James Burkhart

Thompson O’Reilly

Anna P. (Childhood Friend)—There were a lot of rumors going around about what had happened to Tommy. Like, in the time span of an hour, I had heard that he died in a car accident, a police shootout, that he was murdered by a substitute teacher, and finally that he had committed suicide. It was pretty easy to rule out a couple of the rumors. Tommy’s dad is a police officer.

George A. (Classmate)—I got a text message that night. Some long forward message from a number I didn’t know. It came in as a media message, so I naturally assumed that it was a picture of a dancing pig or some naked girl at a party. It blew my mind when I saw Tom’s face looking at me when I opened the text, his birthday and death day below his picture in enlarged colored font. I called Braxton to see if it was true. He didn’t answer.

Braxton D. (Best Friend)—I met Thompson O’Reilly when I moved from Mississippi in the fourth grade. My brother had told me that when I started in my new school that I should find the biggest and baddest kid on the playground, and beat the living shit out of him—to let the school kids know that I wasn’t some pussy inbred hick from Mississippi, ya know? I scanned the schoolyard and saw this big ol’ redheaded kid playing foursquare. He knocked that red rubber ball around like a madman, his beady little ginger eyes burning with foursquare passion. I walked right up, grabbed the ball, and hit him in the fucking face. Then I turned around, waiting to inherit my little slice of the schoolyard, when suddenly that redheaded son of a bitch took me out at the knees with a whiffle bat. We were the best of pals ever since.
Stacy N. (Girlfriend)—This...this is really hard for me to talk about. What happened? What went wrong? I ask myself that everyday. Could I have stopped it? Was it something I did? Or something I didn’t do? It’s just that he always prom...he always promised me...I can’t do this right now. I’m sorry.

Anna P. (Childhood Friend)—I remember when Tommy hit Braxton with the whiffle bat. Braxton was crying, and Tommy threw the bat down and went to help him up. “What’s your name?” he asked him, and Braxton told him. “Braxton...do you want to play foursquare?” That’s the kind of person Tommy was. Quick to forgive, easy to talk to.

Braxton D. (Best Friend)—Tommygun and I were like Bonnie and Clyde. I was Clyde. I’m not structurally sound to go by Bonnie.

Mr. Jackman (Art Teacher)—Tom and Braxton were best friends. Braxton was always referred to as “the leader” of the two, mostly because he was loud and liked to crack jokes. Always the center of attention. Tom, on the other hand, was more of the strong, silent type, though he was fully capable of throwing a zinger into the mix when he saw fit. Tom excelled in art, and had one of the biggest hearts I’ve ever seen in a student. Braxton could barely touch pencil to paper without resorting back to stick figures. I think the only reason he stuck through three years of my art class was because he couldn’t imagine suffering through class without Tom by his side.

Stacy N. (Girlfriend)—I met Tom in art class, freshman year at Lincoln High. His hair was brownish red, and his skin was covered in freckles. A lot of kids called him “Ginger.” I
just called him Tom. He was always so sweet, with the perfect mix of corny thrown in. He asked me to the winter formal by drawing a rose on his art homework, which he had Braxton deliver to my table.

**Braxton D. (Best Friend)**—Yeah, I had T’s back. He probably wouldn’t have ever ended up with Stacy if I hadn’t had brought that rose drawing over to her.

**Mr. Jackman (Art Teacher)**—My brightest memory of Tom was one day towards the end of semester one year. The majority of the class had finished up their assignments, and we were playing a game on the board, with the points scored during the game counting as extra credit. Tom didn’t need any extra credit, but he also happened to get all of the trivia questions correct. He gave all of his extra credit points to Kyle Brown, a young man who had extreme mental and physical handicaps. Kyle flailed in his wheelchair, whistling and laughing. Tom smiled, fist bumped him from across the table, and continued to rack up extra credit points. Everyone loved Tom.

**Tony B. (Classmate)**—To be completely honest, I always thought Thompson was kind of a prick. He always just carried himself like he was better than everyone else, like he always knew what was best. Of course that wasn’t true by a long shot. I hated the way he helped my little brother in Art class. Kyle didn’t need his help and he sure as hell didn’t ask him for it.

**Carrie O. (Mother)**—I was so proud of my boy. I still am. I just wish that things would have worked out between his father and I...maybe none of this would have ever happened. Mothers aren’t meant to bury their babies.

**Coach Dunn (Hockey Coach)**—We had the privilege and honor of having Thompson on our team for one season, as
the goalie. He carried the Lumberjacks all the way to a state championship. All the boys on the team called him “Red-Beard.” Thompson’s hair was brown, but when his facial hair grew, it came out red. Half the kids in high school can’t even grow a mustache, and here is Thompson standing in the goalie box with his beard growing out from his helmet. I’m pretty sure Red Beard won that state title for us. I wouldn’t be surprised if his beard scared the other teams into submission. He looked like a goddamn viking out there. It’s a shame that he didn’t come back the next season. “Troubles at home” is what he told me.

Benjamin O. (Younger Brother)—I miss Tom so much. Having him there during my first year at high school was huge for me. With all of the stuff going on with Dad...I’m just glad I had Tom to talk to, ya know? I told him things I would never dare even speak to anyone else. I guess I never realized how much it was tearing Tom up about Mom and Dad’s divorce. He was the closest to Dad, always trying to impress him, to make him proud. To say Tom looked up to Dad would be an understatement. He fucking worshiped him.

Stacy N. (Girlfriend)—We’d always talk about having kids eventually, stupid high school couple talk, you know how it is. He wanted two boys: Owen Ransom and Benjamin Memphis, so that they could grow up like he and his brother did. He also wanted a little girl, Jordan Nichole. He always said how he was going to be a father someday, just like his father was to him. A lot of teenage boys want to grow up to be better than their fathers, but not Tom. Tom always said that if he ended up being a quarter of the man that his father was, he would have done the impossible. He lived for that idea. I think that is why he was so torn up when he came home and found his Dad that night.
Benjamin O. (Younger Brother)—Mom was out of town, at some board meeting for the school district. I was staying at a friend’s house, and Tom was supposed to be heading out of town for a hockey game, but a bunch of the other team’s players had gotten sick, so they had to forfeit before the bus even left town. So Tom went and hung out with Braxton before he came home. Tom told me that when he opened the door, he saw Dad lying naked on the couch, fucking some girl. Tom said that Dad turned around, saw Tom in the doorway, and leaped off the couch fast as lightning and tried to explain.

Braxton D. (Best Friend)—Tom called me later that night, pissed as all hell. Told me that his old man was sleeping around with some other woman, getting shitfaced and fucking some barfly he picked up after his shift. I guess the way it went down was that Tom came home after we went to the movies, opened the door, and saw his prick of an old man dipping into this whore on the couch. His dad stumbles around and tries to explain to Tom, still naked as a centerfold. T tells him to go to hell and that he is calling his mom, which sends his drunk dad into rage, pissed as an alley cat. Rears back and slugs Tom right in the face. “You better not mention this to your mother, because that bitch doesn’t need to know.” Meanwhile, the cooze he was getting it on with starts running her whore mouth, when Papa O turns around and slugs her, too. Tom takes the keys to his dad’s ‘70 Chevy Nova and blows out of there, leaving his drunk abusive dad to hit up that dirty bird for seconds. Goes straight to Stacy’s house with a big ol’ black eye, looking like he just scoped himself.

Benjamin O. (Younger Brother)—Tom tried to tell me that he got the black eye during hockey practice, but I knew that it was from Dad hitting him. I guess he just didn’t want me to chalk up another strike against our old man.
Stacy N. (Girlfriend)—Tom stayed at my house that night. He cried. It was the first time I had ever seen him cry. It was the strangest sight, those tears falling into his red beard, and I still can’t get it out of my mind. I...I can’t ever get him out of my mind. I’m sorry, this is still just really hard.

Carrie O. (Mother)—Tom called me that night. I was 90 miles away over in Brandenton for a school board meeting. Tom had the most serious tone to his voice, and I knew something was up. I had always suspected that Sean was messing around behind my back, so that didn’t upset me as much as one might suspect. But when Tom told me that Sean had hit him, I jumped into my car right away.

Benjamin O. (Younger Brother)—Like I said before, our father was God to Tom. And when your God turns out to be a lying, cheating son of a bitch, you’re gonna be upset. When your God turns around and smites you, you set your sights on burning heaven down. I think that is what happened to Tom. He had told me later on that his whole life up to that point had been a lie, that he had wasted the first seventeen years of his life molding himself in reflection of a waste of air. He asked me where he should go, what he should do. I had no idea what to tell him. The affair was a huge surprise to the both of us.

Capt. Sean O. (Father, Police Officer)—I’m not sure what Carrie or the boys expected me to do. When you’re not happy in a relationship, you need to find a way to get out of it. Granted, getting drunk and starting an affair isn’t the best example, but it was all I could think of at the time. Whiskey will do that to you. It’s not like Carrie is a bad woman, I still love her and am incredibly proud of what’s left of my family. I just hope Tom knows that I’m sorry. I’m so incredibly sorry.
**Braxton D. (Best Friend)***—T was so torn up after that night. Who can blame him really? He looked up to his father so much, to experience something like that would be like a Catholic walking in on the Pope buttfucking your little brother or something. Tommy started questioning himself, and everything around him. He even started driving Stacy away. Whenever we’d hang out, we’d always end up out in the woods, staring at the creek. Sit there. For hours, sometimes. Then I’d say, “Tommy, I’m going home. You wanna come eat some dinner or something?” and he’d always just say, “I’ll walk.” That’s it. Staring at the creek for hours, and the only words he could say were “I’ll walk.” He’d always end up at that creek. That’s how I knew where to find him.

**Carrie O. (Mother)***—Poor Tom. I know that he must be in a better place now, finally happy. That’s what I like to tell myself. I was so worried about him for months after that night Sean went nuts. When Sean and I finally had our divorce settled, Tom got even worse. Benjamin dealt with his anger or depression or what have you by joining the track team, the swim team, and becoming more involved with Boy Scouts. I suggested Tom do the same, but he didn’t want to go back to Boy Scouts or hockey. Sean had been his Scout Master and had been to every hockey game. Tom would just lock himself in his room as soon as he returned from school. He did nothing but draw and paint, and pretty soon his walls were covered in his art. Pictures of abstract things, dark things. One picture of a little boy with a backpack on standing in the shadow of a huge statue. When Tom wasn’t in his room, he was outside. Sometimes he’d be gone four hours at a time. One night I hadn’t seen Tom for longer than usual, and he had taken the Nova out. I started to worry, you know how mothers

*“It was the strangest sight, those tears falling into his red beard...”*

—Stacy N.
are when their boys are driving fast cars, on top of me already worrying about him being so distant. So I called Stacy. She hadn’t heard from him. I called Braxton, he hadn’t heard from him either. Then I called the police.

**Braxton D. (Best Friend)**—Mama O called me looking for Tom, but I hadn’t seen him. I told her I’d go out and look for him. Pulled on my boots and headed towards the woods, figuring that Tom would be out there staring at the creek again. My truck’s headlights reflected off of the Nova’s taillights right when I rounded the bend to the field with the creek, so I shut off the engine and started walking. I had no idea how that was going to change my life.

**Benjamin O. (Younger Brother)**—When Tom and I were really little, we’d go out duck hunting with Grandpa O’Reilly and Dad. Grandpa had this old side-by-side fourteen gauge shotgun, the most beautiful gun I have ever seen in my life. Perfect hardwood, with gold inlay and etching on the metal parts, even on the trigger. Watching Grandpa shoot that gun was like watching an artist with his paintbrush. It was practically an extension of him. When Grandpa passed away, the fourteen gauge was passed down to Dad. He knew that Tom loved that gun, so he left it and the Nova at the house after he moved out. He hoped that Tom would eventually let him back in, I guess.

**Stacy N. (Girlfriend)**—After the night with his father, Tom told me to tell him if he ever started to act like that, because he was so afraid of letting people down like his dad let his family down. I haven’t told anyone this, but there was a night at a hockey party when I walked in on Tom kissing a different girl. Annie or Anna or something. I was a little drunk, so I blurted out “Just like your father, huh Tommy? A goddamn monster!” I wonder if that sent him over the edge. I called Braxton and
made him take me home, and I kissed him. He didn’t stop me, and we agreed Tommy could never know. We were all drunk, stupid kids. Sure, Tom and I had our problems, like everyone did. But I, I still wonder if what I said was the straw that broke the camel’s back.

**Braxton D. (Best Friend)—**Now when I remember it, the field was dead quiet that night. I started looking for Tom through the back window of the Nova, but couldn’t see anything. The inside of the car was all smoky. I was going to be pissed if Tom had started smoking, because that shit killed my mom, but the closer I got to the car, the less it smelled like cigarette smoke. When I opened the door, I damn near threw up. There was Tom, slumped over in the driver’s seat, that side by side shotgun laying across his lap. The blast had blown off his bottom jaw. His mouth was nothing but a glob of red, with jagged white on either side where splinters of his bones were stabbing through. Blood all over the cream interior of that Nova. The shot had blown little holes in the roof of the car, and the moon shone through them and illuminated the back of Tom’s head. I started crying, didn’t know what else to do. Tried hugging him, shaking him back to life, but he was long gone.

**Benjamin O. (Younger Brother)—**Braxton called the house crying. I could barely make out a word he said, so I put Mom on the line. Mom’s face turned ghost white, and after she hung up the phone, she broke down. We headed down to the woods where Braxton was to meet the police and identify the body. I was in such shock, I can’t even remember where exactly we were. Braxton could barely breathe he was sobbing so hard, and Stacy was there too, crying. The cops shoved us all out of there after a couple of minutes. I remember Braxton kicking and fighting the police officers as they escorted him away. “That is my best friend, you motherfuckers! My best fucking
friend!” I followed Braxton, collapsing in the woods and just crying with him.

**Stacy N. (Girlfriend)**—Braxton called me and the O’Reillys before he called the police. He later said that it was because he didn’t want Tom’s dad to come down there before the real people who loved him got a chance to know what happened. I hated Braxton for a minute then. I didn’t mean to shoot the messenger, but I couldn’t help it. I don’t live far away from the woods, so I ran down as quickly as possible. I could hear Braxton crying before I could see his truck. He stood up when he heard me coming, and I could see that he was covered in blood. My heart stopped beating, I started crying. I cried so much that night I thought I was going to drown. “Tommy’s dead” was all that I could make out between Braxton’s sobbing. My heart broke.

**Benjamin O. (Younger Brother)**—I think it was when I was lying in the grass with Braxton that it finally hit me, that Tom was gone. No more duck hunting, no more hockey games, no more teaching the younger kids in our troop how to tie knots. I wasn’t going to be an uncle, or be in Tom’s wedding, or go on any of the trips we had always talked about. Hell, just a couple of weeks earlier we had talked about building a boat when we were older and sailing it to Africa, down around Cape Town and to Madagascar. We joked about seeing if those penguins from that stupid movie would be there.

**Braxton D. (Best Friend)**—The police asked me why I was covered in blood. “He’s my best friend, he’s my fucking brother!” I screamed at them. When they started zipping him up, I told them not to touch him. My best friend deserves more than to be man-handled by a bunch of fucking pigs working for the guy that drove him to this.
**Carrie O. (Mother)**—Have you ever had to pick out a casket for your child? Put together a funeral for your first born son? I had been involved with planning funerals before, but everything was such a state of shock for me that I don’t really remember much of it.

**Mr. Jackman (Art Teacher)**—It’s protocol for the school system to not hold a remembrance service, a dedication, or anything like that after a student’s suicide. The idea is so that the kids don’t think that the community is glorifying the suicide. The entire school system is put on suicide watch for two weeks following the death of a student. But if any student deserved a remembrance service, it was Thompson. Everyone loved him, and his loss changed the tone of the entire school forever.

**Tony B. (Classmate)**—I didn’t go to Tom’s funeral. What the hell is the point? I was at that party when Stacy walked in on him finishing up with Anna. Way to learn your lesson, huh Tom? If you’re going to be selfish and stupid enough to kill yourself, you don’t deserve my sympathy. If anything, your family should get a swift kick in the ass for raising an idiot to believe in taking the easy way out.

**Braxton D. (Best Friend)**—Tommy and I had made a pact way back in middle school that if either of us died while we were still in school, we were going to have our funerals on a Saturday. That way, none of the stupid little drama queens who didn’t even know us would show up to our funerals just to get out of school. It was the worst when Jimmy Atkins got into that car accident freshman year and his funeral was on a Tuesday, and the entire school was there, but not for Jimmy. They were only there to get out of school. So I held true to our promise. Tom’s funeral was on a Saturday afternoon in the park.
Stacy N. (Girlfriend)—Tom’s mother had asked me to speak at the funeral. I didn’t know what to say. Tom had always been there for me ever since he gave me that rose in Art class. I was at a loss of what to say right up until the morning of the service. A couple of years ago, Tom was out doing some community service with the Boy Scouts, a highway clean up. He found this little ragged flap of a matchbook, and written on it was “Love wasn’t put in your heart to stay, Love isn’t Love till you give it away.” Tom gave it to me later that night. Perfect amount of corny, right? He told me, “Baby, we’re going places.” And at his service, I told that story. I talked about how Tom was always giving away his love, and therefore was one of the only people our age to know what true love even is. And we’re still going places, Tom and I. I’m going to have Tom with me forever.

“Only Braxton would pick an 80’s Glam Metal song for his best friend’s funeral, but I guarantee that Tommy was smiling...”
—Anna P.

Carrie O. (Mother)—Mothers shouldn’t have to bury their own babies. I will never have a full heart again. I still see Tom though. After the service, I started reading some spiritual books—to try and make sense of everything, I suppose. My favorites ended up being about Native American belief systems. I liked how they dealt with nature. I learned that eagles are a symbol of good luck for most Native tribes. Every time I see an eagle in the sky, that’s Tom for me.

Anna P. (Childhood Friend)—At Tom’s funeral, Braxton got up and put a CD in this big stereo system that they had set up. Piano started coming through the speakers, and it took me a second to realize what the song was. “Home Sweet Home” by Motley Crue. Only Braxton would pick an 80’s Glam Metal
song for his best friend’s funeral, but I guarantee that Tommy was smiling behind that big red beard wherever he’s at.

**Capt. Sean O. (Father, Police Officer)**—That was the hardest day of my life, the day of the funeral. I know that a lot of people there blamed me. Hell, I even blame myself. But forcing the blame didn’t make it any easier. I would take the weight of everyone’s problems for the rest of my life for one more day with my boy.

**Braxton D. (Best Friend)**—When we were carrying Tom’s casket to the hearse, that was the toughest. Me and Ben, some kids from their Scout troop, and Tom’s dad, right next to me. I heard him sniffle, and I looked over at him. Silent tears, man, just pouring down his face. Looking back, I don’t know why it surprised me, but it did. After we slid Tommy into the car, I put my hand on his shoulder, and he just looked at me and nodded. A silent understanding, I guess. I’m sure that still tears the old bastard to pieces.

**Tony B. (Classmate)**—Like I said, I’m not sure what the big deal was about Thompson O’Reilly. One less cheating, arrogant prick out of the picture is fine by me. Tragic? Sure. Stupid? You fuckin’ bet.

**Benjamin O. (Younger Brother)**—The weird thing about death is that the truth comes out, and it’s a shame that it takes loss for the truth to finally show. After Tom’s funeral, I had so many people come up to me, and tell me secrets they had shared with Tom, feelings they had for him, what they truly thought. There were girls that Tom didn’t even hang out with that were practically in love with him. He made their day, hell, he made their life, when he held the door open for them at school. There was also a kid on the hockey team that told me that Tom was like a father to him; the kid didn’t have a dad
at home, and Tom had taught him how to play and cheered him on in the games. It’s the strangest damn thing that it takes death for the truth to shine.

**Braxton D. (Best Friend)**—Tom’s old locker at school was covered with notes that next week. Sticky notes, sympathy cards, poems, you name it. Every single one of them said something about how he had changed their lives, made them live stronger, or better, or love more easily. I wonder if Tom had known that, if he would have stayed. Tom was raised right. He made some mistakes, sure, but who doesn’t? I guess he saw too much of his father in himself. After all, he spent his whole life trying to be like his dad. He just didn’t want to put anyone else through that, felt like he was damaged goods or something. I guess he didn’t realize what he really ended up putting us all through. I promised him I’d take care of Stacy. I’ll tell you one thing though: you don’t get hit in the knees with a whiffle bat every day, and I’m not ever going to find someone to do that to me again.