

# **An Overdue Eulogy**

by Rocky Shores

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It was a Saturday in '88. I left the house around 9 AM while the sun was bright and yellow in the clear blue sky. Out to the metal swing sets and the monkey bars undergirded with pea gravel. The gravel was coated with whitish dust and soft on in the sense that they shifted easily under force. I'd learned, slowly, that vaulting off the jungle gym and landing in the gravel was just as likely as landing one of railroad ties that cordoned it. The railroad ties were hard--unyielding--and left inch-wide bruises and marks of sticky pitch when landed upon.

There was no pea gravel under the swings. It was the red stuff, the hard stuff, broken into shards that packed into the brown dirt, except when they were busy sticking into your skin. A good economist would say this raised the price of doing anything risky on the swings, and therefore reduced such behavior. Theoretically, anyway. I don't think they account for bragging rights, which is basically the currency of childhood. By those days I'd made the playground my personal obstacle course, with its sand boxes, geometric metal structures, four-foot brick walls, and swing chains I'd grip so tightly as I climbed them that my knuckles bruised and palms bled.

I once grabbed a flimsy rubber seat on the swing set, and twisted the chains high into the air until I could barely wriggle my stomach onto it. Then I spun madly downward, hands and legs splayed in ecstasy until my forehead scraped a good twelve inches over the sharp gravel. My skin was tattered and bloody and I wore it like it was my own Red Badge of Courage.

But that was a different day, and on this perfect morning, the Baby Blue sky that inspired John Denver was crossed by a couple white contrails that spread like furrows of cotton over an azure pond. The air was quiet and empty, and the upper-middle class pukers who polluted the burb were busy with a Saturday Morning orgy of Dinosaucers and Rainbow Brite and the Real Ghostbusters. Playing in my head was the Golden Grahams jingle riffed from Happy Together by the Turtles—"Imagine me and you // and you and me // together eating Golden Grahams // so happily..."

I drifted about on the playground and twisted in one of the swings on the north west corner of the school. It was still cool, maybe 55 or 60 degrees, and I crossed my arms against my skinny torso when the breeze blew. Thoughts of spaceships and Tyranosaurs, laser guns and Russian spies spun around my imagination, intermittently pierced by car horns and birdsong. The blessed solitude of childhood.

At some point I must have glanced across the north side of the brown brick building, and I must have seen Nathan climbing into one of the gigantic Ponderosas on the school's opposite corner. I must have seen it,

though the exact memory is gone—lost to time and entropy and More Important Things. But in my mind I can see him in his tan cargo pants and white T-shirt disappearing into the dark green needles.

I walked across the playground onto the black asphalt marked with chalk and striped with white paint. I neared the tree, calling his name as the branches stretched across my field of vision. He told me to stop. What were the exact words? “don’t come over here”—“go away”...I’ll never remember exactly, but it was enough for my mind to rebound with denial. I stepped on the dead grass and fallen needles beneath the lowest branches.

“Go away,” he said again, emphatic this time.

“Why?” I asked into the sap-scented air.

“I don’t want you to see my butt.”

It was the most self-defeating thing he could’ve said. I took another step under the tree. In the filtered sunlight I could see a fraction of his pale ass framed by shadows. A pine cone broke loose somewhere near the top of the tree and plinkoed through the tangled maze. It landed on the ground. I looked up again. “What are you doing?” I asked.

“Pooping.”

Another pinecone hit the ground. My eyes focused on it. A butt nugget. “Go away,” he repeated. I walked off, stopping 15 feet away next to the wall of the building. Turd after turd landed beneath the tree. Eventually he climbed down, his tattered white sneakers toeing gingerly over the ground.

“How did you wipe your butt?” I asked.

“I had some toilet paper in my pocket.”

I walked back to the tree. There was no toilet paper on the ground. “You put it back in your pocket?” A vision of feces sticking to his fingers as he jammed used asswipe into his pocket overwhelmed me.

“Not in my pocket. That’s stupid,” he said, exasperated. My brain cowered in the morning sun. “It got stuck in the branches.” I looked up into the Ponderosa’s shadowy rectum. A few ribbons of shit-marked tissue dangled like Christmas tinsel. “Wanna play video games?” he asked.

“Sure!” I replied. I started walking toward his house, a musty basement apartment in a 20-something-year-old fourplex. He followed me across the school’s southside playground. As I started across the parking lot he stopped, still on the sidewalk.

“Where are you going?” he asked.

“Your house,” I answered. “I thought you wanted to play video games.”

“Nah, I play those all the time.” He was rubbing it in. The fucker.

“Let’s go to the arcade.”

“Okay!”

“Wait. Do you have any money?”

“Yeah,” I said. “At my house.”

When we got to my foster parents’ backyard, Nathan hid behind the wooden slat fence. I bounded up the splintery stairs of the wooden deck, and opened the sliding glass door to the kitchen as quietly as I could. It may have been 1988, but the décor was straight out of the Nixon Administration. Short paisley carpet in baby shit yellow and meconium brown, stained veneer cabinets, and lead paint over asbestos-impregnated drywall.

At the bottom of my closet was a 35mm film case I’d rescued from the trash, black polyethylene with a bendy grey lid that slid on and off with a thumb’s worth of pressure. Packed with coins, it was heavy in my 10-year-old hand and produced a satisfying rattle when shaken. My gangly foster sisters were strewn across the couches and beige carpet of the basement family room, hypnotized by the TV. I moved quietly and quickly, holding the film case silent in my hand as I passed them, and escaped the way I came.

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\$2.68. That’s what the change added up to. The morning’s work had begun. At Nathan’s house we took a couple empty plastic trash bags from the pantry, and dug a dozen empty cans of Milwaukee’s Best from the kitchen trash. Since the Nintendo was right there, and I begged, we played a couple rounds of Mega Man and Rushin’ Attack. Cheap endorphins. Nathan wasn’t very into it. For him it was something to do alone, to numb the injuries of his childhood. Every now and then we’d play some two-player stuff, with me dying at double the rate he did and watching him rack up extra lives by the dozen.

Before leaving we dug out the couch cushions, and searched the kitchen drawers, entertainment center, and bathroom. Nathan went into his parent’s bedroom. I followed.

“Don’t come in,” he said.

I paused mid-step. “Why?” I asked, more curious than argumentative.

“I don’t like you coming into my parent’s bedroom.”

“Okay.” I furtively stepped back into the doorway, the irony not lost on me. I watched as he searched around the bed, taking two rumpled dollar bills from a beat-up nightstand. He pulled out the drawers under the bed, looked in, but didn’t reach in. He looked up suddenly and rushed past me

out of the room. I chased him through the living room and back to the kitchen. The neighbor upstairs was on the small wooden balcony and we heard him opening the door to his kitchen.

“Why’d you run?” I asked.

“I thought that was my dad and stepmom coming home,” he replied.

So far we’d scavenged twelve cents from the gutter on our way to his house, thirty-something cents from the couch and drawers, and two bucks from his dad and stepmom’s bedroom. More than five bucks already.

There was no sidewalk on the cul-de-sac where his fourplex stood, so we dumped the aluminum cans in the street, crushing them under the soles of our Kmart shoes beneath the early summer sun. The sounds of stomping feet, melodramatic shouts, collapsing aluminum, and mindless laughter echoed off the shoddy buildings.

Back at my house again, I carried a trash bag into the kitchen. Drops of beer and Diet Coke settled into the old carpet as I set it down next to the trash can. In the muck of coffee grounds and used Kleenex I uncovered three soda cans and a broken drinking glass. I left the bags on the floor when I went to the living room.

“Can I hang out with Nathan?” I asked my foster mom.

She was almost fifty, five foot two, with a few wisps of grey in her round-cut black hair. “I don’t know, can you?” she asked. She was a perfectionist, as was her father, and probably his as well.

“May I?” I asked.

“May you what?” I understood the game. Submission first, then permission. As long as she was focused on proper grammar she wouldn’t notice that I’d already been hanging out with him, and we were snatching every bit of cash we saw.

“May I hang out with Nathan?” I asked in the best English I could muster. There was surely some point in there that could have been corrected from the bowl-cut-on-high.

“What are you guys doing?”

I told her we were collecting cans and bottles to take to the recycling center at King Soopers in the mall. She had told me many times that Nathan was a bad influence. But getting me to spend several hours outdoors—plus pushing 1 of 9 foster kids out from underfoot—it more than balanced out. “Okay,” she told me.

“When do I have to be back?” I asked.

“Five thirty,” she replied. I couldn’t believe it.

I ran out the door excited as fuck. “I don’t have to be back till five-thirty!” I told Nathan.

“Yes!” he exclaimed. Then he was quiet for a second. “Where are the bags?”

I went back to the kitchen and got them.

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No trash can was safe. We stalked them with our 13-gallon bags, digging cans and bottles from every round steel bin that sat outdoors. It was filthy, sticky work. We found a few more in the enormous grass field just past the playground on the west side of the building. We snatched them up greedily, while leaving the randomly scattered cigarette packs and used condoms untouched. At the playground we added sand to the uncrushed cans, squashing them on the blacktop before continuing north toward the mall.

In that direction the grass dropped down, creating a bowl-like depression with a soccer field that spilled over into a baseball diamond. We crossed it and tossed the steel barrels next to the diamond’s tall fence. A few young spruce trees dotted the summer grass that sloped gently down in front of us. Along a row of suburban fences, the certainty of the unburdened present merged with a sky of untrammelled possibilities.

We walked a couple hundred yards north, down to a massive drainage ditch that cut across the field. On the other side were the high school’s game fields. To the east it continued for miles, tunneling under roads and branching up steep hills into ever more expensive neighborhoods. I carried the bag of glass bottles, and Nathan the bag of aluminum cans, as we ran down the sharply-angled wall into the ditch. More than a decade previous, while the concrete was fresh and soft, an artist had climbed down and scrawled a five-foot tall KISS logo into it. Over time, flowing water and sand had worn away the artist’s shoe prints, and though the emblem was weathered, it was still garish and glorious at the bottom of the ditch.

He led us west along the bottom of the ditch, strands of his neck-length hair radiating blonde in the midday sun. We climbed out, crossed a street, and went back down the other side. The gray concrete came to an end, replaced by a maze of sandy culverts with dirt walls stretching ten feet high. Above us was a field of tall grass, and young sunflowers that would grow more than eight feet before bursting into yellow, frisbee-sized blooms by mid-July. In places the field was like unscathed prairie, as it had existed for millenia before. In others, it was a dumping ground for old furniture and rusting construction equipment.

During heavy storms the ditches filled and over the years I read many stories of folks who jumped into the raging currents, never to be seen alive again. Bodies have been discovered as far as a hundred miles downstream, decades after they went missing. But most of the time the ditches were dry, their bottoms filled with sand and loose stones. Nathan led us until finally we came to three tunnels side by side, each one at least twenty feet wide and nearly as tall. They ran beneath a wide parking lot and under Academy Boulevard.

"These are the Trippin Tunnels," he said.

"Why do they call them that?" I asked.

"Because this is where the Stoners go to trip."

"Weird." In my mind, I pictured long-haired teenagers in torn jeans losing their footing on the concrete.

We walked down the middle tunnel. It was a couple hundred yards long, dirty, and the air was cool and damp. Sunlight entered through the ends and dimly lit the graffiti-covered walls. A filthy mattress lay near the middle of the tunnel and I imagine that if we'd checked around it we could've found a fuckton of used condoms. We continued through, shouting Hellos! and Shits! and DIE MOTHERFUCKERS! into the emptiness and listening when our words echoed back.

Finally we stood in a place where the sheer walls opened to the sky. Ahead of us the top closed up and the tunnels sloped downward before continuing. Mounted into the concrete was a ladder and above that was a barbed-wire topped fence. At the top of the concrete, scrawled in dark spray paint was a two-line poem:

*Lifes a bitch and then you die*

*So fuck the world let's all get high*

We climbed the ladder and Nathan scaled the fence while I held our bags of recyclables. He shifted his weight carefully over the barbed wire and I tied off the bags before tossing them to him. Then I followed him over.

King Soopers wasn't far, literally a walk across the street, and along the way my friend picked up a few pebbles and placed them in his pocket. Once inside the grocery store, we went to the recycling counter. Trade-in prices were posted on a board overhead--aluminum 26 cents a pound,

newspaper 2 cents, glass 3 cents. The sensible thing to do, given this information, would have been to skip the rest and just collect aluminum cans, crush them down, and fill them with sand. But I don't think we ever figured that out.

By the time the clerk put the \$2.13 in my hand it was early afternoon. Four houses had passed since we'd started collecting, and hunger gnawed our innards. We meandered through the grocery store, filling our mouths with free samples--pizza rolls, cottage cheese with lemon pepper on Ritz crackers, artificial crab salad. I followed Nathan to the back of the store, to a spot next to the deli counter and across from the cereal aisle. Sitting on the counter, turned kitty corner so the staff wouldn't have to be distracted, was a self-serve frozen yogurt machine. Small cones 50 cents. Waffle cones 1 dollar. A hole was drilled in the counter for customers to drop payment into.

Nathan looked at me with his blue eyes. "Here's how you pay," he said.

He reached into his pocket and concealed some pebbles in his hand. One by one he dropped them through the hole. Each one landed with a clink against the change on the bottom. He placed four pebbles in my hand, grabbed a waffle cone from the stack, and filled it with vanilla soft-serve. I imitated every step, filling the cone until the frozen yogurt barely balanced on it.

We shuffled briskly--guiltily--to the mall entrance, greedily consuming the cones as we went. We passed the cheap shoe store and the cosmetology school (where a student stylist would cut your hair for three bucks). We crunched through the last of the cones as we race-walked to the arcade. All our dollar bills went instantly into the quarter machine, and between the two of us we had 33 quarters. What fools spend hours collecting cans to blow it all on a few rounds of Golden Axe and Final Fight, Xybots and NARC? What idiots risk their health digging through trash cans, just to make green-robed dwarves and bearded women swing axes and swords at pixelated zombies? And who believes, in those dopamine-infused moments, that those characters' lives should be theirs? The answer is, we did. And though it felt like forever, the money was gone in less than 45 minutes.

Our money blown, our pockets empty, our hands and legs filthy from the day, we trekked back--through the tunnels, along the the sandy ditches, over the vibrant grass. My time wasn't up, so we went back to Nathan's apartment. His dad and stepmother still weren't home.

"Do you wanna see what's in my parent's room?" he asked.

"Yeah," I said.

We walked back to their bedroom. He bent below the mattress and pulled out a drawer. He reached in and stood back up holding a white rubber penis by its handle. I took it from his hand, stared at it, pressed on the head with my thumb. It was a firmish rubber overlaying a solid plastic structure.

Nathan grabbed it back from me. "Yuck," he said. "I can't believe you touched it."

"You touched it, too!" I replied.

"Yeah, but I touched the handle. You touched the part that goes in my stepmom's vagina."

"Oh."

I looked down at my hands.

He twisted the bottom. It started vibrating. We burst into laughter. He wielded it like a dagger, pointing it at my face. I lifted my hands, turned my head, and ran from the room. He chased me through the apartment. I crouched in the kitchen while he prodded me with the dildo and wiped it against my neck.

"Okay, okay, stop!" I shouted.

He laughed and went back as I followed.

"Shit!" he said. "It won't shut off."

He twisted and flipped the dildo, but the vibrating continued. Finally he dropped it back in the drawer and pulled out what looked like a long, flesh-colored rubber sock. A cord stuck out from it. He set it on the floor and plugged it in. The rubber sleeve came to life, elongating into a foot-long Dune-worm looking monstrosity that buzzed as it hoisted itself into the air.

"What is it?" I asked.

"I don't know," Nathan answered.

He picked it up from the floor, turning the base in his hands. Near the cord was a hole a couple inches across. The hollow interior contained several hump-shaped lumps of rubber that vibrated against each other. I reached toward the opening.

"Don't touch it!" he said.

My hand stopped.

"I know what it is!" he continued.

"What?" I asked.

"It's a pussy machine. The inside is supposed to tickle your dick!"

"What the...?" I said.

He tossed it at me. The vibrating pussy machine hit me in the chest and I toppled over trying to escape it. Nathan laughed and soon I was on

the floor laughing along with him. We laughed until our stomach muscles ached.

He unplugged it, put it back in the drawer, closed the drawer and left the room. I followed him. In the drawer the dildo was still vibrating. The batteries probably died before his dad and stepmom returned. Or at least, I hope they did.

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My foster mom had multiple sclerosis, and a couple years after that summer it flared up, badly. She struggled to continue as a foster parent as her ability to walk, to feed herself, to speak, slowly degraded. The home closed and I was sent to another on the other end of town. I called Nathan and told him what happened. I hoped I could still somehow meet up with my friend, but it wasn't possible.

He called me one day in February. He told me he was moving to Calhan, a spread out town about forty miles east of the city. He told me he didn't want me to know his address. He didn't want to give me his new phone number. I asked him to call me again. He said he wouldn't. It was goodbye.

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Twenty years later I found myself in a low-walled cubicle in a mortgage processing center of a large national bank. It was a slow day in a slow month. I leaned over my keyboard, clicked the mouse, and with no work to keep me occupied, I thought of my old friend.

I thought of his eternally messy blonde hair and angular forehead. I thought of the front teeth that were too big for the rest of his face. I thought about all the times Mr Clark had me walk with him to the principal's office for telling insanely dirty jokes and making sounds like a humpback whale in class. I thought of the story he told me of a spaceship crew that became infected with a bacteria-virus that drove them to madness and cannibalism. I thought of the time we watched Madonna sing Vogue on MTV, and how he said the cones on her tits made him horny.

It was time to search him out. Facebook had a few similar names, but none that were the right age. White pages had a few possibilities, but no phone numbers. Google had nothing. Then Yahoo's results sent me to a remembrance written for him in the Tucson Observer. Then to a note on the virtual memorial page of the Tucson Gay Museum. None of these were definitive, but the obituary that ran in the Colorado Springs Gazette was.

Eastern Colorado, like a lot of unpopulated areas, can be a quiet place. It's dry and strong winds drive massive clouds of dust over the yellow grass and yucca. During the 1990s, there was little economic opportunity, and driving around in a pickup truck and getting wasted wasn't an uncommon passtime. Sometime in his late teens, Nathan developed an addiction to methamphetamine. And while I jammed out to Semi-Charmed Life, it was a reality he was living. In October of 2000 he overdosed and died. A year later his father also died, from cirrhosis.

I wondered many times--if I'd looked for my friend back then--if I'd had the time and means and will to seek him out--could I have made a difference? Could I have pushed him a little bit toward recovery? Could he have known the struggles and hopes and aches and elation that make a life worth living? Or, not?

Colorado Springs Gazette 11/2000, Metro 45

**NATHANIEL TODD DICKERHOFF**

Mr. Dickerhoff, 22, died Oct. 6, 2000, in Tucson, Ariz., as a result of drug abuse.

Mr. Dickerhoff was born Nov. 5, 1977, in Aurora to Charles Dickerhoff and Victoria Wharton-Greenhow.

He is survived by his parents; a step-mother, Sherri Dickerhoff; two brothers, Kevin and Aaron; and a sister, Lesley Cutsinger.

Memorial services will be at 2 p.m. Saturday at Living Word Community Church, 532 Colorado Ave., Calhan.

Memorial contributions can be made to any charity.



Mr. Dickerhoff

I cannot know these things. I take comfort that even as his life collapsed into the misery and self-hatred that both fuel and are reinforced by addiction--even as that happened, he was loved by many people, particularly his mother. There's simply no love bigger than that, and he had it, even if he couldn't sense it. I

hope he could.

Nathan was often sad, often angry, and in many ways an abandoned and neglected child. He was also wild and hilarious and free and full of life.

When I think of his strangeness, his loneliness, his radical freedom, I'm reminded that the conventions and worries, the disappointments and social constraints that often pervade this life--they are only artifice. The stuff of life is found in the moments in which it is lived: in a morning of picking cans, a few minutes of shoplifting frozen yogurt. It's in hours wasted on joysticks and flashing screens and games of pretend. I keep these memories, these moments of forever, and offer this overdue farewell to Nathan Dickerhoff who was, for a few years, my best and closest friend.