

To Rid the World

I read the headline but couldn't make sense of the words. But yes. The picture was Jack. A boy I once knew, now 33, jailed for killing an elderly minister. For spiritual reasons, to rid the world of evil, he said. Something in his brain had broken apart.

In kindergarten, all the girls loved Jack. He was quiet, shy. Small and pale and blond. He half-smiled, crooked, blushing. We all tried to hold his hand under the snack table. To help him open his milk carton. Jack didn't pick his nose or make farting sounds with his hands or pull our hair like the other boys. Jack made us swoon. I wanted to marry him. I decided that at our wedding, I'd wear a white flower behind one ear, and he'd kiss me on the lips.

We went to different schools in third grade, but Jack's house was four houses down from mine. In the early evening air, muggy and filled with fireflies, I'd sit on the curb at the end of my driveway and wait, hoping he'd come over. He almost always did. He'd sit down on the curb, say *Hi, Susie*. I'd say *Hi, Jack*. We'd scrape chalky white rocks on the street, write our names, play tic-tac-toe. I'd talk to him about my day, show him the red imprints on my bony knees from kneeling so long at Mass. Jack wasn't Catholic, so I'd tell him about the giant crucifix in the front of church, the nails in the feet, the torn white cloth and the blood. The crown of thorns. Once we played Jesus On The Cross, and I made a ring of weedy flowers for his head. I pretended to nail him to the driveway. His face fell like leaves. After that, every time I went to church, I looked at Jesus and saw Jack. Then he left me, moved away in fourth grade. I hadn't seen him since.

When I dreamed of him that night, with the headline still racing through me, he was the boy I once knew. *Hi, Susie*, he said. Like we were still sitting on the curb, without all the years in between.