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See You Later

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See You Later

By

Magdalena Fransen

Runner-Up, TRU Creative Non-Fiction Contest

There's a picture in my house. In the picture, I'm nine years old and my best friend, Mike, is with me. We are on his red scooter, and the sun is setting behind us. We are both smiling. It is a beautiful day.

I met Stephen Michael White when I was six years old. My mother and I lived in South Korea at the time. We had moved there two years prior, and finding friends in a foreign country was hard. My mother and I were the only company we had. People have often told me age doesn't matter. This logic does not apply to a single mother, and a young child, living far from home. We both needed a break. So when we kept bumping into two foreigners at E-mart, my mother introduced herself. My mother became friends with Mike's mom, Stephanie White. As it turned out, Stephanie was also a single mother with a child around my age. She was certain we would have much in common.

I've come to discover that the term "around your age" is very vague. In fact, Mike was six years older than me. Yet somehow, Mike and I became really good friends. I thought of him as my big brother, and my mother saw him as a son. Despite all our differences, and the fact that we were not related by blood, we were a family.

Mike and I did not have much in common, but we bonded over simple things. We both had no father, we both missed our home countries, and we were both bullied on a day-to-day basis because we weren't Korean. It was not unusual for Mike to come home with bruises and cuts on his skin. While walking home, teenagers would often beat him up, just for fun. Eventually Stephanie enrolled Mike in *Taekwondo*, hoping he'd learn to defend himself. Unfortunately, this made things worse. Now he had to fight off black belts too. Mike couldn't protect himself.

Instead, he protected me. Because I was younger than him, Mike could chase away my tormentors by saying, “Leave her alone.” I only wish I could have done the same for him.

Mike taught me how to protect myself, how to ride a bike. He taught me how to play video games and he even taught me how to skip rocks. I loved Stephen Michael White.

In 2008, my mother and I went down to visit Mike and Stephanie. They had moved a couple hours away from us and I missed Mike. It was Mother’s Day weekend and our parents had arranged a picnic. I was so excited! It had been almost a year since I had last seen Mike and I had so much to tell him.

As we unpacked, Stephanie told us about a new *jimjilbang* (a gender segregated public bath) that had just opened in town. I loved *jimjilbangs*. The baths varied from hot to cold and sometimes they had different themes. For example, one bath I had been to had coffee beans in the water. This made the person who got out of the bathtub smell like coffee. The bathtubs could fit ten to thirty people at a time. *Jimjilbangs* were very crowded buildings. It was common to go to a *jimjilbang* with many family members, with your friends and their families too.

Because *jimjilbangs* were segregated, initially Mike had not wanted to go. Stephanie, my mother, and I would be on a separate floor than Mike. He would be left alone with strangers. When Mike went to *jimjilbangs* in the past he was attacked by teenagers or treated like an outcast. So that night, Mike planned on spending his night playing videogames at home. But at the last moment, Mike decided he was coming with us. I had convinced him to come. I was so happy he was coming with us.

That was the day my mother took the picture of Mike and me on his scooter. We had spent the entire day together. It was a great day. We spent it walking around and talking. We

traded old memories for new ones. We talked about our future, we talked about our mothers. We talked about our dreams for the future. Mike had told me he wanted to move back to the U.S.. I was only nine years old and I didn't have a plan, but I did confide in him that I missed Canada. Between the stories, jokes and piggybacks I remember thinking he'd make such a good dad. Mike was a good listener and he was kind. He was one year away from getting his motorcycle license. Mike told me he would take me out on his motorcycle when he got his license. In a week, Mike would turn fifteen. But Mike never saw his fifteenth birthday.

I will never forget that night. I will never forget how the Korean woman hurried into the female floor in the *jimjilbang* looking for us. I will never forget what she said.

“Your son. Your son. He fell and hit his head. Come quickly!”

He hit his head. That is what the lady had told us. But this was not true. If he had only fallen and hit his head, his death would have just been a freak accident. His mother would have closure by now. My mother and I might still be expats in South Korea. But what happened to Mike, to my big brother, was no accident.

He was found in one of the tubs, face first, and unconscious.

If it was an accident, why did he have multiple bruises on his back that resembled hand marks? Bruises that had not been on his skin. Bruises around his neck, shoulders and arms. If he had fallen, why had no one pulled Mike out? If he had hit his head, and just fell into the water, why did his lungs have three litres of water and blood in them? If what the lady said was fact, why had no one come to testify? To this day I do not know the answer to any of these questions.

Later, at Stephanie's request, my mother began calling Michael's family and friends. She informed them that Mike had passed away. My mother told them that she was so, so, sorry, but

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Stephanie was unable to speak at the moment. My mother told them that Stephanie would call them
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as soon as she was able. My mother did not tell Mike's family how he had died. How could she?

We were still in shock.

All of us dealt with our grief differently. My mother called everyone who knew Mike and Stephanie. Stephanie sat in her chair crying, holding Mike's favourite hat. My mother made Stephanie a tea and continued to comfort her. I had never seen either of these women so sad. For the first time in my life, I was silent. Why had I asked Mike to come? Why did he listen to me? All I could think was that this was my fault. In my mind, I heard the last words he said to me. The five words echoed loudly in my head until they became a distant memory.

"I'll see you guys later!"

And he will someday.