began to gain the reputation of the pothead, stoner kid. Still wanting to play the role of the good boy, I distanced myself as from as much as I could. The rest of the year passed and I grew close to a few other people, particularly a boy named Michael. Michael was overweight with blonde hair that stopped at his waist and is to this day, the most intelligent person my age that I have ever met. It is through him that I really got to know Scott.

It was a chilly fall night, and I was making my way over to Michael's tiny house to spend a night filled with pizza, Mountain Dew, and our favorite video games. When I arrived, Michael informed me that Scott would also be coming over. I was shocked. I hadn't talked to Scott since the first month of seventh grade. How could Michael have invited a pothead, a druggie over to his house? What if he brought pot with him and wanted to smoke? What if he threatened me if I told him I wouldn't smoke a joint with him? But I played along and acted excited. When Scott finally came, nothing changed and, to my great surprise, I ended up enjoying myself more so than I ever had before at Michael's. We stayed up until the sun rose, playing Dungeons and Dragons and all sorts of other games that are socially unacceptable to enjoy. Before Scott left for home, he invited us both to his upcoming thirteenth birthday party. I accepted the invitation, though I was hesitant about going to the house of a boy who used drugs.

The birthday party is my first encounter with the room that would come to define my transition from innocence to adulthood. For the most part, Scott's house is beautiful

and decorated in a way that epitomizes wealth: stained glass skylights colors the sun's rays as they trickle in through the roof, polished wooden floors gleam and reflect distorted images of the objects above them, magnificent windows stretch from the floors to the top of the vaulted ceilings and offer generous views of his father's garden, which is somewhat overgrown. The entire place seems so elegant, so rich, so presentable. And then there's the basement. The once white shag carpet is tainted with stains of every variety: soda, dog piss, fluorescent vomit. Cobwebs cover every corner and every flat surface is in desperate need of a good dusting. I feel uneasy. But still, this is a party, and I intend on having a good time. Five other boys are there, mostly Scott's friends from grade school. There's Jake, a thin, wiry boy with hair like spaghetti, Brian, built like a bulldozer with a goofy, yet endearing smile, and Isaac, the strangest boy I have ever met, and perhaps ever will meet. Michael is also there, thank God.

As the party goes on, we listen to music and argue about whether Slash really is the greatest guitarist since Hendrix or not. We play too many video games (Super Smash Brothers for the Nintendo 64 in particular), and talk disparagingly about our teachers.

"Mr. Bamford's a douchebag."

"Mrs. Barr's super nice, but like, she's so old. Seriously! She's like a dinosaur! Last week she fell asleep at the podium for like, five minutes!"

"Mrs. Cecil caught us passing a note around about how much everyone hates her, you should've seen her face! It was hilarious! I thought she was gonna cry!"

Though mean, the conversation is funny and I gladly become an active participant, half enjoying the blatantly disrespectful exchange, and half just trying to fit in. Then, the conversation takes a turn for the worst, and my greatest fears about the night become all too real.

"Remember that time when we got really high?" Jake asks, reminiscently.

I can't even pay attention to the rest of the conversation. The mere mention of drugs sends a cold chill from my heart, through my veins, and into my fingertips. How was this kid okay with talking so freely about smoking pot? Hadn't they seen the commercials? Hadn't they paid attention to the DARE officers? Didn't they know that this drug was going to ruin their lives? If they keep doing drugs, they'll never do their homework. And if they never do their homework, then they'll fail out of school! And if they fail out of school, well then, to hell with having any chance at getting in to a good college! And how exactly is one ever supposed to be expected to find a job without a college education? Didn't they realize they were throwing their lives away just for the cheap thrills of a quick high? I keep quiet though, hoping I won't have to deal with the subject if they don't address me about it personally.

"It's always been something I've wanted to try."

The voice belongs to Michael. I can't believe my ears. My own best friend, who I thought I could trust, suddenly wanted to try smoking marijuana.

"Cool, how about next weekend?" asked Scott. Michael agreed and, what's worse, he seemed excited about the idea. Scott's eyes turn to me next.

"Are you in?"

I have no idea what to say. Of course I don't want to try smoking pot. Only burnout losers do drugs. And pot leads to other things! I knew for a fact that if I started smoking pot, next week I'd be drinking, and the week after that I'd be partying with junkies and hookers, snorting lines of coke off of a stripper's tits. That's what people who do drugs do,

right? If I say yes, within the month, someone will find me ditch, dead from a heroin overdose, and then how will I get into a good school?

"Yeah, sure. I'm in."

The words shock and horrify me, but I don't let it show. What have I just done? Did I really just cave to peer pressure without even a second thought? Though no one seemed to be explicitly forcing me to say yes, the idea of being the only different one in the room scared me to death. I was in no position to turn away a chance to make friends and, apparently, risking my future was worth the approval of a half dozen teenagers. I try to have fun for the duration of the party, but the idea of what I'll be doing in a week lingers in my thoughts and makes for a rough night of fitful sleep on a green bean bag chair that smells distinctly of urine and old pizza.

The week comes and goes, and after many fruitless attempts to talk my way out of my commitment. I wish I had a way to stop time. But try as I might to stop the inevitable, Friday comes, and I am forced to face the fate I've sealed for myself. It's a cold, rainy day and the overcast sky mimics my feelings about the night. A girl in our grade, Leah is supplying us with the weed we'll be smoking. We walk from the middle school to Scott's house stopping halfway through at a gas station to stock up on snack foods in anticipation of "the munchies". We buy chips, salsa, soda, candy, and even a bag of beef jerky. Somehow our purchase adds up to a whopping \$43 dollars. How the hell did we just spend almost \$50 at a gas station without getting any gas? As we all pool our money together to pay, I feel like I'm under the constant scrutiny of the cashier. Did he know what was going on? The uncomfortable feeling of being watched only makes me doubt why in the world I'm doing what I am even more than I did before. We finish making our purchase and I'm the first one out of the door.

When we finally arrive at Scott's house, we go straight to the basement. The place is still as uneasy feeling as it was the previous week; its stains seems somehow more menacing, the Taco Bell cups, half full with mountain dew, seem to fester and rot. I feel like I'm going to puke. We bide our time and wait for Scott's parents to go to sleep before we sneak through to Elisha, his sister's room, which is also on the basement level. Elisha, or ED as she prefers to be called, is a quirky and intelligent sophomore in high school. Though older than us, she has no problem hanging out and letting us invade her space. She opens the window and silently removes the screen, revealing a small ledge. The ledge is filled with gravel and large enough to fit three middle school boys at a time. Michael, Scott, and I shuffle out onto the ledge and in to the night as I prepare myself to do the unspeakable.

Scott takes the glass pipe and packs what's known as "the bowl" with a sticky green clump; the smell is sweet and bitter all at once. He takes a solid colored Bic lighter out from his pocket and shows Michael and I how to "hit" the pipe. Scott sets an example, as he takes a long, slow breath of smoke in and holds it for as long as he can. Michael takes the pipe next. He breathes in as heavily as Scott did, but chokes almost immediately. Then it's my turn. I wrap my lips around the pipe and fully expect police cars to come out of nowhere, sirens blaring, ready to cart me off to jail forever. I can already start to taste the smoke. It's like the smell: bitter, sweet, dirty. I breathe in, trying to inhale a respectable amount. Like Michael before me, I choke. I cough so much I actually blow the rest of the pot out of the bowl. Not only do I look like the lamest kid on the planet, but now, I'm also an idiot and an asshole. I apologize immediately, but Scott makes sure to let me know that it's not a big deal. He simply gets out more pot, fills the bowl again, and gently reminds me to try and

take the pipe out of my mouth if I feel like I'm going to cough again. He takes the pipe and hits it again, hard.

After fifteen minutes and four rounds of smoking, we climb down back in to the basement and wait for the high to set in. I never even feel a thing. Maybe I didn't do it right, maybe I didn't do enough, all I know is, I feel like I've risked a lot for nothing. But I also feel a certain sense of relief. No one's dead, I didn't get arrested, and I'm pretty sure my brain cells are still a-ok. Fuck those adults who tried to tell me what to do before; if they've lied about this, then what else have they been holding back from me?

Over the next few weeks, we all gather at Scott's every Friday night. It becomes a religious routine. Throughout the week, all we would talk about was what happened last weekend at Scott's and what we wanted to do come Friday. Sometimes we smoked, sometimes we drank, sometimes we did both, and other times we did neither. People began to treat me like I had changed, and I had. In the months following the beginning of my friendship with Scott, I had begun to rebel; first in small ways, like swearing and listening to Marilyn Manson (who is still a personal favorite of mine), but later more radically. I began to fight my parents and refuse to be obedient when I felt like obedience was unwarranted. Homework took a backseat to hanging out, chores never got done - I even went as far as to renounce my religion. Though faith was never particularly important to me as a child, my parents would be mortified to know that I no longer consider myself a Christian. But I had found a new religion, of which we were all disciples and Scott's basement was our sacred temple.

The night I shed my faith started like any other. A friend of mine, Greg, found a copy of the Bible in Scott's basement. Having an offbeat, goofy sense of humor, Greg began argue that the correct pronunciation of the tome's name was in fact "bib-lee." Though I laughed, I felt offended. I knew he was speaking in good humor, but the act seemed incredibly disrespectful. Then someone mentioned off-hand how the thickness of the pages of the Bible would be perfect to use for rolling papers in a pinch. That pushed me out of my comfort zone. I had to say something.

"Hey guys, can you chill a little with the whole Bible thing?"

"Oh, sorry. Are you a Christian? Like, you believe in the Bible and stuff?"

"Yeah, kind of." I thought everyone did. Apparently, I was mistaken.

"That's cool," said Scott. "But just out of curiosity, why do you believe in it?" I was shocked to find I couldn't provide a single answer for him. Of course I believed because that's what I was raised to do. But here, in the basement, that argument seemed flimsy and poorly thought out. I felt like such an idiot.

"I'm not really sure," I told Scott.

"Alright, that's cool." Scott was always cool. The rest of the group continued to talk about their various beliefs, but I remained silent throughout the rest of the conversation. If I couldn't tell someone why I believed in something, then what purpose did it serve for me to keep believing? So far in Scott's basement, I had started doing drugs and had lost my faith, and yet, I didn't feel bad about any of it. I actually felt better than I did before I started to get to know Scott and his friends. People might not have understood me, but I was beginning to, and it felt great.

The other kids at school weren't scared of us; they were scared of becoming us. We got the funny looks that implied all too clearly how much lower everyone else thought of us. I never appreciated their looks of judgment, and found their holy-than-thou attitudes

comically unfounded. While they were talking about how much they wanted to be like Paris Hilton, or Fifty Cent, we were talking about things that actually seemed to matter: religion, love, life, death, the nature of humanity, the importance of embracing one's self. Where everyone else was struggling to fit, we were struggling to just be ourselves. Despite our position on the lowest rung of the ladder of social relevance, I managed to somehow end up dating someone who was, in my opinion, the most wonderful girl in the entire school.

Mary's the kind of girl any boy would be proud to take home to his parents. She's tall and slender, with bright, powder blue eyes, and a toothy, sincere smile. She makes good grades and is well mannered and I can't believe I was ever lucky enough to call her my first girlfriend and even luckier to call her my last. I met her in my science class, where she sat right next to me. I also knew her from the orchestra. She played the viola and loved to dance. Our friendship grew over the course of the year and, eventually, I mustered the courage to ask her if she wanted to come to Scott's on a Friday sometime. She said yes and after that week she was inducted in to the cult of the basement. We started dating shortly afterwards.

One Friday at Scott's, after having watched *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* for the umpteenth time, the rest of the gang went upstairs to grab snacks. Mary and I stayed on the couch in the basement, alone, and in complete darkness, save for the glow of Scott's computer screen. Scott's stereo was somewhere, playing Ozzy Osbourne's *Crazy Train*, my personal favorite at the time. We had been dating for nearly two months and we had had yet to do anything more than hold hands.

This is it, I thought to myself. I'm going to kiss her, right here, right now.

And I did. It was my first kiss. The feeling was a strange concoction of triumph and guilt. I had proven to myself that I was capable of getting the girl, and yet I wasn't really sure that was what I wanted at all. For Mary, the kiss was a stepping-stone in our relationship, but for me, it was a confirmation that I never really wanted a girlfriend in the first place. Though I had genuine feelings for Mary, there on the couch, I was forced to confront a demon that had haunted me for years. That night on the couch I was kissing a great girl while wishing I was kissing a great boy instead.

A few weeks later, I ended things with Mary but didn't tell her why. I just couldn't bring myself to tell her the truth. She was hurt, but through it all, we managed to remain friends and later, as a freshman, I told her about what really happened and why I had to break things off with her. But, with the issue of the girlfriend now out of the way, a whole new problem arose: how in the world was I going to tell my friends? It didn't seem like something Scott, or Michael, or anyone in my little entourage would have cared about, but when dealing with an issue as delicate as this one, you never know just quite how people are going to react. Would they shun me, thinking I used Mary like some sort of drug store "gay" test? Or would they just not say anything at all, and refuse to talk to me ever again? Whatever the outcome, I had to tell them who I really was. While they might not accept me for being gay, I knew I couldn't accept me if I wasn't being myself.

It was another Friday night. We were in Scott's basement once again, eating Chinese takeout and watching *A Clockwork Orange*. Old pizza boxes from last week were collected in the corner next to the computer desk, a pile of crushed coke cans lay beside it. The night was as normal as any other. I decided to spill the beans. I had been stewing about what to

say all week and had finally decided to best way to do what I needed to was to just come out and say it.

"Hey guys, can I tell you something?"

"What's up?" someone answers.

Time slows down. All the thoughts I had collected, all the things I had planned on saying, all disappeared. I was stuck, sitting in the basement, having called attention to myself. I was expected to say something, but all I could manage was to sit there with my mouth agape, trying my hardest not to cry. My loss of words only lasted for a few seconds, but I swear I could've lived a lifetime or two before I started to actually speak again. I blink a few times, realize how ridiculous I must look, and collect my thoughts once again. Here goes everything.

"I'm pretty sure I'm gay," I blurted. For a moment, the only reaction I got from anyone was a blank, mildly confused stare. Oh Jesus, now I've done it. Here I am, stuck in this basement, with no way to get back home, and all of these kids hate me now. Why couldn't I have just kept my mouth shut?

"Cool," said Scott. "Thanks for sharing. Can you pass the soda?"

That was all I got. Everyone else either shrugged the comment off or parroted Scott's response. Relief washed over me. I felt good. I felt honest. I felt like me. It was then I knew that these were the people I would cherish when I looked back on life in my later years. These were the people who I trusted, and who trusted me. These were the ones who wanted me to be me, and nothing more. These were the people I could finally be myself around without worrying. They opened my eyes. So what if they didn't make the best grades in school, or if they got in to trouble every now and then, or that they didn't care who had the number one song on the radio? These were genuine people, beautiful in all of their strengths and flaws. They weren't afraid to see the world, or to show it to others, and for that, I'm eternally grateful. As we transitioned in to high school, Friday nights became a thing of the past, and people began to drift away from each other and in to different circles as people tend to do. I still keep in contact with some of the group and, while I'm no longer close with most of these people, I know I'll never be able to forget their influence and what they taught me about myself, and the kind of person I want to be.

We weren't doing anything other kids weren't, we were just more open about what we did. We were more open about everything. What we did and who we were might not have been wholesome, or "good". What we were might have been "wrong," but we were also honest both with each other and ourselves. We weren't afraid to explore who we were, and to push to each other to do the same. I can't remember a time in my life where I've learned so much about life and how I relate to it. Billy Joel once sang, "I'd rather laugh with the sinners than cry with the saints." I couldn't agree more if I tried.

Not too long ago, I had the privilege of returning to Scott's basement. It was the first time I'd seen the place in years. We were seniors in high school and things had certainly changed. Scott, having become a workout junkie, had installed even more workout equipment. I took a seat on the old Bowflex and looked around. Though the landscape had changed, the place was exactly how I remember it. The old blue couch was gone, the TV was new, and it looked like he had gotten rid of his old computer. But some things never change. Monster energy cans were strewn about the place, some half crushed, some half full. Pizza boxes were still in no short supply. I saw another lingering Taco Bell cup, and, though I knew it wasn't the same one I remember leaving on his shelf at his birthday party,

for some reason I let myself pretend it was. All of the familiar stains of the carpet were still there, though I noticed a few new ones as well. It's an ugly little room, but it's home. Even through its dingy, unwashed walls, I can't help but feel like this place glows. After all, not all that glitter's is gold, nor does all that is gold glitter.