

CASEY SHEARER PERSONAL ESSAY

It's been two weeks since I broke up with my girlfriend for the second time in a month. I have recovered and am, in the words of my roommate and life-long friend Chris, "back in the game." Or at least I think I am. It's three a.m. early Tuesday morning. I am sleeping. Chris comes into my room and wakes me up. His mother is on the phone and has something to tell us. "Can it wait until morning?" I ask. The answer is no. Annoyed, I get up and take the phone. She wants to talk to both of us at the same time, but there's only one phone. I get the news first.

"Casey, Brian died tonight."

The Los Angeles Times February 24, 1998. "Torrential downpours last evening, the result of the weather phenomenon known as El Niño, took the lives of two highway patrolman, and two college students. The patrolmen were swept away along with their car when a portion of the road they were driving on disintegrated. The two college men, students at Pomona college in Claremont, died when a one-hundred year old eucalyptus tree was uprooted and crushed their car as they stopped at a stop sign on the way to class."

A tree. A family tree. A tree house. Wood. Strength. Shade. Fruit. Life. A tree.

1989. I'm 11 years old. I'm playing an AYSO all-star soccer game at Paul Revere school in the Palisades. Chris and I play for the Santa Monica team. We're playing the West LA squad. We are in our traditional blue and gold, they in their red, white and blue except for the goalies. Chris is our goalie. His counterpart between the wooden posts is a stalker kid with bright blond hair dressed in black who keeps yelling passionately at his teammates. We win. The other goalie is dejected. Although we don't know at the time, the other goalie is Brian.

A family party during Christmas of '95 at Orin's house. All the usual suspects are there, the Mores, the Parrents, the Browns, the Utsingers, the Schmalholzs and my family. Oh yeah, the Cressners, Brian and his parents, are there too. These are the families of my best friends: Orin, Matt, Chris, Carl, Adam and Brian. Peter and Jeff are missing. Orin, Matt, Chris and I have known each other since before pre-school. I think we were friends at age two and a half. We picked up the others along the way. Brian was the last. He went to school with us in seventh grade. He started hanging out with us in tenth. Us boys are watching National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation. My sister, who is attending law school in New Orleans walks into the room. She sees Brian. "A new member of the group, I'm not sure if I approve," she says jokingly. She would have. I don't think my sister ever saw Brian after that.

It's January of '96 and I am home in LA visiting. Visiting at home. Is that possible? Two years of living in Finland will do that to you. I am home visiting my boys. I am on the sidelines watching Chris, Matt, Orin and Brian play a soccer game. If they win they are in the driver's seat for the league championship. Brian is the goalie and the best player on

the team. The score is tied 0-0. There are five minutes left. The coach decides to take Brian out of goal and put him a/forward, hoping for a winning goal. Almost magically, the offense starts to click. Ronald is sent free down the left wing. He crosses the ball towards Brian. The pass appears to be out of his reach. He lays out headfirst and gets his forehead on the ball. The ball rockets towards the goal. The goalie stands motionless as a roar erupts from the crowd, I jump up. The ball hits the side of the post and smacks off the wood, going out of bounds. Brian lies face-down in the grass and grimaces. He gets up, turns toward the sideline and smiles. There was something about that smile. Two minutes later, Ronald scores the winning goal. Everybody smiles.

June of '96. All my friends are finishing high school in LA. I'm visiting from Finland. We're at one of the various end of the year parties, outside in one of our classmates' yards. Brian is dancing, dangerously close to falling in the swimming pool. He's singing, incredibly off key. "At the Copa, Copa Cabana." I have to leave. I'm going back to Finland for my graduation the next day. I'm sad at having to leave my friends yet again. I say goodbye to everyone. Brian comes up to me, grabs me and says, "Case, you have to make sure you come back later in the summer. Who needs Finlandia? You probably don't realize this now, but you mean so much to me. You have to come back." He smiles. I'm happy. I smile.

The summer of '97. It's a hot afternoon and the boys are sitting in Orin's room shooting the shit. Orin's room is like a sauna and we're all sweating even with the fan on. I don't remember why, but Brian says, "I'm going to tell you guys something that no one else knows." He proceeds to tell us the story of when he lost his virginity. He's in tenth grade and an eleventh grade girl is driving him home. She stops at her house instead of taking him straight home. The next thing Brian knows he's on the floor in her room and has become a man. The story is funny for some reason I can't remember and it sheds some new light on high school, but that's not what I'm thinking. I'm thinking, "damn, he's one of us. 'No longer is Brian one of our friends that's just around sometimes. He told us his biggest secret. We are his best friends and he is ours. He's one of the family."

February 23, 1998. A tree fell in Pomona. A witness said it didn't make a sound. We lost a member of our family. A branch of our family tree was broken.

The summer of '97. It's after a U2 concert. We're at Norm's. Norm's is a twenty-four hour diner that offers cheap food and some of the craziest scenes imaginable comprised often of wannabe gangsters, vagabonds, transvestites and upset waitresses. It's where we go when we're drunk and hungry at two in the morning. Norm's is on Lincoln and Colorado, kitty corner from Denny's, our other late night home. I order a side of fries. "You always order a side of potatoes," Brian says.

It's after one of our friends' birthday parties, a seventies party entitled Pimps and Ho's, early on a Wednesday morning. We're at Norm's. We're drunk and dressed like we came from a pimp of the year pageant. Peter is wearing purple sequin pants with a matching vest and hat. We sit down in a booth I'm wearing a purple shirt straight out of Saturday

Night Fever with gray bell-bottoms and a tan hat that looks like a safari hat. The whole outfit cost ten dollars. Brian is wearing a hat with a fake leopard skin band and a ridiculous maroon shirt. I think we look ridiculous, but hey it's Norm's so no one even looks at us funny. Brian takes all the silverware and shoves it off the table. He then puts his head down on the table. Peter laughs and picks up the silverware. He says, "B you can't do that." Brian shoves the silverware on the floor again. The waitress arrives with our water. She leaves. Brian sits up and dumps his out on the table. We are told that we need to control Brian, or we'll have to leave. Somehow Peter, the designated driver for the evening, convinces them to let us stay. I order a side of hash browns. Brian flashes his trademark smile. There was something about that smile. Everybody laughs.

The Pomona fire department took the portion of the tree that fell on the car and left it on the side of the road where the accident occurred. Brian's friends turned the monstrous piece of beautiful life into a shrine covered with pictures, carvings, flowers, candles, and beer bottles. One of his soccer teammates tacked a pair of Brian's goalie gloves to the tree. His girlfriend carved out "I'll love you always jerky." Another person carved "I love my friends." Someone else carved in big capital letters, TREE, LIFE, DEATH. A tree. Five of us go down to see the tree the day before the funeral. We stare at that tree for what seems like an eternity. No one really says anything. We take turns crying, kicking the air, pacing and kneeling. We hug each other. Surrounded by beautiful eucalyptus trees on a college green, we stand on a sidewalk and stare at the one that had fallen. One of Brian's college friends walks up and recognizes Orin. They met when Orin visited Brian at school the previous year. Another one of Brian's friends asks us to help her choose a picture to put on the tree. We select one of Brian walking into a room sporting his wide, wonderful grin. Somebody says, "So many people loved him." I don't know whether to cry or smile, but that was B in a nutshell. He made you smile. So I cry.

The summer of '97. Brian, Orin and I are driving back to Orin's house from a workout at Brian's club. We stop at a yard sale. Brian buys a bowling pin. "This will be awesome to have in my room," he says. A bowling pin.

It's the day before the funeral. Five of us are sitting in Brian's dorm room with his friends from Pomona college. One of them went to our high school. Brian's college friends tell us we can take things from the room if we want. Orin rummages around, and pulls out something. "Case, look at this." It's the bowling pin. I smile. Awesome. I take the bowling pin home and put it in my room.

We sit in Brian's room without Brian for hours telling stories about him. I am supposed to be home for dinner. Who cares. We don't want to cry anymore, we tell the stories that make us laugh, the ones that make it seem as Brian lived like El Niño.

Matt tells Brian's college friends about Brian's 12th grade anthropology project on the Hopi Indians. He had neglected to research the Hopi and decided to make up a good portion of his presentation. In front of the entire class he says that his housekeeper was a Hopi and her name was Kobayashi, which is a name from the movie The Usual Suspects. He proceeds to give his presentation which he says is based on an interview with his

housekeeper but really is based on a doll he had bought for two dollars from Matt. He then decides to involve the teacher in his presentation. He paints her face in the supposed tribal fashion and makes her perform the traditional Hopi snake dance in front of the entire class with a rubber make in her mouth. The next day the teacher tells Brian that he has disgraced her and the entire Hopi tribe. She gives him a B+ for the project. We can't figure out how he got away with it. Keyser Soze is all Brian said about it. Keyser Soze was the name of the master mind in The Usual Suspects who got away with everything. Brian liked to envision himself that way.

Someone tells a story about how Brian had a biology test he wanted to get out of. He ate the hottest jalapeño pepper he could find. It caused his eyes to water, his face to swell up, and caused him to sweat profusely. He went to the nurse, who took one look at him and said, "Oh my goodness, you have to get right to bed." Brian got his note from the nurse and postponed his test. Keyser Soze?

Our friend Emily from high school who went to Pomona with Brian tells the story of Brian's attempt to freestyle at a party at my house. He was standing in a corner by himself trying to rhyme, saying "I be me. We be we. I be we. I am B. I be me."

Chris tells us about a time he and Brian went to get blood tests. When they put the needle in Chris' arm, he looked away feeling a bit scared. When it was Brian's turn, he stared down the needle like it was an opposing soccer player. Chris said he could feel Brian's strength.

Orin asks what people at Pomona called Brian. They said Papa Crez, because they thought he must have illegitimate children everywhere. We tell them we called him B. Dalton or Hit Squad or just B. No one really remembers where the names came from, except for Hit Squad which came from a rap song Brian and Chris made for a twelfth grade math project. "The B-C-C-B hit squad is in the hizouse."

Brian's best friend at Pomona, Nate, tells us about the Cressnet factor; how all the frats and security on campus had to devise plans to keep Brian from sneaking into parties without paying. In particular he tells us about one of their escapes from campus security and angry frat brothers by jumping into a tree after crashing a party. One second they were dancing on a terrace, the next they were running wildly from a pursuing campus security officer. The tree provided the means for escape. The tree delivered them. I look around at everybody smiling. A tree.

It's the funeral and Brian's dad, Ted, is giving the most moving speech I've ever heard. He is talking about how the Cressner family is dealing with Brian's death. When Ted speaks of how brave Brian's 14 year old brother Michael has been in the aftermath of his brother's death while his parents cried. Everybody loses it. I grab Matt who's sitting next to me and we both sob. Then Ted talks about Brian's passion for soccer, his newly acquired vigor for school work and his amazing capacity for friendship. He talks about that wonderful smile; the big cheshire cat grin. How it could light up a room and make your day. How there was just something about that smile. Everybody laughs. Everybody cries. Ted questions how an object that had been on this earth as long as a one-hundred year old tree could take the life of his son.

What giveth life, takes it away.

Everybody's crying. It's the day of the funeral. The service is over. We have just watched our friend lowered into a grave. "We chose this so you guys could come talk to him," Brian's father says to me. I take one last look at the grave...and then another and then another. No one really wants to be there. No one really wants to leave. Brian's parents and brother drive off. We're the last one's there. Time to go eat before the reception. Where to go is the big question.

Norm's is the answer.

Chris and I are driving to Norm's. The sun is setting. We're driving West toward the ocean as the sun sets. We get off the freeway at Fourth street. "Let's see the sun one more time," Chris says. We chase the sun as we try to make it through downtown Santa Monica to the beach. We get there, and the sun has set. Appropriate.

We turn the car around and go to Norm's to honor our friend.

Twelve of us walk in, wearing dark funeral suits. We create an interesting scene. The waiters don't think twice about a party of twelve in suits coming in at 5:30pm. Somehow, it makes sense. I order a side of fries.

Spring weekend 1998. The KRS-One concert ends. People are going back stage. "Can we get back there?" says Chris.

"Nah, there's security guards," I say.

Brian would have found a way to get back there," Chris says.

It's Halloween of 1996, Brian is dressed as the landlord in Three's Company. The Alcoholiks are having a concert. Somehow, he gets on stage and dances there for almost the whole concert while countless others are thrown off the stage. "Brian would have found a way," Chris repeats. I nod.

Brian and I.

It's the day after the Pimps and Ho's party. Brian and I are chilling by ourselves in Orin's jacuzzi, recovering.

It's a few minutes before the one and only party at my house. Brian and I are shopping for supplies.

It's the day after a party at Brian's. He and I are chilling at his house. It feels like it could be my house.

We're swimming at Peter's.

We're in the sauna at B's club.

Straight chillin', talking, whatever. That's what a friendship is. The crazy stories are one thing, but this is what I'll miss the most.

It's January of '97. Brian and I are driving together to Santa Barbara to visit Matt and Jeff. The two of us together. We're talking. He smiles. The sunset is incredible.

January of '98. I'm at Brian's house watching football with him, his family and his friend Nate. The Packers beat the FortyNiners. Nate's happy, he's a cheesehead. I get up to leave and ask what's going on that night. Brian shrugs "I don't know. Maybe we'll do something," he says. I walk out the door and drive home. We don't do anything that night. A few days later I fly back to college.

February of '98. Chris and I call Brian. We leave a five minute message on his machine. "Where you at B?" Chris plays a song on the guitar during the message. We think it's funny. We forget to leave our numbers. I call back and leave the numbers, asking Brian to call us back.

A week and a half later. Brian hasn't called back. I'm disappointed. He never calls.

He was a part of our family. He gave us strength, a home, companionship, but most of all, a reason to smile. Like Brian, live for today, but remember to look up at the trees. But most of all remember to remember.

Brian's gone, but I remember him. Brian's right here. He's at Orin's, at Norm's, crashing parties, he's in my room with the bowling pin. He's gone. He's not gone.

It's two months later and I am at peace with the death of one of my best friends. Or at least I think I am. A one hundred year old eucalyptus tree fell on top of a car Brian was riding in, crushing him and a friend after being uprooted during a rain storm in Pomona. They were at a stop sign, on their way to class. The tree didn't make a sound until it hit the car. They didn't look up. They didn't know. It never rains in Southern California. Fuck El Niño.

"On through the houses of the dead past those fallen in their tracks
Always moving ahead and never looking back
Now I don't know how I feel, I don't know how I feel tonight
If I've fallen 'neath the wheel, if I've lost or I've gained sight
I don't even know why, I don't know why I made this call
Or if any of this matters anymore after all

But the stars are burnin' bright like some mystery uncovered
I'll keep moving through the dark with you in my heart
My blood brother."
-Bruce Springsteen.