

WHAT HAPPENED TO WESLEY
A Short Story

If someone asked me about my best friend Wesley before he died, the first thing I would have said to them was that Wesley loved apples. Heck, he liked all kinds of fruits, as long as they were clean and fresh from the orchards in which they grew. I remembered one day, when I handed him an orange, he'd ask first, "You cleaned it, right?" Sometimes I'm not entirely sure if I did — sometimes I might forget — and then I'd have to wash off the fruit before giving it to him back.

That was Wesley: a plump, stout kid with not much of a sense of humor. He's the kind of kid that, if you told him to keep a secret, he'd say that he would. Then the next day your parents will start asking you about why you accidentally lost the family pet (for this example it'll be your house-cat Marbles). It wouldn't take you two seconds to realize it was Wesley who told on you. He's not a bad kid for breaking promises, believe me; he's about the last guy who'd ever do that. He's just horrible at keeping secrets and lying -- it's not his fault, really, since he grew up in a place where his folks wanted him to not lie, which I'm guessing must have happened to either his mother or father. If it were me, I'd be betting on the dad, if you ask me. That's the second thing I'd say if someone asked me about my best friend Wesley. I'd say that he was never a liar.

Me, I'm not like Wesley. In fact, there were more things we had in differences rather than in common. My name is Thomas Gilroy, but everybody called me Tommy. I liked to play baseball, watch baseball, and watch horror films. I loved horror films. My personal favorites were George A. Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* and Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining*. They never failed to make me jump out of the couch and run behind it, screaming. Wesley, on the other hand, never cared much for horror films. Sure, he'd watch a couple of them along with me on the TV while he slept over (especially when mom was sleeping and the volume was turned low enough so we could listen by going through the

wired speakers) but he never favored them as much as I did. He preferred movies that had a sense of fantasy and magic in them like Ralph Bakshi's *The Lord of the Rings* or *The Neverending Story* by Wolfgang Peterson. I'm not like that, but I wish I enjoyed them with him then rather than now.

Wesley died on a Sunday afternoon; moments right after my little brother finished level two in his video game, and around the same time I was listening to rock music with lint on my hair (don't ask me about it). I was jammin all right, twirling my pencil like a pinwheel with my tongue sticking out, ready for fresh air. I'm going to ace this homework, I thought. I'll kick its butt far into Neptune. How obnoxious I was back then. I'm glad that awkward, arrogant speech I used back then has shed off . . . shed off like a snake. Anyway, after I finished my homework, I got the news from mom. Wesley's mother called, and she told her about it. Even though mom had the phone, I heard Wesley's mom bubbling out cries from it. I practically saw her tears form in my mind.

I didn't cry then, but my eyes stung like fire forming around them. I didn't wipe them off to stop the sting, either. To be a good friend, I decided to keep that as a sign that I wouldn't give disrespect to Wesley. My mind was racing then, thinking how fast it happened, and why. Why, why, why?

#

Four years had passed since his death, and it was the first day of high school. I made no mark on my calendar saying so; somehow the date was glued onto my head. What made it odder was that the high school had a different date than the other schools. I don't even remember any of my parents saying anything about when the first day of high school was. I'm probably just imagining things.

When I got to the bus, I realized that it came to a halt seconds after I just stepped outside. Huh. I never saw the bus come in through the street out of any of the window, so that kept me puzzled for a minute. But still, stupid as I was, I got on.

A lady sat in the driver's seat. She had brown, chestnut hair that was wrapped into a ponytail. She had a hard line for her mouth that told me she didn't really like her job.

"Name?" she grumbled.

"I don't need a name," I said. "I'm a student. There's no need for it."

The lady grumbled again. "Name?"

"Tommy Gilroy."

"Purpose of transportation?" she asked.

"Well, I'm here because I need to get to school," I replied.
"But, ma'am, there really is no need—"

"Get in. Now." She grabbed my collar and threw me into the first seat. She drove on. I decided not to say anything. I mean, come on, the look on that lady's face wasn't something you could pass by and smile at. Besides, I wasn't in the mood for an argument anyway.

There weren't too many kids inside, so I pressed my nose against the window. The glass was cold, prickling the tip of my nose. I exhaled a little breath, it fogging up the glass into some sort of blank canvas for a painting. I was no artist then (and still isn't) but I drew a smiling face with my fingertip. Nobody said about not drawing on the windows, but I decided hey, why not. Certainly it would take my mind off of—

Hold on. Something's wrong. I heard something from outside, or was it inside the bus?

I tried to hear the sound again, but nothing came, only the rolling grumbling of the bus's wheels. It reminded me of a song we used to sing back in kindergarten. It was called the Wheels on the Bus. I used to sing it with Wesley, back when he was still cheery and clapping his huge hands like a giant toy monkey soldier.

The bus stop came to another halt. We were at the high school. The stop sign flipped open, as well as the front doors of the bus. But I didn't get off yet.

I noticed something on the stop sign. It didn't say stop, like it always does for a school bus. It was blank.

The entrance of the high school and the hallways were empty. I kept wondering to myself, as I got nearer to my first period class, if I accidentally came to school on a weekend rather than a weekday. There was one way to know, and I reached my first class. That class was Homeroom, of course. But it was same room for World History, so I went in.

There was a mist around the classroom that came with a stench of dread. If people told you that it smelled like rotten eggs, they're wrong. To me it smelled more like a dead animal, or dead animals. That's with a plural. I held up my nose high and clogged it with my forefinger and thumb. I walked to the middle of the classroom to find a seat.

And then—

"TOMMY!" The sharp gasp of breath glued me to the floor. I knew who that was. It was Wesley.

At first I didn't say anything. The mist, the fog, whatever it was, it was getting thicker and colder. Already my hands gotten numb and my breath foggy like it did back at the bus. It wasn't fall yet, so why was it so cold?

"Wesley, is that you?" I called out. My lips were quivering.

Out of the cold mist came his answer: "Yes, Tommy, it's me Wesley! Come over here!"

In my heart I decided that I wanted to go, to reach Wesley and hug him and get the both of us out of here, but my feet didn't move. This time I knew it wasn't the cold that did that; I thought that. I considered his voice, and I didn't move. If someone else had seen me, they most likely would've thought that I was some sort of paranoid kid with no sense of reality. That sounded scary in my mind, but I couldn't think of anything else that I would've looked like anyway.

"But you're dead." I said it coolly and calmly, like breathing fresh air.

"I'm not dead! Who told you that?" Wesley's response came through the cold mist.

I thought up of another question. "Am I dreaming?" While he responded I pinched myself. It didn't work.

"No you're not! This is real, Tommy, real! Come over here, we need to get out!"

"I don't believe you." It was too real for me to believe it, and I don't know why. Wesley . . . he was there, right there, and I didn't do anything.

But then I walked into the mist. And there I saw Wesley.

He looked exactly how he did the night before he died: Plump, stout, and not much of a sense of humor. He had a lopsided grin on his face with missing teeth here and there. He wore the same shirt, too: red-and-white striped that seemed too big for him yet he wore it anyway. Wesley still looked like he did when we were about ten or eleven-years-old, and that's when I realized I might have made a little mistake. He kept muttering my name, and that's when I knew it wasn't real. Or so I thought.

"Tommy," Wesley said. "Wow, you've grown, haven't ya?"

"Wesley . . ." I was astonished. "What happened? You look the same!"

"'Course I do! We're still friends, right?" He nudged me on the shoulder.

"Yeah, friends . . ." I nudged him back, but with a sense of awkwardness that made trip over. I landed on my hands, and I saw his feet.

Wesley wore no shoes. More like he didn't wear any feet, because the shoes looked too big, with Wesley's jeans making large lines that seemed almost like a ghost. My guess was correct when I pressed a finger down his left shoe. It went all the way down, but no touch of his toes.

I got back up. "Wesley, how-?"

"Let's watch another movie, Tommy, I'm bored." He yawned and scratched his armpit.

"Yeah, let's watch a movie." I had the decision in my head whether to stay with Wesley or go back. I still had my family, and it would be nice to go back and stay in a normal world rather than here. But deep in my mind I kept thinking about Wesley, my best friend, my bro . . . I had another brother, but he was still too young to hang

around with. It didn't take too long for me to come up with an answer. I'm sure you'd guess what decision I made just then.

"Let's go, Wesley. You know how much I love those movies we watch." We walked down the hall together, the hall inside a classroom, and passed through the mist. There was the hint of daylight, and I felt happy again.

(From the Candle County Newspaper)

FOURTEEN-YEAR-OLD FOUND DEAD AT JUNIPER HIGH SCHOOL

By Jack Princeton

(CONNECTICUT) Police have announced on Tuesday afternoon that freshman Thomas Gilroy was declared dead. The Gilroy family has been in such a similar state beforehand when mother Janet Gilroy had explained that her son's friend, Wesley Garner, had been found dead in a car accident just four years ago.

"It was awful," she told me when the news broke out about her son's death, "Tommy was so close to his friend Wesley. We . . . we never thought it would have happened again . . ."

It was reported that freshman Thomas Gilroy was supposedly wandering the school searching for a homeroom. The police have found him lying on the ground, splayed, with a large smile on his face. Investigations have reported for him to have been laughing before his death.