

Mr Taylor's Barbecue

My name is Tim Walker. I've lived in Ceder Center my whole life. Ceder Center is a very quite village with a tight-knit community. There were two summers when our block in particular enjoyed block parties which have never been rivaled. No-one talks about these parties any more, but at that the time, they were the height of the summer, the focal point of our community activities. At the center of these parties was Mr. Taylor's barbecue.

I grew up living next to the Holland family. My dad worked with Mr. Holland. My mother served on the same school and civic committees as Mrs. Holland. My older brother Steve was in the same class as Brent Holland. Steve played on the basketball team and Brent was a wrestler. On the football team, Steve was a running back and Brent's position was tackle. It always seemed trivial to us, but everyone in the Holland family was very heavy while everyone in my family was very skinny. My best friend was Cassie Holland. We may have seemed like an odd couple to others, me being so skinny and Cassie being so heavy, but that difference never meant anything to us. She and I were in every class together. We would do our homework together at her house. On Friday nights we would stay up watching horror movies on T.V., seeing who could keep their eyes on the screen the longest before looking away. We spent hours together. We shared our inner most thoughts with each other. I felt it was obvious that eventually we would start a family together, but at fifteen years of age, those intentions seemed a lifetime away.

Back in the fall of 2001, Mr. and Mrs. Devlin moved away from our block. The Devlin kids were all grown up and moved away years before. Mrs. Devlin had recently become very ill. Mr. and Mrs. Devlin went to live out of state near a medical facility that specialized in Mrs. Devlin's illness. I really missed the Devlins, they were like an extra set of grandparents to me and Cassie. We both received small gifts from the Devlins at Christmas and at our birthdays. When Cassie and I were very young, the Devlins were occasionally our babysitters. Even though no one had died, Cassie and I went through a period of mourning from Thanksgiving to New Years after the Devlins left.

When spring broke in 2002, the Devlin's house had a new occupant, Mr. Taylor. Mr. Taylor had recently retired from his private practice of child psychology. He used to live in the suburbs, his clients were all inner city children from broken homes. He was an older gentleman with thinning hair, wire frame glasses, and always dressed very conservatively. He had a mild mannered politeness about him that always felt welcoming. Cassie baked some chocolate chip muffins for him as a house warming gift and the two of us walked them over to his house. When he opened the door for us, the joy in his face and the ecstasy in his reaction made us both giggle. He invited us in and began giving us a tour of the house. Cassie and I both knew the house very well, so we found it interesting to see the changes he had made. He showed us his awards he had won in several cooking contests. He pulled from his bookcase three cookbooks he had written. We both found it exciting to have a gourmet chef in our neighborhood. Though the Devlin's leaving had left a hole in both our lives, Mr. Taylor's arrival made us anxious to become more acquainted with our new neighbor.

In the spring of 2002 an Amber Alert went out for two boys, Will and Jason McConnell. We saw the story on the evening news, but Cassie and I didn't know them that well. They lived on the other side of the village. The two brothers were twelve and fourteen years of age. Our parents and the rest of the adults in the community talked about the disappearance often. The kids in the neighborhood who did know the brothers were very quite and solemn. Any time we played games with them they seemed to be a little less enthusiastic than before the disappearance. The mood in the village took a very sad turn as the school year ended.

The first weekend in July, Mr. Taylor hosted the first block party. Though it was only attended by twenty people, it was the biggest, happiest celebration our little neighborhood had seen in years. Ben and Jimmy Clea, each singing and playing guitar, provided country and folk music. The kids had sidewalk chalk drawing, a silly string contest, and later a pinata. Mr. Taylor, Mr. Jones, and Mr.

Holland all ran grills in Mr. Taylor's backyard. Mr. Jones and Mr. Holland provided good food, but it was Mr. Taylor's pulled pork sandwiches and hamburgers that won everyone's taste buds. The pulled pork sandwiches were super moist and decadent, with a sweet tangy sauce. The hamburgers were large, had a nice outer crust and a moist, juicy center. The spice combination in the meat gave his hamburgers an upscale flavor that no restaurant could reproduce. Everyone who attended the party left with full bellies and happy hearts.

The second weekend, Cassie and I had the privilege of assisting Mr. Taylor in his prep work for the block party. We were both excited as he exuberantly demonstrated the traits of each spice that went into his meats. The pork had to be prepped the night before so Mr. Taylor could start smoking it at midnight for the next day's feast. He marinated the pork shank for six hours. Then an hour before putting the pork into the smoker, he applied a spicy rub. The hamburger meat was hand ground and mixed with a blend of over twenty spices. Mr. Taylor also showed us how he made his signature ketchup and mayonnaise. Fresh lettuce, slivers of vidalia onions, and pickles made with a homemade blend of sweet and dill flavors rounded out the gourmet condiments. Once the tables were set and the guests were arriving, a sense of pride and accomplishment swelled within Cassie and myself.

The authorities never did find the McConnell brothers. Once summer ended and school started up, the specter of their disappearance loomed heavily over the school. Classes they were supposed to be in left empty desks to acknowledge their lack of a presence. A memorial cabinet with photos and trinkets was assembled in the main hallway of the high school. Sympathy cards were made and signed to give to the grieving parents. All sporting events started with a moment of silence for the missing brothers. Our church had a memorial erected in the lobby for the missing boys. All over Ceder Center, missing fliers for the boys were posted and re posted on telephone and electric poles.

At Thanksgiving several families rented space at the civic center for the Thanksgiving celebration. Mr. Taylor supervised the Thanksgiving feast, which was the finest any of us had ever dined on. Mr. and Mrs. McConnell were given a place of honor at the table. Mr. Taylor delivered a heartfelt accolade remembering the boys, though he had never actually met them. At Christmas we had a similar celebration at the church, and once again Mr. Taylor provide his expertise in making the dinner. Mr. Taylor had also offered his services to the school to council some of the students who were having the most difficult time adjusting to the boys' absence. All through the school year the community came together to console the grief manifested by the boys' disappearance.

One a Friday night in June, I waited for Cassie to show up at my house. We were going to watch the nine-o'clock movie on T.V. together. It was ten-thirty when I finally called the Holland's house. Mr. Holland answered the phone. He said he hadn't seen Cassie since that afternoon. He had assumed she had been with me since the movie started. I walked over to their house and found an irate Mr. and Mrs. Holland. Mr. Holland drove off in the family mini-van to search for Cassie. I stayed at the Holland home with Mrs. Holland and Brent. Later my mother came over as my father drove off in his car to join the search. We stayed up with the Hollands all night waiting to hear about Cassie. Hour by hour the night slowly crept by. Every once in a while either my father or Mr. Holland would call the house. Neither one of them was having any luck. Once morning came, the police were called. Everyone in the house gave the police a statement. A week went by, no one had seen any sign of Cassie.

Mr. Taylor agreed to see me during the subsequent weeks to help me deal with Cassie's disappearance. The first session I had with him did help.

“Have you any interests that were your own, not shared by Cassie?” he asked.

“Not many,” I said. “We did pretty much everything together.”

“Try to find a new hobby, something neither you or Cassie had done before,” he said.

“O.K.,” I answered. “It's hard to find new interests. I feel like I'm abandoning her when I try to think of something different to do.”

“When you are doing things you did together, go ahead and talk to her. Let your mind fill in her

answers with her voice. Just remember, she's not really there, it's just your memory.”

“O.K.,” I said somberly.

I started following politics on T.V., eventually started my own blog. My political views and concerns were growing beyond those of our little village community. I started blogging about liberal issues; animal rights, civil rights, and pay equality. On Friday nights I still watched the horror movies. I could hear Cassie tell me to turn away at certain points. I, however, was resolved to never turn my head during a horror movie ever again. Nothing put up on the movie screen could ever compare to the horror I experienced when Cassie disappeared. The loss I felt from her absence made me grow inside in ways that a boy my age was not meant to grow in.

July came again. Mr. Taylor hosted the block party again on the first weekend. Mr. Jones helped with the grilling, but Mr. Holland did not attend. No one in the Holland family attended. I did not feel like attending, but Mr. Taylor talked me into it. Once there, the festive mood did seem like a welcome change of pace from the depression I had been going through. Mr. Taylor had made his pulled pork sandwiches and hamburgers just like the year before. It seemed like a sin to eat without Cassie's presence, but I partook in the feast anyway. The pulled pork was just as tender and the sauce just as sweet and tangy as the previous year. The hamburgers were just as succulent and juicy and the ensemble with all the gourmet condiments were still just as amazingly delectable as in the previous year. The Clea brothers were singing away and the kids were all shooting silly string at each other. The block was erupting with joy and amusement, just like the previous July, except there was no Cassie.

I had a sudden swell of shame and sorrow curdle through my body. Having this much fun without Cassie made my soul feel guilt riddled. I had to get away. I knew the house so well since the Devlin's had me over so much. I knew of a secret entrance to the basement that Cassie and me would use while playing hide-and-seek with Mr. Devlin. I decided to wander off and spend some time in the basement away from everyone until I could clear my mind and regain my composure. I slipped away from the crowd and into Mr. Taylor's garage. There I went to the service door which lead into the basement. I slowly and quietly walked down the steps and into the main room of the basement. That's when I found her, Cassie!

Cassie was laying on a wooden structure which itself was laying on the basement floor. She was naked, her arms were stretched to each side and her wrists were cuffed and chained to the ends of the wooden structure. Her mouth was covered with a leather strap. Her body was coated in sweat. Her hair was drenched in sweat. Where her legs used to be attached to her hips were two large charred areas on her body. Her legs were nowhere to be seen. Two large streaks of blood stretched over the area of the wooden structure where her legs should have been. I immediately crept down to her and loosened the strap around her neck and pulled the cloth gag out of her mouth.

“What has he done to you?” I asked.

Her mouth quivered and her weak voice cracked as she spoke, “everyone's eating my legs up there. He's keeping me alive 'til next week so the rest of the meat'll be fresh,” she said.

I looked around quickly to find her clothes. Seeing her clothes a grabbed a locket she wore that everyone would recognize. “I'm going to put everything here back the way I found it and then get help,” I whispered to her. I put the cloth back in her mouth and tightened the strap back in place. I caressed her head and kissed her above her left eye. “Help will be here before the day's done,” I whispered.

I made my way back up the steps and into the garage. I looked carefully as I walked back out of the garage. The party still seemed to be in full swing. I assumed I had slipped away unnoticed. I tried to walk across the main party and exit the property by the driveway. Then I was cornered by Mr. Taylor.

“Tim, my boy, you look absolutely pale,” he said. “I think you need another burger.” He picked up a plate off the table we were both standing by. “I made this one especially for you.”

"I'm actually not feeling well, right now. I think I'll head home."

"Nonsense. Eat this burger, you'll feel a lot better."

I didn't know what else to do but eat the hamburger. I picked it up and took a big bite out of it. All the flavors were still there, but I could not sense them anymore. I tried to smile. Jimmy Clea waived at me as he started the chorus of a song. With each chew and each swallow I tried to be back at the party like I was when I first arrived. I tried like hell to let the forbidden knowledge of the meat's origin not color my appearance and behavior. I was the only one here that knew we were eating human flesh, the meat of Cassie Holland's legs. I finished the burger. Mr. Taylor had moved on to other guests. This time I succeeded in leaving the party.

I walked quietly and calmly down the block toward the Holland house. I kept my eyes alert for any sign of a police car, but none drove by. When I arrived at the Holland's home, Mr. and Mrs. Holland were in the kitchen, quite and somber. I held up the locket and yelled, "I know where Cassie is!"

The police arrived in less than five minutes. The officer asked very few questions. I could hear him on his radio requesting the D.A. and Judge Cuthbert to be notified. Within half an hour, five police cars converged on the party. I could only image what the police arrival at the block party looked like. The Hollands drove me down to the police station. I gave a full account of my experience to Officer Martin. Several hours later the Hollands drove me back to my own house. My mother and Mrs. Holland couldn't stop hugging me, I felt like a stuffed animal in an obsessed child's arms.

Two day's later I visited Cassie in the hospital. When I first arrived I hugged her and gave her our first kiss on the mouth. We held hands and we talked for hours. We talked about horror films and friends from school. We did not talk about cooking. Some of the conversation felt like we had never been apart, just like we were still back in school. Some of the conversation delved into a deeper level. We both agreed we loved each other. We were both committed to each other. At times we could not hold our tears back. At other times we laughed uncontrollably. Eventually I had to leave. Even though I had to go home, I felt that part of me that was empty before filled with Cassie's spirit.

Mr. Taylor never stood trial. He managed to poison himself in prison before his trial started.

Cassie spent years in therapy. She had to learn to manage her life without the use of her legs. That was probably the easier part. She had nightmares for years about the abduction and the mutilation. Trusting strangers was a skill she had to actively practice. Her relationship with her family and sometimes with me was often strained. She would breakdown crying for no reason. Sometimes when a sorrowful event happened, she would not react appropriately. She would be apathetic or even laughing at a sad occasion. I spent years in therapy myself. To this day I wonder if there was a way I could have found Cassie before her legs were severed. Though I've been told I did everything I could to save her, I still feel a sense of guilt that things could be better.

Eventually Cassie and I were married. We have four children together. There are things in our house that are not talked about. Cassie and I keep a photo each of Will and Jason McConnell on our mantel. Our children often ask who these boys were, but we will not tell them. We try to forget the events of the summer of 2003 ever happened. But the pictures on the mantel and the lack of Cassie's natural mobility are ever present reminders of Mr. Taylor's barbecue.