

The Kid **W**ho **o o o** Died (!)

By

Margot Kinney-Petrucha

WHY I LIKE IT: *Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes... I think that one of my favorite parts about working with the fiction that comes through FOTD is sort of the large cycles that seem to permeate each issue. A lot tend to be patterns that I notice while reading the stories and some tend to appear as if through the ether. It's as if as soon as I had a child of my own the universe was waiting to send us multiple stories about the unbearableness of loss – family, of children, of friends – the weight of each existential crisis that arrives with each cry or lack thereof, and how we must carry ourselves in newfound parenthood or go on having lost someone that made an impact upon us.*

Margo Kinney-Petrucha's, "The Kid Who Died," is one of those stories that comes out of time and space and lands here in front of us for Issue 11 to be read – and deserves to be read.

A small moment connects two classmates together, and when one of them dies the grief is so overwhelming that it makes each thought of each day seem like eons.

Reminding me of bits of Junot Diaz, Kinney-Petrucha frames this narrative as if each day requires an explanation about how to continue:

It's something out of a nightmare. To be on solid ground one moment and plummeting into frigid liquid the next. To spend the last moments of your life slamming against an impenetrable barrier as water fills your lungs. And then for someone to take a nice afternoon stroll by the river and find your corpse floating there under the ice. You think about it and your whole body tenses up. You claw at your head. Don't think about it.

I think about here how the 2nd person works. How what this character thinks, the reader must experience. There is such a power in the tool at work here that communicates the power of empathy through shared experiences of beauty crushed under the ice and snow.

I truly enjoy this story because of the way in which it works with grief. That is, where there is grief there is always the shared knowledge that in loss we must continue to fill the hole that was made in us, and the only way to do that is to walk forward.

Kinney-Petrucha has done us all a service for letting us read, "The Kid Who Died." I suggest that you take the time to experience this work.

QUALITY QUOTABLE *(for the love of language...)*

You can't be satisfied with a chaotic universe because you're built to create structure and that's in your goddamn DNA so don't fight it.

The Kid Who Died

Friday, 8:30PM

Hold your breath. Wait. Let a minute pass. Hear your heartbeat quicken. Let your brain get all fuzzy. Close your eyes and puff your cheeks out. Keep holding until it feels like your skull is going to cave in. Hold on a bit longer. Exhale. Force your lungs to keep the air out. Do not inhale. Tense your face. Reach your limit. Gasp for air. Your body relaxes. Your heartbeat slows. Everything resumes normal function as if nothing happened. That's how long it must have taken. About two minutes. Maybe more. Maybe less if she was struggling. Don't think about that.

8:47PM

Can't focus. Remember to breathe. Push your chair back away from your desk. Look at something twenty feet away, exercise your eyes like Mom taught you. A tree outside your window stands silhouetted against the reddish sky; the clouds reflect the lights of a distant city you went to once. You had a nice time. But there's usually not much going on there and it's a long drive so it's not really worth visiting.

Someone's pissing under that tree now. Wonder why they don't just come inside. The dorms are right here, plenty of bathrooms. It's kind of funny. Smile. Stop smiling. The sky is weighing down on you. Focus.

9:05PM

She's blocking your thoughts. Take a moment to push her away. Be gentle, like they told you to be.

9:07PM

It doesn't take. She's still there. Her nose is still buried in her phone. She's sitting on a stubby barstool, surrounded by friends, in that house with the sticky floors. You're still quietly observing as she accepts a drink and takes a swig, eyes still fixated on her little screen. Your mind is still muddled from whatever blend of liquids is in your cup. You're still staring at her. She's still glancing up at you and grinning slightly, giving a small wave of her hand to invite you closer. Your legs are still tensing up as you walk towards her. She is still smiling. The ice is still cracking. She is still underwater. She is still drowning. She is still dead. She is still dead. She is still dead. She is still

9:10PM

Lie on your bed. Hold your breath again. Two minutes. Less. Close the blinds. The red sky bleeds through. Ignore it. Don't ignore it. Shut your mind off. There is only you and the room and the sky and this pain you haven't earned. Don't cry.

9:38PM

How long have you been lying here? Get up.

Get up.

Seriously, get up. You're numb. Your mind is still off. Your mind is still muddled. You're still slightly drunk for the first time. You're still looking at her. Still trying to make small talk. Stop. Stop. Stop. Stop. Stop. STOP. STOP.

9:40PM

Fine. Think about it then. Relive it like you've done over and over and see if it gets you anywhere. The memory's muddled anyway. More muddled everyday. Let it fade. Let her fade. Run through it all again. She's on her phone. No. Start over. She *was* on her phone. Her friends stood around her, drinking and giggling. There was a big crowd dancing until the music shifted. The energy died down and everyone scattered to various walls and objects, leaving open spaces throughout the room. She looked at you. She smiled and waved from her stubby barstool. You walked over to her. She asked if you were enjoying linear algebra, the class you shared. You croaked out a few witty remarks to keep the conversation going. Some song started to play and people thought it was good. A crowd cheered and gushed to the center of the room. You asked her if she wanted to dance. She said no.

One of her friends headed to the front door and called out to her. You didn't quite make out what he said, but then she turned to you and asked "Wanna come with us?" You said yes.

You were in the car on the way to the city. The sky was red. She didn't talk much on the way there. Neither did you. You were both in the back seat. Someone sat

in between you, physically breaking the tension. The driver, front seat, and middle seat kids chattered the whole ride. You occasionally chimed in with a cough or snort if they said something funny. She said something at some point, some kind of inside joke that made her three friends laugh. The middle seat kid gave her a noogie.

And she kept looking at you. On and off, but consistently. Maybe it was just because you were looking at her.

You were in the city. You still had no idea what you came for. The driver pulled the car over and you all walked a few blocks down a dimly lit road. Snow was falling. You felt oddly safe. You, her and the rest of the group rounded a corner and found a small playground. It was tucked away in a quiet spot between three buildings. A big, tall slide and a short set of swings. Each structure was worn but sturdy, well-built but abandoned. It would have been unsettling to look at, haunting even, if it weren't so inviting that night. Like someone had put it there just for you.

You were on top of the slide. She stood behind you, waiting for you to go down, cheerfully egging you on. Once she realized you were too much of a wuss to do it alone, she sat down, wrapped her arms around you, and said you could do it together. And you did.

Everyone ran to the swings and grabbed a seat. You swung. You giggled every time two swings were married. One friend yelled out about how he felt so fucking alive, man! He jumped off the swing and fell flat on his ass. It was so funny. You caught snowflakes on your tongue.

The snow started accumulating so you all decided to go home. The car was quiet on the way back. The middle seat kid fell asleep leaning on her. She kept

looking at you, then at her sleeping friend, then out the window at the snow. Your heart was full.

You were dropped off at your dorm. You stepped out of the car and felt pained for a moment when you realized the night was over. But then you heard her say “wait” and she left the car to give you a hug. Just that, then a quick “good night” and she slipped into the back seat and the car drove off. You stood in the snow for a little while longer. Your hair got wet. You swung yourself around a street lamp. You’d never felt that way before.

And then a week later she drowned under a sheet of ice and died.

Happy? Get back to work.

10:14PM

Get back to work.

10:37PM

Get back to work.

11:06PM

You don’t get to sit there and do nothing because she died. You don’t get to grieve this much for someone you barely knew. You don’t get to feel the way you feel about her. You don’t get to feel the same pain her friends feel, her friends who have known her for years and have grown with her and know things about her you never earned the right to know. You don’t get to love her.

Get back to work. Find the eigenvalues of matrix B.

11:11PM

Fine. Cry.

Waste of time.

11:21PM

You think about how horrific it is. To be sealed under ice with no way out. It's something out of a nightmare. To be on solid ground one moment and plummeting into frigid liquid the next. To spend the last moments of your life slamming against an impenetrable barrier as water fills your lungs. And then for someone to take a nice afternoon stroll by the river and find your corpse floating there under the ice. You think about it and your whole body tenses up. You claw at your head. Don't think about it. Don't think about it. But you're thinking about it and you think about it until it makes your head spin and you grab a plastic bag and breathe into it until you pass out.

11:35PM

You wonder how she got under the ice in the first place. Why was she alone? Why was she walking on thin ice over a river? You wonder if she wanted to die. Or at least if she didn't mind it. You wonder if she didn't struggle at all and just breathed in and let go. You wonder if she's happy with how it ended.

11:37PM

You remember how you found out. You were in class. Linear Algebra. People were whispering about what had happened. You were zoning out, but you heard her name and your ears perked up. They were saying she'd drowned. You knew you must have misheard them. The professor arrived late and brought the news down hard. He assumed everyone already knew, there had been an email about it the day before. You hadn't checked. All the blood fell from your heart to your feet. You learned what a panic attack is.

11:41pm

Wonder about fate. Wonder how it could happen so suddenly and out of nowhere and how this could happen to someone so young and smart and with so much potential. Wonder if she died for a reason. Wonder if she didn't. No. She had to have died for a reason because if she didn't you'd never move on you'd just lie here and regret never talking with her more or telling her how you feel or insisting that she dance with you that night because it was her last chance to and neither of you knew it yet. You can't be satisfied with a chaotic universe because you're built to create structure and that's in your goddamn DNA so don't fight it. People die all the time from stupid, pointless deaths like this but this one has to mean something.

Or it doesn't. Maybe it doesn't matter at all. Maybe she didn't matter at all. But you know she mattered to you. She mattered to you. She mattered to you and there's no fucking logic behind it and it's stupid and you're stupid and you need to drop it and move on.

Or can you let yourself hurt even if you don't quite understand why?

Fine. Try.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *I wrote *The Kid Who Died* while taking a course in structure and storytelling, and was inspired by *How to Talk to Your Mother (Notes)* by Lorrie Moore. Most of my college writing deals with mental health and existentialism. I was particularly moved to write about death after someone my age tragically drowned in a pond I swam in frequently throughout my childhood. I felt shaken by the event despite the fact that I had never met the person. I wanted to use reverse narrative form to elevate themes of inner conflict and anxiety, especially in situations where one doesn't feel entitled to their emotions.*

AUTHOR BIO: Margo Kinney-Petrucha is a Program Administrator at VentureWell (A non-profit organization that funds and trains faculty and student innovators) and freelance writer based in New York, NY. Her work aims to experiment with combined forms of media to find new and engaging ways to tell stories. She graduated from Hampshire College in Spring 2020 with a BA in Creative Writing and Mixed Media.