

Stampede

I think I read the article in the *Calgary Herald* the day it was published—July 6, 1972.

I was in a hospital bed. My back ached. Early in the morning of the previous night, I had been stabbed in an unprovoked attack by a total stranger outside a hotel bar in downtown Calgary. I was seventeen. My attacker was seventeen. We were both Irish-Americans. The newspaper article is very matter-of-fact.

17-Year-Old Charged in Stabbing Case

A 17-year-old Californian youth appeared in provincial court today charged with wounding in connection with an early morning stabbing in downtown Calgary.

Terrance O’Sullivan of Berkeley, Calif., was remanded without plea to July 14 by Judge Gary Cioni.

He was charged after another U.S. youth, Timothy John Nolan, was allegedly stabbed in the back during an argument.

Nolan is in good condition in hospital but doctors say he may lose a kidney as a result of the wound.

It’s more than thirty-seven years later. I did not lose a kidney. I retain a jagged scar on the lower left side of my back, which occasionally itches in warm weather.

Several things struck me when I first read this article in the hospital room in Calgary. For the first time in my life, I had entered the official record of the fully-named—*Timothy John Nolan*—like *Lee Harvey Oswald* or *James Earl Ray*. The anonymous reporter was nodding to the concept of total and complete accuracy. But the other “youth,” my attacker, Terrance O’Sullivan,

either had no middle name, or the reporter had simply forgotten to ask, or for whatever reason, the detail slipped through.

I was also struck by the notion that I was “allegedly stabbed in the back during an argument.” I was most certainly stabbed—I could feel it with an increasing ache—a kind of slow throbbing in my lower back.

Also, the “argument” referred to was not really an argument. O’Sullivan approached me as I was getting into a cab with my friend Peter and two girls and a guy we met in the bar. O’Sullivan pulled out a 7” hunting knife from a sheath on his belt—put the knife to my throat—and yelled over his shoulder to a friend: “Is this the guy...is this the guy who did it?” His friend said: “No...no...no...it’s not the guy.”

I was aware that a number of people were watching the scene with great interest, including the doorman at the hotel entrance. I said to O’Sullivan: “I don’t know who you are. I’ve never seen you before. I don’t know what you’re talking about...” and as I said this, I turned my head and body from under his bracing forearm to get into the taxicab.

Then—I felt a swift and powerful—almost reckless—pound to my lower back. I thought O’Sullivan had somehow dropped the knife, closed his fist, and given me a parting punch in the back. I didn’t understand that I had been stabbed, until I got into the back seat of the cab. My lower back was instantly warm—soothingly warm. I said to my friend Peter who was in the front seat—“That guy was nuts,” thinking I had survived the encounter and I was ready to go on, to head over to someone’s apartment to smoke dope. I reached to feel my back with both my hands. When I looked at them, they were covered in blood.

I’ve told this exact story so many time over the years that even if my memory is inaccurate and incomplete, I have no way to confirm it. Actually, Peter could confirm or deny some of what I report. Peter has always had a first-rate memory for detail. But the above narration is the story I’ve told. It’s mine now, just as the scar is mine.

I did not lose a kidney. But in a profound way, I lost my childhood, my “youth” in that encounter. I didn’t know at the time how much I had lost or what I had gained.

It was the summer of 1972. Guys a few years older than me were wounded or killed every day in Viet Nam.

That same night in Calgary, a 15-year-old “youth” was working as a night clerk at a 7-11 convenience store. He was shot in the head, dragged into a storage room. He lost his life—*David Edward Lee*.

Terrance O’Sullivan also lost something as a result of his crime. A little more than a week later, he pled guilty to assault with a deadly weapon and was sentenced by Judge Gary Cioni to a year-and-a-half in a Canadian federal penitentiary outside Calgary.

I have had no contact with Terrance O’Sullivan or Judge Gary Cioni. I googled them both recently and found that the Judge Cioni is still on the bench. Terrance O’Sullivan seems to have been lost to aliases or perhaps death or another penitentiary.

My friend Peter has struggled with drug addiction in recent years, after many years of sobriety and stability. He has not disappeared, but the last time I saw him, he had the gray, exhausted and sad expression of the helpless.

My Mom and Dad flew up from Minneapolis to Calgary the day after the stabbing. As I remember it, my Mom stayed around long enough to confirm that I was alive, and then returned to Minneapolis. She has never mentioned the event since, a fact I easily accept. She didn’t want to be reminded of anything about that late-night call from Peter.

My Dad stayed in Calgary and after I got out of the hospital, Peter, my Dad, and I spend a couple of relaxing days in Banff, as if it was just a short vacation.

Our parents agreed among themselves that Peter and I should continue on our trip, even though we had demonstrated within only a few days of leaving Minneapolis that we were completely irresponsible—picking up hitchhikers, trying to pick up girls, drinking underage in bars. I cannot imagine reacting the same way if any of my three teenagers got into this kind of trouble. But it was an entirely different time.

This was the summer of the Harvey Wallbanger—vodka, Galliano and orange juice. I had many Harvey Wallbangers that night before the stabbing, which may have allowed me, at the time, to slide through the experience. I have not had a Harvey Wallbanger since. I cannot abide the sickening taste of Galliano.

A week after the stabbing, Peter and I continued on our trip to the West Coast. I remember we stopped at Radium Hot Springs near Kootenay National Park outside of Calgary. I sat in the hot springs for hours. The warm water soothed my back. The sky was that endless blue above. I thought I had recovered from the stabbing. Now I know, I have never really recovered.

Everything has happened in thirty-seven years—my education, marriage, three kids.

What I still can't believe—how unprovoked the attack by O'Sullivan was. I remember wondering (I haven't stopped wondering)—“How could he do that?”

A certain fatalism entered my life after the stabbing—a kind of willingness to let things happen—a form of pacifism with events.

I never had a chance to meet or thank the hotel doorman who jumped into the back seat of the taxi and applied pressure with his hands to stop my bleeding. I might have died right there in the back seat of the taxi but for his actions.

I remember he told me to calm down as the two girls in the front seat screamed. He made me laugh when he told the girls to “Shut the fuck up!” Then he spoke in a low voice telling me to relax and be still. For some reason, probably because of my long hair, he called me “love child.” He was surprisingly tender when he said those words. I would like to thank him—my guide and savior.

My friend Peter told me years later bits and pieces of the story that he had never shared. Peter had said something to the boyfriend of one of the girls. Peter was the guy who “did it.” Peter was the guy O'Sullivan intended to stab. Peter also chased O'Sullivan through the streets of downtown Calgary, saying he just wanted to talk.

As Peter told me this years later, I could see his regret. He even apologized for getting me stabbed, an apology I shrugged off at the time. I told him it wasn't his fault that O'Sullivan was nuts.

The police picked up O'Sullivan at his campsite outside of town later that night. He was asleep. They had to wake him up to arrest him.

A certain fatalism. I'm sure Peter has that fatalism too. Things happen. Things happen we will never understand.

Violence creates a disturbance in the force, as in *Star Wars*—a sense of unease—an after-glow from this disruption of ordinary life. Ordinary life being the peace everyone desires.

Months after the stabbing, I was home in my bedroom one afternoon. Suddenly, I was overwhelmed by a deep sadness. *No longer a boy. A tentative adult.* It had happened too soon. *Things had happened to me.*

I began to sob in that gulping, out-of-breath way that I remembered as a little child. I was so alone. I could not explain to anyone the change that had occurred in me. No one seemed interested.

I was in the hospital in Calgary for a week. This was the week of the Calgary Stampede. On the TV, cowboys rode broncos and roped calves. I remember the chuck wagon races. Drivers in crisp white shirts. Four black horses. The little covered wagons. They raced around the track. It was like the scene in *Ben Hur* with the chariots.

Was it anger or determination in the faces of the chuck wagon drivers? They lashed their teams, leaned into their turns. It seemed the chuck wagon drivers were at the very center of a great disturbance in the force. They seemed to love their endless orbit around some disturbance in the force, the horses' hooves pounding, the dust rising with each turn.