

## Two Words By Josh Kim

The call came while I was teaching a class of what I assumed would be eager young undergraduates as part of my doctoral studies. I ignored it and waited to finish the hour-long session, figuring it was about something stupid that Craig wanted to tell me, and in a way, I don't think I was wrong. When class let out, I had a couple voicemails, the majority of which I'd neglected to listen to for weeks. I checked the messages: three unheard. One from my landlord, telling me building services wouldn't get to the ant problem in my apartment until next week. *Click. Message deleted.* The second was an automated recording: "Hello! You've been selected to win a free cruise to the Bahamas, courtesy of"—*click. Message deleted.* The third was from Craig.

The semester had gotten off to a rough start, and I appreciated the prospect of a humorous retelling of the shenanigans him and the guys back home had gotten into. I was excited to teach freshman the beauty of the written word and the joy that comes with constructing a well reasoned, eloquently stated argument, and was dismayed that my class was less than thrilled to be where they were. No matter what did, I couldn't seem to engage any of the twenty-three sleepy eyed adulescents in the room. In addition to my perceived failure as an educator, my living situation had been less than stellar: insect infestations, cramped two bedroom apartment, and a roommate who thought I couldn't hear him watching porn late into the night. I needed some good news; I needed a pick-me-up. The message was two-words: "Tim's dead." *Click.*

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Tim's body lay cold and pale in the casket as friends and family passed by to gaze upon his peaceful face; that's what I'd like to say, but I can't, because Tim doesn't have a face anymore, let alone a body—he's dust amongst an Iraqi desert's sands. The casket is empty, a symbol of what used to be. From what I'd been told, a routine explosives de-arming had gone wrong. My imagination went wild when I heard that one, something about a wrong wire getting cut—should've snipped the green wire, not the blue. Or maybe it was the red. Isn't it always the red one in the movies? I don't know. I don't know shit about bombs. The only thing I know is something went wrong, something else exploded, and now we're here, sitting in a church, listening to a priest who has never spoken to Tim talk about the afterlife and what it means our good friend. Scott sits next to me, refusing to cry. A few rows up, I see Craig is doing the same. I look around for Brad, but I can't find him. I imagine wherever he is, he's watching the service but not really paying attention, stone-faced and resolute against a flood of nostalgia and memories. Tears are weakness, and, now more than ever, Tim would want us all to be strong. But I can't right now. Every breath is a gasp, a struggle. Scott reaches out to hold my hand and squeezes, both to comfort and remind me that this is neither the time nor the place. But this is the perfect time, the only place. We're not really in the presence of the dead, but we might as well be. Am I supposed prevent myself from mourning because they can't find the thousand pieces of Tim's body and ship them back home? I can't imagine dying like that. It suits Tim though, somehow.

The church is beautiful—I must've passed it a million times before without ever actually seeing the inside. From the street, it's a plain little white chapel, completely unspectacular, but the inside is lavishly decorated with garnet-hued fabrics draped along the walls. The pews are carved out of a dark wood that looks like cherry and is polished so well I can see my reflection gleaming in the auburn-colored seats. Tall, golden candelabras surround the altar where the empty coffin lays and oversized wreaths of flowers guard either side of where Tim's body would be, had it not been atomized. It's a gorgeously misleading image of beauty, sickeningly inappropriate for the situation at hand, totally cliché. The weather outside is impeccable, and sun's shining through the round window above the altar, bathing the flag-draped casket in a warm light, filtered through bright peridot and citron and sapphire panels of stained glass. It's disturbing to have such a beautiful thing touch upon so dismal a symbol. Tim's death wasn't warm—it was burning hot, fueled by just under four pounds of explosives and shrapnel.

I try to control myself, but the tears keep coming. They completely saturate my tissues before I give up trying to clear them from my face and let them fall directly into my lap. It's funny how a black suit, the epitome of colorlessness, gets even darker when wet. Normally, I'd worry about how the little droplets might stain the pants with a slight, salty residue. But today, it doesn't matter. I suppose it doesn't matter any day, but today it seems even less relevant. I vow to never wear the suit again. I grab one of the bibles from in front of me and open it, letting myself cry over its holy word. The act is momentarily comforting. I'm only ever religious when I'm angry at God or when I need Him and, right now, the idea of ruining His gospel with my liquid mourning seems like a valid protest, each little splatter soaking through a dozen pages or so, ink running away from the letterforms, distorting His "eternal truth."

Tim's mother approaches the altar to deliver the eulogy. She doesn't have much money, but she's managed to find a nice black suit that flatters her. Her face is streaked with makeup and she can barely form a sentence worth listening to. I'm surprised she's so emotional. Tim and his mother always had a contentious relationship; I don't think I can remember a time when I saw the two of them together that didn't degenerate into screaming. But, he was her youngest. No parent ever really recovers from the death of a child, but I imagine losing your youngest is an especially heart-wrenching. I think about how my mother will react when I tell her. She didn't need to know, and if she had, she would've wanted to come along, and that's one thing I can't have right now: another person to take care of when I can't even take care of myself. I can't be a shoulder to cry on when I need one myself. I need a waste can to heave in. I need a way to forget.

"Tim was my baby boy," his mother starts. I can't help but think how wrong this is, how nothing about this entire funeral seems like anything Tim would want. He wouldn't want it to be held in a church. He wouldn't want some religious hermit he'd never known talking about his life and lack of accomplishments. He wouldn't want his mother of all people to deliver the eulogy. I don't think he'd even want a eulogy. I'm pretty sure he wouldn't want to be called "baby boy." And he definitely wouldn't want people to cry. I guess that one's kind of my fault.

I'm trying my best, goddammit.