

Consequences Exceed the Law

based on a true story

by Rachael McNerney

If you asked Pete where he saw himself in the future it is doubtful his response would provoke tears. His life was planned out similar to many adolescent dream weavers: “big house, great paying job, and a wife who puts dinner on the table every night.” Pete was a family-oriented child who attended Sunday family dinners religiously. His grandmother spoke fondly of him to all of her friends. Almost daily, his mother clandestinely hinted to him that he was her favorite child. He was well liked by all, especially his peers. Pete had the closest friends one could ask for; the five of them were inseparable.

The boys of Belden Lane attended weekly playgroups until they could walk and their bond strengthened with each step thereafter. As youths they played in the creek behind Grandma Betty’s yard; as adolescents they raced to climb the tallest trees. The trouble they embarked on as teenagers was minimal, partially because the reprimanding by their religious mothers was too severe a consequence for the light-hearted deviants. At age sixteen, Pete, Tim, Mark, Brian, and George became blood brothers. In the summers, they put sweat and meticulous labor into creating forts that to this day have stood the tests of time. However, Pete has not revisited them since their construction and does not plan to any time in the near future. The trek through the woods would be extremely long and painful. Yet if he attempted this excursion, he would find the oak tree in which the five young men carved their names along with their latest girlfriends’ names; each mark remains inscribed today.

The bond formed by Tim and Pete was especially pronounced. Their mothers’ irrevocable friendship mandated meeting daily, the most prevalent topic of discussion being their unconditional pride in their sons. In 1975, times were unpleasant, for Tim was diagnosed with a rare bone disease, Legg Calvé Perthes. Quite to his dismay, Tim was wheelchair bound for one year. Always the innovator, he learned how to balance on the back wheels of the wheelchair. Continually, he developed new tricks to share with his dependable buddies, who arranged visits with him during his recovery.

They remained by his side throughout high school. Nothing could destroy the bond they formed, or so they thought. Graduation from Catholic school came before Pete, Mark, Brian and George felt prepared for college. While Tim attended community college, his friends began laborious jobs such as landscaping and painting. With no definitive career in sight, Pete enjoyed the ability to choose his day-to-day jobs and live his years of eighteen and nineteen to the fullest. Despite their contradicting chosen paths, Pete continued to spend time with his original five friends every weekend.

I cannot account for every time I have heard the words, “It will never happen to me.” Pete never imagined it would happen to him either. Never for a second did he fathom that for the remainder his life he would carry the burden of a tragedy he was solely accountable for.

The night started out like any other. Pete and his three lifelong friends (Mark, Brian, and George) journey to the car following a night of drinking on the town. Pete grasps the wheel without reservation and commences the short trip home. The boys pass around the bottle of whiskey, taking two swigs at a time. They pass by Sleeping Giant Park and venture through the winding curves of the Hamden back roads. The clicking of the radio dial captures the attention of the boys lounging across the seats in the rear. Pete settles on a station and increases the volume to its loudest potential. The amplification initiates a revival of adrenaline and testosterone that commands them not to remain seated. The roads are familiar to Pete; the notion that navigation would be problematic never crosses his mind. Pete had driven under the influence multiple times throughout high school, as did many people he knew. He trusted himself behind the wheel; foolishly, his friends did as well.

Music resonates through the car, and a harsh breeze surges through wide open windows. The faint tinge of whiskey tickles at Pete's nostrils. Five miles from his destination and no longer on the main street, Pete assures himself he is in the clear. He accelerates; the pedal fights back against the sole of his boot. He exceeds the speed limit and simultaneously the wind current strengthens in the cab. The boys in the back cheer at the clockwise progression of the speedometer.

The stoplight came too soon, as did the car traveling perpendicular to the boys. Both cars at full speed created a catastrophic explosion, and in a blink both cars were airborne. All but one boy was ejected from the vehicle. The smell of molten metal permeates the night, and Pete hears blood-curdling screams from his own open mouth. Pete unpeels his eyes, uncertain of his whereabouts. Confusion turns to fear and Pete begins to panic. He wails and stretches his arms in all directions. Shards of shattered glass penetrate his skin, and blood seeps from the open wounds. He struggles to shift his body out from under the steering wheel. He shouts to his friends, but frighteningly only silence echoes back. With enormous strength, he hoists his body out of the bent frame of the car window. He falls to the rough, cool pavement. He rises to his feet to survey the damage and immediately sinks back to his knees and weeps. He has never been able to repeat details of the horrific scene laid before him on that tragic night.

In one short ride, Pete was responsible for the deaths of the four people in his life who meant the most to him: three his blood brothers, and the fourth his mother, who had been driving the car he collided with. For years following the accident, Pete was in and out of court. None of the families took legal action against him. His punishment is far more severe than a prison sentence; his punishment is living with a past that haunts him to this very day.

Have you or your friends ever posed the question "Who is the most sober?" when deciding who will drive home after a night of drinking? This is a deadly question. Individuals are not easily persuaded to make the lawful choice every time they consume alcohol. Even the most sober friend is impaired and still immensely capable of harming others. Not a weekend goes by when I am not disappointed by the stories I hear of peers attempting to drive impaired and claiming success. How do you measure this success? By not getting arrested or pulled over, or just simply by not dying and murdering innocent people in an accident? Why put lives at risk when alternatives exist? It only takes one risk, one lapse of judgment to transform lives forever. If the consequences of a DUI or a DWI do not prevent you from getting behind the wheel impaired, maybe hearing Pete's story will.

Against all odds, Tim and Pete remain best friends. Tim visits Pete regularly and sits next to him balancing a wheelie on Pete's second wheelchair. Pete worked hard all his life, despite the fact that he never held a steady job. He worked multiple jobs including painting and roofing until the age of forty, all without his own means of transportation. A year ago, during a routine roof repair, Pete fell off the roof and suffered severe nerve damage and is now paralyzed.

Visiting Pete with my dad, Tim, is difficult. I've known Pete my entire life. I recall as if it were yesterday sitting with him in my old backyard at the innocent age of seven, advising him to cut off all of his hair and no longer wear it in a ponytail. Pete is a genuinely kind person who made a mistake. Seeing him become weak and thin, and struggle to pick up a sock off the floor with a claw-like device my dad constructed is heart wrenching. But nothing compares to the arduous task of listening to him recall the night that changed his life forever. Completely remorseful for his actions and the agony he brought upon all of those close to him, Pete counsels me, and anyone who will listen, to learn from his mistake. Watching this grown man speak so passionately with tears steadily streaming down his face is enough to make anyone think twice about driving under the influence. After all, one fewer impaired driver on the road could prevent one more death of a brother or a mother.