

# The Infinite Abyss

*Kyle Peterson*

As I step into my room, it occurs to me how funny it is that I can still say that. My room. I haven't been here, except for a few odd days, in more than six months. It now belongs to the dust bunnies hiding under my bed more than it belongs to me. But even if I don't claim the room, the room claims me. A quick glance around and it's obvious who used to live here.

Maybe it's the photographs, collaged on the wall next to the bed, the first thing I see when I step through the door. They were put up with a careful disregard, the product of many late nights, and many cans of Mountain Dew. There are more than 100 of them, smooshed and overlapping, with blue wall showing through where pictures have fallen off. I'm disappointed with the large amount of blue I see. Not because any one picture is particularly important, but because together they form a mosaic of the last four years of my life, a mosaic that's begun to lose form due to disrepair.

I step closer in order to pull the mosaic out of focus and examine the individual photos. One in particular catches my eye. It's dark and indistinct, dirty and scratched, but my mind paints over it and adds a layer of vivid detail. The brightness of our clothes contrasted against the black of the night. The sparkle of the rain reflecting the camera flash. We'd just gotten back from a school music contest. A few friends and I took refuge in a vehicle, trying to decide whose house to watch a movie at. But as it began to pour, we had a sudden impulse. Leaving our bags, we ran out into the freezing torrent, taking laps around the school track, stomping every puddle in sight, and pushing each other over into the grass. The photo shows the five of us crowding around Annie's red Ford Taurus, soaked to the skin, laughing and giggling and shivering at the same time.

Looking at this picture reminds me of one of the Narnia books I read as a kid. C.S. Lewis describes two children discussing a painting of a

sailboat out in the sea. As they talk about how realistic the painting is, the boat and the waves start moving, and becoming vivid. Then the wind starts rushing through the room, and they can hear the waves crashing, and taste the salt in the air. And the picture starts growing, and growing, and suddenly a wave sweeps over the picture frame, into the room, and pulls them out into the sea.

This is the feeling I get as I stare at the picture on my wall. I can almost convince myself that I can see the movement—the water dripping from our hair, our chests shaking as we giggle. As I bore into the picture with my eyes, I can almost believe it's not flat, but a deep hole in the wall that leads to another time and place. And if I think hard, real hard, I can fall right through.

Finally, after nearly a minute, I break my gaze and look more fully around the room. It looks like any other high school bedroom. There's a single bed in the far corner, next to a small nightstand with an alarm clock and a lamp. The bookcase is on the near wall, overflowing with birthday books from grandma and old magazines. Next to the bookcase is a shelf, covered with prom pictures, odds and ends I made in shop class, and a single, small wooden plaque. It's this plaque that gets my attention next. I walk to the shelf, and pick it up, feeling the smooth, cold wood. I run my finger over the brass as I read. Fourth Place, State Wrestling, it says plainly. What an understatement. It doesn't tell about hours running, sweat pouring from my body, or tears shed in defeat. It doesn't speak a breath about losing 25 pounds, living through a fog of 600-calorie days, or the Thanksgiving I tried to make myself vomit because I was afraid I wouldn't make weight. And it doesn't try to explain the euphoric, testosterone induced feeling of invincibility, standing with an arm raised high.

I lay the plaque back on the shelf, and move to the bookcase, knowing what I'm looking for this time. I stoop to open a box on the bottom shelf and pull out a stack of letters. I wonder what the point is—I know what they all say anyway. But I enjoy the sight of her handwriting.

It has a neat left-hand slant, and she makes her a's like a typewriter does instead of like they teach you in kindergarten. I read to myself as I flip through the letters. How are you? Flip. It feels like forever! Flip. I miss you. Flip. I miss you. Flip. I miss you.

I start to mutter a silent I miss you too. But I stop myself when I realize that there's no one there to miss—that time and circumstance and change have steadily tugged her away, and that my letter is only a footprint in the sand that ink and paper have protected from the waves. The person I miss doesn't exist anymore, except in a letter shoved in the bottom of a box, and in my mind. I might as well miss myself.

I shove the letters back into the box, angry at the flow of time for sweeping me away while I tried so desperately to fight the current. I'm frustrated at the finality and irreversibility of it all. But mostly, I just feel lost. The contents of this room are concrete examples of where I've been. Being here again makes me realize with sharp contrast how little I know about where I'm going.

It's the same feeling I get when I'm flying over a big city, peering out the airplane window, down upon row after row of tiny cookie-cutter neighborhoods, cookie cutter houses, and cookie cutter families. They go about their business, bustling from place to place, bumping, colliding, rebounding. And in the movement, I feel so small. So insignificant. Like I'm drowning amid billions particles of water in a sea of immeasurable size.

It makes me wish I had faith in god. Faith that I'm not just a pinball in a cosmic machine. Faith that there is a plan for my life. Because I've come to realize that my planning is useless. In the long run I have no idea what I want or what is good for me. My best estimates of how things will turn out always seem to be horribly mistaken. I regret things I desperately desired, and even the worst of situations have turned out positive. It's senseless. I used to fight with my parents about having control over my own life. But now I have complete responsibility for myself, and I've never felt less in control.

I sit down on my bed, mind reeling. Time escapes me. It feels like mere moments ago I was taking pictures in the rain and putting them up on my bedroom wall. But I haven't seen most of the people in those pictures in over a year. Just yesterday I was out on the wrestling mat, putting my body on the line for the split second thrill of a victory. But now I only wonder if I'll ever be blessed with the chance to cheer for my own son, to watch tapes and critique technique, to cry as his hand is raised for the final time. And it feels like I just finished tearing the envelope of my last letter seconds ago, even though the date on the postman's stamp clearly reads 2004.

It's not like this phenomenon is anything new. Old people always try to explain how quickly life races past, always try to make us kids stop and smell the roses. But I never really understood what they were talking about until now. I'm a kid, jockeying for attention on the playground, and I blink. I'm in elementary school, building my science fair project, and I blink. I'm in high school, experiencing my first relationship, and I blink. And I'm a college student, and if I blink again I'll be 40. And I simply find it impossible to wrap my mind around what I want to be, and where I want to be, and who I want to be with.

But I suppose that's just the nature of life—groping through the semi-dark, never quite sure where the last turn came from, or when the next is coming. I suppose I just have to do my best with what I'm given, and cross my fingers that everything turns out all right in the end. But that's difficult, because there's no reassurance that I'm ever doing the right thing, or that I'm anywhere close to on the right track.

A few months ago, my mother asked me if I was happy with my decision to come to Iowa State. After more than a year here, I told her I didn't know. Sure, it's a great school. But I asked her how, with nearly 2500 colleges and universities in the country I could have attended, I can really ever be sure I made the right choice. I'll never forget how she responded to me—"Kyle, when your wife someday asks you if you love her, you'd better

not say ‘out of the 3 billion women in the world I could have married, I’ll never be sure I made the right choice.’” She’s right. Sometimes I think too much.