

## **The Heat of the Why**

by John Thomson

I hadn't seen his mother in over fifty years. But I had reason to visit her again during a heat wave near the town where I grew up.

It was one of the hottest days ever recorded there. We sat inside the stuffy living room of her mobile home and began talking about her son, my friend, whom she still called "Stevie."

At first, we reconnected memories, like sagging fence wires. She listened as I recalled how I met Steve in elementary school, how he and I stayed connected through all the intimidations and pressures of high school and marriages and different politics and the barriers of geographical distance. Recounting the history of my relationship with Steve helped his mother talk more freely about her son's death, just a month prior.

The awful manifestations of his illness had seemed to come out of nowhere: incoherency, hallucination, paranoia, aggression, the loss of body control. Different doctors had different diagnoses. One said "accelerated vascular dementia." Another proposed Lewy Body Dementia, the disease that'd afflicted the comedian Robin Williams. It was remarkable to me how Steve's mom talked so clinically about what'd taken her son. It was a good thing, I thought, how she'd subdued it in this way and was able to reduce it to something out of his control and beyond the reach of his will and strength.

For me, what happened to Steve was observed from far away. We'd grown apart over the years, but he'd still call maybe every three or four months. In the last call I'd ever receive from him, he'd seemed disoriented, lost. He'd asked me when I was coming over to his house. It was as if we were twelve -ears-old again, and he'd planned a game of whiffle-ball and expected me there. I'd reminded him I lived 600 miles away, as I'd had for the last thirty-five years. "But you said you were coming over," he'd said. And he hung up. Then I felt the force of all the years that bound us. Realizing just then that my friend

was losing his mind made the memories more vivid. I saw the short kid with the white hair on the playground at our elementary school, and then in the dirt alley behind my house when he was on a bike with raised handlebars and a banana seat (he was the first to have one), and then in high school when he played banjo and I played guitar and I'd coerced him into learning Bob Dylan songs. And he's there at my wedding. He was one of my groomsmen, and that white hair of his still stands out in our wedding pictures.

After his call, I phoned our mutual friends, who lived in much closer proximity to Steve. "Steve is in a very bad place right now," one of them said. A "bad place" could mean different things, but in the following months the depth of Steve's mental illness became evident to all of us.

His family tried to keep us informed. Their own struggle to deal with Steve's incapacities created space and mystery about his fate. A few months later, Steve's sister arranged for me to call him on his birthday. During our conversation I wondered if he understood what I said to him, or if he even knew who I was.

He died a few months later. The news of his death didn't come as a shock. But what would be the most difficult part for me was what his mother shared on that hot day inside her mobile home, when she described what Steve's life was like during his final weeks. He could no longer bathe or shave himself. He had trouble controlling his bodily functions. He couldn't be left alone for fear he'd wander off in an incoherent daze. She recounted how he'd once done this. They'd searched for him for hours. They called the sheriff. A helicopter circled the sky, looking for him. He was finally found face down where he'd fallen by a passerby. He was taken to the hospital. The calamity of the incident made my mind escape into the shelter of denial, and his mother's voice turned to nothing but sound.

The living room of her mobile home became intolerably warm. Steve's mother explained there weren't enough registers in the ceiling, and so the air conditioning didn't work like it should. We arose and she led me to the door. We embraced, and I told her what a dear friend her son had been to me, despite not seeing each other but every few years.

The day had become hotter. The heat outside her mobile home was like nothing I remembered growing up. The combination of the almost unbearable warmth and the

knowledge of my lifelong friend's suffering before he died cast me into an indescribable gloom. Why was my friend tortured like this? And why did his family suffer so deeply, forced to witness and deal with his illness? The Buddhist believes suffering in life is unavoidable and universal and that it is empowered and made worse by a desire for pleasure and immortality. The Christian believes suffering is the reality of a world broken by our past departure from the will of God. On that day, neither belief made any sense to me. The heat of the why was more oppressive and disorienting than the material atmosphere.

It would remain hot during my stay in my hometown. The discomfort was inescapable at times, persisting with my bitterness and bewilderment about what'd happened to my old friend. It seemed the whole world was burning up.

But, a few days after my visit to Steve's mom, my wife held up her phone to show me the latest video of our infant granddaughter. She resembles no one in our family, only herself. And for some reason, I like that.

In the video, the child's eyes searched the topography of her mother's face. Her arms stabbed at the air as if she was grasping for something she couldn't see or that was too far away. And somehow, I was able to feel the breeze she created with her hands and rid myself of a question I couldn't answer.



**John Thomson's** fiction and nonfiction has appeared in several literary journals, including *Terrain*, *Broad River Review*, *The Dodge*, *Collateral*, *bioStories*, and others. His short story *Out of Good Ground* won *Terrain's* fiction award in 2018, and his novel for young readers, *A Small Boat at the Bottom of the Sea*, was published by Milkweed Editions. He is a retired wildlife biologist and land conservationist and lives with his wife in Northern California, close to their two grown daughters and their families.