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John Stoakes: All-American Kid

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The story of a Western Oklahoma athlete dying young.

John Stoakes: All-

The tubes hurt my arms; my throat was so raw and cracked I knew I couldn't even cry. The quiet whiteness of the room scared me, the sturdy footsteps in the hallway were a million miles away enclosed in some mystic case. At first I was frigid; then I began to panic.

"Yuck," I thought. "You're the all-American kid, you gotta get hold of yourself and find out what's going on."

My head rocked as I tried to think. It was like someone was playing a joke on me — a long term joke — lasting forever. No matter how hard I tried, I kept seeing his face.

Going back, it had to have started on my twelfth birthday. My friends and I were pushing one another around in a backyard football game. An Atlas van pulled up to the vacant house next door, and after much scowling, two burly men began to unload. We watched as they struggled, and with hands tucked deep in our Levi pockets, we snickered knowingly at their cussing.

The next day in the middle of a storm that twisted my 10-speed into a coiled mess, the new neighbor arrived in his slick red Corvette. After the wind went down, Mom sent Dad and me to meet him with one of her apple pies. When the usual exchange of adult amenities had taken place, he turned to me, stretched out a long, slim hand, smiled and said, "Hello,

son."

Man, were we impressed with his car; for awhile anyway, until dad told me the man, whose name was Karl Tilman, was a mortician. "Huh," I thought. "Just my luck to live next door to some fool that embalms stiff's."

All my buddies thought it was a joke too, and I got teased about a week before my temper flared, and I punched Joe square in the jaw and told him to keep his mouth shut.

The first Halloween after Tilman moved in, Joe, Frank, Herb, and I decided to have a little fun. Tilman spent a lot of time out in his yard, and before long, it began to look like a BETTER HOMES AND GARDENS lawn. We waited until after eleven to make sure my parents were asleep. Joe and Frank made Tilman's yard look like a Bourbon Street celebration by stringing miles of toilet paper from one end to the other. Every shrub and cedar took on a mummy-like appearance. Herb and I applied Coalgate shaving cream to the windows and to the shiny Corvette.

And someone — I can't remember who — produced a few eggs.

We had a blast. As we were light stepping it back to my yard, we heard a strange whistling. There was Tilman standing on his back redwood deck staring right at us. He never made a sound

and he never told our parents.

The next Halloween we waited until Tilman drove off in his fancy car, and then we demolished his yard. Just as we were standing back and admiring our work, we heard this strange whistling again. There, like a specter, was that strange man on his redwood deck, his stare searing our souls.

The very next day, November the first, our parents (perhaps, knowing the real culprits), shepherded us over as volunteers to assist in the restoration of the yard. Tilman never frowned, never complained; he just stuck out that long-fingered hand of his, smiled, and said, "Thanks, son, for coming over and helping me."

While we were retrieving miles of "tee-peed" toilet paper, washing windows, and picking up a ton of bottles and cans, he just watched, whistled, and grinned. By the time we had served our retribution, I felt so slimy I went home and stood in a hot shower until Mom made me get out and turn off the water.

By the age of fifteen, I had given up playing jokes on Tilman, and my life revolved around basketball. I went to bed thinking basketball, dreamed about basketball, and woke up with it on my mind. I knew I was destined to be a star; watch out Magic Johnson; here comes John Stoakes, all-American boy.

American Kid

by Todd Winn

My sophomore year in high school, however, I did get a little sidetracked by Alice Ann. During our after-school basketball practices, the cheerleaders used to come into the gym and practice their cheers. Alice Ann was the prettiest girl I had ever seen. Her hair was straight, black, and hung down around her waist. Her body was just right, long and lean. Her Jordache jeans were molded for her body and turned to fluid when she walked. The first time I asked her out, I was a basket case, and even when she said yes, I didn't know what to do. Our first date would have been a disaster had Alice Ann not taken charge. She wasn't like the other girls I had known. Alice Ann had a calm assurance about herself, and she knew exactly what she wanted out of life. After a few dates, we began to see each other all the time. She became my best friend, my lover, and my number-one supporter. With Alice Ann under control, my attention turned once again to full-time basketball.

By my senior year in high school, my life was neatly planned. I would play college basketball for O-State, turn down an offer with the pros, take over the family business, marry Alice Ann in St. Xavier Church, and have my own family. Life was just one ball game after another. One flattering sports article after another. And Mr. Tilman never seemed to miss a

game, home or away. I would look up in the stands and find his eyes fixed on me. When he would catch my look, he always broke out in that confounded smile, flicked his long fingers in some type of greeting.

When Coach Floy called our first practice in October of my last year, I knew I had been hitting the Coors too hard over the summer. I just couldn't get in shape. I was always dogged tired, and I missed lay-up after lay-up. I shrugged it off and got a little better when I started munching a steady diet of B-12. Our team, the Rams, was ranked number one in the state, and I knew if we were going to stay on top through the state playoff, I had to stay healthy. One night after Mass I talked to Father Coady about how exhausted I felt all the time; he didn't seem too concerned and said I was letting my nerves get to me.

Every game became a nightmare, struggling to breathe, blinding headaches; the pressure began to mount. We were in the home stretch now. We were going into the final game of the regular season against arch rival Morrow Lucky Cardinals. At our first meeting in December, the game had ended 78 - 79, our favor. We had to win this game to be the undisputed conference champions and to go to District with a perfect win-loss record.

It was a see-saw game. Midway through

the fourth quarter, we were behind two buckets. I went up for the rebound; my lungs became bricks; I couldn't swallow; I was choking on my own saliva; my head drummed; my last glimpse was of Tilman grinning at me from the stands.

The methodical dripping of fluid and a monotonous clicking of the machine woke me. The nurse spoke, "Hello, John, can you hear me? Squeeze my hand if you do."

"Of course, I can hear you. Who do you think you are asking me such stupid questions? Where am I?"

Mom stood beside the bed. Dad reached out, took my hand, and asked me how I felt.

"Will somebody please tell me what's going on?"

"John, I know you can't talk now. Dr. Mace will talk to you later when you feel better. He will explain. Try to go back to sleep now and get some rest."

"Man, I don't understand what this mess is all about."

In time, the white man with his dangling black stethoscope appeared. "John, I am Ron Mace. Three days ago you and I spent about five hours together in the operating room. John, you suffered multiple aneurysms. Do you know what that is?"

I managed a dim recollection of our biology teacher's reference to aneurysms and brain damage.



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"We were able to stop the seeping, but we also discovered a tumor in the frontal lobe. We think the tumor probably created enough pressure to cause the aneurysms. John, your parents requested that I tell it to you just like it is; your dad said you were a man and could take it. The tumor we found is in such a place that we can't get to it; in other words, it's inoperable. We recommend chemotherapy treatment which could result in possible remission of the growth and prevent spreading. We can't promise anything, but you are young and strong." He droned on, his words lost in a maze.

"I'll fight everyone of you; I won't die. I'll show you. I won't take those stupid treatments. There's no way I'm going to turn yellow and lose my hair. I'm the all-American kid; my life is planned."

With an inaudible screech I yelled, "Get out of this room, everyone of you."

They act like they can't even hear me, like I'm not really here.

Father Coady touched my arm. Here was my priest, my baptiser, my confessor, a Child of God. He would not lie to me; he would not join those who would betray me. He would offer me life and hope.

"Father," I pleaded. "Tell them I am just tired."

"John," he began, "God gives us trials to make us strong; remember the story of Job. We must accept His plan for us. We

cannot question His will."

I was bewildered at his resignation and his willingness to accept this sentence of death.

"Father, how can you be on their side? Do all of you want me to die? I won't die! This is a joke — it's a dream. Man, I don't have cancer. I just got a little run down; I was meant to play basketball, to live. . ."

"John, remember Christ loves you and suffers for you. Let us pray together. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the time of our death."

"Father, I don't believe you. You can pray all you want. Just tell me this — where is Christ now? Is this evidence of His love for me?"

I knew Alice Ann would come and straighten out this mess. She always had a way of getting straight to the truth, and she had a knack for putting people in their places. She would handle this for me. She loved me and understood me. She didn't want me to die; our lives were planned.

It was years before they let my friends visit me. When they came, Alice Ann led the pack. As soon as she bent over to kiss me, I knew something was wrong; she had changed. She believed the lies; she was part of the conspiracy to make me believe I was going to die.

Joe, Frank, and Herb wouldn't even look at me. They stood across the room and weaved from one foot to the other. They were together in this: my parents,

my friends, my Church, the doctors, the nurses, the hospital; they were all plotting against me. But why? I had never done anything any other kid hadn't done. I went to Mass. I even went to Confession when I didn't forget. Every once in awhile, I got a little out of hand, but never anything really bad.

And then I had the answer. Why didn't I think of this before? This was a stupid dream. I had been in tight spots before — even dreamed of dying before — and then woke up and went about my life. Any minute now, Mom would walk through that door and say, "John, if you are going to make it to basketball practice on time, you'd better roll out. And, John, you forgot to carry out the trash last night."

I began to feel better; man what a relief. Just a stupid dream. I even felt like whistling "Dixie" as my grandpaw used to say when he felt good. All I had to do was just lie back and wait until good old Mom came in to sound her good morning. It's sure strange how a dream can scare the wits out of a person. The tubes and the needles didn't even seem to hurt anymore. I began to doze.

The door opened slowly, quietly; I turned; standing there was Karl Tilman, the smiling mortician.

"Hello, son," he said with that confounded smirk on his face. He walked over to the bed and reached his long, slim fingers out to me.