

Jason Irwin

## Natalie Wood Will Be There When Jim Morrison Rises from The Grave

“Can you believe that shit?” my cousin Aiesha said on the phone. “Someone stole our car!”

It was Mother’s Day, 2000. In the background I could hear Aiesha’s husband yelling. The keys had been jammed in the ignition for over a year, and he hadn’t gotten around to having it fixed. The car had been parked, where it was parked every night, in the driveway unlocked.

Twenty minutes later my cousin called back. “The state police just called. They wanted to know if the name Todd Dopler rang a bell?”

Todd was my best friend for fifteen years, since sophomore year of high school in fact, though we hadn’t hung out together in six months. His drinking, in my opinion, and most everyone else’s, had gotten out of control. Over the last few years he’d been gotten arrested, petty stuff – drunk and disorderly, vandalism, DWI, crashing his parents’ car – he’d also spent time in the county jail, rehab facilities, and psych hospitals. It wasn’t that I didn’t drink, far from it, but it was no longer fun to be around him. You always felt on guard, there was always a sense of foreboding, that something terrible would happen and there wasn’t anything anyone could do to stop it. Looking back, twenty years later, it seems as if it were all a matter of fate, as if the events that played out that foggy May morning had been written down long ago.

My cousin and I would soon learn the tragic details: how he stole the car from my cousin's driveway early that morning after a night out at the bars. It was graduation weekend at Fredonia State and there were lots of parties, lots of drunk students celebrating. Aiesha's house was only a few blocks from the main drag of bars. Did Todd know about the keys, or had he tried the car doors with the sole intention of finding a place to sleep off his drunkenness for a few hours before walking home? It's a question we keep asking but will never know the answer. It was one of Aiesha's husband's friends however, who called the police. He'd recognized the car, which was parked on the street in front of their house three miles away in Dunkirk. Apparently, Todd was trying to remove the license plates.

I hung up with Aiesha and told my mother what had happened. She always gave Todd the benefit of the doubt, reminding me that "You never know what's going on in someone's mind or heart," while I, chose to distance myself from him and his antics.

After sitting in silence awhile, I called Mike, my friend since kindergarten. Mike had been a police officer for five years. He always had crazy stories about the people he encountered, like the guy who drank antifreeze and said he'd once fallen off a cliff and his head exploded into a million odd pieces. When doctors put him back together again he said he looked like a Klingon from Star Trek.

"It's totally insane," Mike said, relating what he knew about Todd. "I mean he was going over a hundred on Lake Shore Drive."

As the story went, Todd, being chased by the police, pulled the stolen car over on Lake Shore Drive West, across from a nursing home. The police officer who was chasing him – another high school classmate -- pulled

over behind him. When the officer got out of his cruiser and started walking toward my cousin's car, Todd hit the gas and took off.

He ended up flipping end over end, clipping the tops of a stand of birch trees on the south side of the road. He died instantly, at least that's what the police told his mother, which I hope for Todd's sake was true. The roof of the car had caved in on top of him.

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After talking with Mike, I stood for a while staring out the kitchen window. All I could think of was that night at the Old Main Inn, the last time I'd seen Todd. It was November, there was a thin coating of snow on the rooftops. You could see your breath. The bar was crowded with pseudo-hippies from the college. Young men and women in tight jeans and tie-dye, long, unwashed hair and homemade jewelry. Maybe some of these people were out on graduation night as well. Maybe they saw Todd staggering around. Maybe one of them even bought him a drink.

When I walked into the darkness that stunk of stale beer, patchouli and pot, a band was tuning up on the stage -- a bearded, denim-clad trio, ala the Grateful Dead meets Blues Traveler, meets Nirvana. I saw another former classmate of mine named Ken and we started chatting. Ken and I were in art class together our senior year. While he worked on mural-sized paintings of Metallica album covers, I painted mis-proportioned portraits of Charles Manson, Aleister Crowley and the Ayatollah Khomeini.

As we talked, I saw a shadow moving quickly in our direction. It was like when you're driving and you see a deer out of the corner of your eye, darting from the side of the road. I braced myself for the collision. Instead of a deer it was Todd. Dressed in tie-dyed parachute pants, an *Autopsy* t-shirt (death metal band), and a denim

jacket, he danced in front of us laughing this maniacal laugh. He swung his arms like windmills, ran in circles around Ken and I, barking like a dog in heat. With each revolution he spiraled in closer, until we could smell the stink of cigarette smoke coming off him.

We had not hung around much in the last several months. I heard he'd quit drinking again, that he'd found another job. Two years earlier he got his right index finger caught in a machine at Field Brook Farms, the ice cream factory where he worked on the production line. They put him on the machine without any training when the person who usually ran it called in sick. Doctors were able to save the finger, but it was permanently bent. His mother talked him out of suing because the owner of the factory was a member of the United Methodist church. It was in that church's youth group that I'd first met Todd fourteen years earlier.

It was the spring 1987: I'd quit attending confirmation class at St. Elizabeth Ann Seton and joined the youth group at the First United Methodist Church where my mother was secretary. Todd was 18, but still a junior, held back in junior high for reasons I didn't know. He had spiky black hair, pasty white skin and piercing, methane-blue eyes. He was eighteen and still a junior. We not only became fast friends, for the next ten years we were inseparable.

Todd was quiet and polite around adults, unassuming even, but out of their company he transformed. He was hilarious, unless you happened to be a girl. His energy was schizophrenic. One minute he was quoting Andrew Dice Clay and Jim Morrison like scripture, the next he'd make his eyes bug out and pretend he was Charles Manson, via the infamous Geraldo Rivera prison interview, telling you he was the mirrors at the end of the highways, the demon in the semen, as he once referred to himself to the police, when they were called to his house because he'd been shooting birds out of the attic window, and barricaded himself in his basement. He was

like the Energizer Bunny. He just never stopped. It was as if he needed to keep himself and everyone around him entertained at all times, as if his life depended on it, as if the silence was too much to bear, as if it might cause him to slip away into the abyss of self-loathing and failure.

Dunkirk, where we lived was a dwindling post-industrial small town forty-five miles southwest of Buffalo. It was a grid of parking lots, drug stores, bars, dollar stores and, to us, disaffected and love-starved, with hormones raging, it offered little else. I had chronic health problems due to birth defects and Todd suffered from extreme ache, and like both of his older sisters, he was also adopted and desperately wanted to find his birth mother. We both loved Led Zeppelin, The Eagles, U2, and beer. In fact any kind of alcohol we could get our hands on was a triumph. Getting wasted at fifteen or sixteen was not uncommon, it was a kind of salve, that not only comforted us, but propelled us into the stratosphere, into fleeting moments of transcendence. After I got my driver's license we'd drive around town in my mother's Pontiac, blasting music, racing through county back roads and highways, acting as if neither of us had a future waiting in the wings.

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Inside the Olde Main Inn that cold November evening in 1999, as I remained with Ken about art class, I was both happy and a bit apprehensive seeing Todd walk into my field of vision. The last time he started drinking again, two years earlier, after we attended a U2 concert in Pittsburgh, his mother blamed me. I've often wondered if this was the start of his long, downward spiral, or was it years earlier when he was rejected from the Air Force? His severe acne? Having his finger chopped off? Or his Quixotic quest to find his birth mother that set him on a course he'd never return from. Todd and his two older sisters were all adopted. His sister Heidi found her birth mother and over a short period of time formed a relationship with her. This only fueled Todd's envy and

desperation. If only he could find his own mother, if only he could find his true identity, then maybe things would start to turn around for him, or so I imagine he thought. Yet haven't we all had "if only this would happen," moments in our lives? Todd did find out his birth mother named him Troy, that she was single, and requested he be raised in a Methodist household. He also found out with the help of a counselor about the possibility that he might have been born with fetal alcohol syndrome, which would never be properly diagnosed. If not that then maybe schizophrenia, which was also never diagnosed.

Because I didn't want to be around Todd while he was drinking didn't mean I was living clean and sober lifestyle. Far from it. You could make the argument that both Todd and I were racing toward uncertainty and mediocrity. that neither of us were going anywhere. I was twenty-eight and still living with my mother. I had no idea what I wanted to do with my life, other than, as my grandfather was fond of saying, I liked read books and drink beer. Four years earlier I had quit a job at a local radio station to hitchhike around Ireland and then went on a road trip out west with a woman I thought I was in love with. It didn't turn out the way I'd hoped. Life usually doesn't. So, I returned, hoping at least I could make something of the poems and novel about my travels I'd been working on with little success. The summer after Todd's death, I'd spend at Chautauqua Institute, working at the bookstore and taking poetry classes. Two years after that I'd find myself in graduate school outside New York City.

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A few days after Todd's death my mother and I drove to the crash site. We parked the car on the edge of the road and walked into the tall grass. Someone had already put up a white cross. We saw broken branches, tire tracks in the ground. It felt eerie standing there like an empty church. Afterwards peculiar things began happening

in our house. Lights turned on and off, a wind-up music box in my mother's bedroom began playing one day while she was at work and I was in the basement. My mother was convinced Todd's spirit had followed us home from the crash site. One of her friends told her that sometimes when a person dies suddenly and violently their spirit is confused and afraid. They don't understand that they are no longer alive. They need someone to tell them. I scoffed at such talk, though my mother believed it wholeheartedly. "You need to tell him," my mother's friend said, "that they're dead and they need to go to heaven." Unlike my mother, who had seen the dead her whole life, starting with her grandmother, I never experienced anything paranormal before, and was skeptical.

A couple nights after we returned, I lay in bed unable to sleep. I felt a weight press down at the foot of my bed, as if someone had sat down. I lay awake until nearly four am, afraid to move, afraid to look, afraid of what, or whom I might see. Around dawn I felt the weight lesson. To this day I believe it was Todd's spirit who came to say goodbye, to let me know that he knew he was dead.

I was asked to speak at Todd's funeral. Standing at the pulpit with the sunlight streaming in through a stained glass window of Jesus, dressed in a long white robe holding a lamb, I looked out at the assembled crowd -- Todd's family, friends, strangers, Aiesha, my mother --and all I could think of was the craziness, how, in high school we used to drink cheap beer and watch *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *Blue Velvet*.

"Let's fuck! I'll fuck anything that moves," Todd would scream, doing his best Dennis Hopper impression, whenever he saw a good-looking girl.

I thought about that night he showed up at my house drunk and raving at three in the morning, banging on my bedroom window. From there he made his way to the front door. Suddenly there was a police officer on the porch with him. I heard Todd scream "Nazi." There were so many stories like this. I told my mother not to

open the door, but she did anyway. The officer asked if we knew Todd. My mother said yes and told the officer it was okay for Todd to come in. She said it was okay. Todd barged through our house, making his way to the kitchen and puked all over the dishes that were quietly drying on the rack, the countertop, the sink and the yellow linoleum.

Yet, even as this image filled my mind, I found myself saying things like despite all his troubles, the difficulties he had expressing himself, saying and doing things that others, especially women, found repulsive, Todd was a good person, he was a generous and loyal friend. I attested to the fact that he loved his parents, even though he once told a hairdresser at the *Pink Puff* (a woman he was obsessed with), that he wanted to murder them while they slept. He loved his sisters, too, and was a proud uncle to his three nephews. It seems obvious now -- two decades later -- but maybe what Todd was looking for, was no different from we're all looking for -- validation and acceptance, love -- and like most of us when face to face with love's possibilities, all the fears and insecurities that go with it, we often become tongue tied and say things we don't mean to say. We say no, when we mean yes, please, or in Todd's case we spout dirty nursery rhymes and vulgarities. Sometimes it's hard to let our masks slip, to let go of the personas we've spent a lifetime cultivating -- however long or short our lives may be. We don't want to get hurt, or give the appearance that we've been hurt, but we will feel hurt at some point. It's inevitable.

On April Fool's day, 1988, I had my left foot amputated (I was born with a clubfoot and my left leg was six inches shorter than my right). I was home from school for a month learning to walk with crutches and in a great deal of pain. Todd visited me every day after school. It was a generous thing to do, something I'll always be grateful for.



Standing on the altar that day I also thought about that last night we saw one another. Inside the Olde Main Inn, as the band kicked in to their first song, a laid back, surfy jam, Ken disappeared into the wall of bodies around the stage. Todd and I claimed two stools at the bar. It was difficult to hear each other, though I recall Todd saying something about getting back into the world, making good. He'd been in a rehab somewhere and sounded clear headed. On the stool to Todd's left sat a young woman in a tank top. She had long, stringy blonde hair. Her fingers and wrists were adorned with rings and bracelets. She sipped a fancy drink, which she held in her left hand. Even in the dim light of the bar you could tell she'd spent too many hours at the tanning salon. It wasn't long before the old Todd, the Todd I both loved and tried to avoid, emerged, the one that set him running in circles barking. He started making lewd remarks, to the girl on the next stool and the bar in general.

I looked at my feet dangling off the ground. I thought maybe if I didn't make eye contact with him, if I didn't give him an audience, egg him on like I'd so often done in the past, maybe he'd stop. He didn't. He just couldn't. He let out a scream and the next thing I knew Todd was licking the girl's face, but not just her face. He started at the base of her neck and licked all the way to her ear and her cheek. She screamed. Of course, she screamed, and Todd howled with delight. People around us turned to look. The man sitting on the other side of her sprang into tough-guy defensive mode. I acted on instinct, self-preservation if you will. I knew I had to get out. I did not want to be responsible for this. I did not want to be witness to Todd getting his ass kicked. Yes, he was my friend, he'd visited me when I was sick, we had great times together, crazy drunken times, but I wasn't about to get my ass kicked to protect him. I took a last swig of my beer and headed for the door. As I was crossing the street, walking in the direction of where I'd parked my car, I heard Todd call out. "Come back," he yelled. "Come back!" But I never turned around. I just kept walking.

Todd was always obsessed with women, always madly in love with someone. . Sometimes it was a woman he worked with, or someone who lived down the street, someone from church, or the hairdresser at the *Pink Puff*. Of all his celebrity obsessions – Jim Morrison, Sarah McLaughlin, Andrew Dice Clay, it was Natalie Wood, whom Todd felt the greatest connection to. When he talked about her movies like *Gypsy*, *Rebel Without a Cause*, or *Splendor in the Grass*, he referred to her real name: Natalia Nikolaevna Zakharenko For Todd there was something almost spiritual about Natalie Wood. In her he saw someone not unlike himself, someone burdened with a name and identity that was false, someone who was suffering, someone trapped.

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Twenty years have passed since that Mother's Day. Life for those of us still living has gone on. After grad school I lived for a time in New York City, got married, moved to Pittsburgh, got divorced, and married again. Two days before Christmas, 2019, my mother was diagnosed with Cancer and died just thirty-five days. I still think of that November night when Todd called out to me and I kept walking. I felt the guilt of my decision for years. When I think of Todd today, I remember the happy times, the times he made me laugh so hard I couldn't breathe. We were like brothers after all, always trying to outdo one another. Who could drink the most? (Todd always won that one), Who was funnier? Whittier? More tragic?

Now, whenever Mike and I get together we have a few beers, get to talking about the old times, the places and people who have gone, one friend who's spent the better part of his adulthood in prison, and Todd, who left us with stories that never get old, like the time Todd told his counselor (a woman named Sherri, who he was also in love with), that he was going to "make this town look like Bosnia." One time he jumped on a police car and pounded the windshield screaming "Die pigs!" One Halloween when Mike, Todd and me were all in the same

algebra class at community college, Todd howled at the moon and told everyone present that Jim Morrison would rise from the dead and pumpkins would rain down from the heavens! In 1997 the three of us went to New Jersey to see U2 in concert. On the drive home we stopped at a *Ponderosa* in Bath, NY. As usual, Todd became infatuated with our waitress. When we were leaving Mike realized none of us left a tip and returned to our table to leave some cash. If he hadn't the world would never have heard the poem Todd had scribbled on a napkin for the waitress. To this day it may be the only poem I can recite from memory.

*Sin, sweet sin*, he wrote, *Daddy wants in. Doctor Hess wants droid sex with Ms. Jackhammer*. And he signed it: *Cool Whip!*

I can't imagine Todd alive today. He'd have been fifty-two. Can you imagine Keith Moon at fifty-two? I can't fathom what he'd be doing with his life, or what he'd make of the world -- 9/11, Facebook, Donald Trump, COVID-19?

Was his death a surprise? Didn't we all see it coming like a storm on the horizon? Maybe not in the way it happened, but we did see it. We just chose to keep this knowledge hidden the way we keep thoughts our own deaths locked away in some tiny room in our minds, busying ourselves with all the day to day things that demand our attention: work, laundry, and bills to pay; falling in love, going to college, hoping somehow it will go away.

I've come to believe that Todd was a mystic. Despite his troubles, he had moments of purity and clarity. He was fearless in ways I will never be. Yes, I pursued poetry, but Todd's life, his every waking moment, was a poem— perilous, misguided, yes, but always full throttle. He lived, as he died, at high speed, in constant pursuit of that inarticulate something we're all looking for, something to justify our lives, to give it meaning, carnal or spiritual -- whether it was his search for love, friendship, a quick high, or his birth mother, Todd was a seeker, an

artist. He was always trying in some way to break on through. I hope that wherever he is, he's found his Natalie Wood and they're in love and fucking each other's brains out, waiting for Jim Morrison to arrive amid a downpour of pumpkins.