

## Uncle Kev

By Peter Horgan

There isn't a whole lot I can tell you about my Uncle Kevin. For most of my formative childhood years my parents just tried to avoid him. My father was a church minister who went to extraordinary lengths to shelter me from any secular influence. But his brother (my Uncle Kevin) was irreligious incarnate, the profane given body, the only crack in the ecclesiastic covering of my childhood. Uncle Kevin was the obligatory unwelcome guest who'd show up at Christmas sporting a black eye, or reeking of pot. His name was only ever mentioned in my family as an example of disrepute, or used to provoke shame for recalcitrant behavior—*keep behaving like that and you'll end up just like your Uncle Kevin*. Other than that, I barely knew him. Needless to say my uncle was my parents' last choice of babysitter. But in spite of these familial misgivings there was one occasion when an improbable combination of events landed me under the sole supervision of my less than wholesome uncle.

My parents were away at a Church conference and I'd been left under the care of my grandparents. I was helping my Grandfather prune back a glory vine when the old man took a tumble off a stepladder and was whisked away by an ambulance. Before I really knew what was



happening both my Grandfolk were carted away to hospital and Uncle Kevin's ute was pulling into the driveway. The throaty rumble of his V8 engine and its exhaust extraction system sounded like an approaching storm, like the foreboding of trouble. When he killed the ignition there was a moment of silence, before he kicked the driver side door open and several beer bottles clattered out onto the concrete. There happened to be a council verge side rubbish collection happening in the neighbourhood, so he picked up the bottles and slung them into the pile of trash on the other

side of the street. The second one smashed on impact. “Well Bodhidharma,” he said. “Looks like me ’n you are gonna eat some pizza and watch Chuck Norris kick the poop out of some commie bastards tonight. What do you say to takeout and a kung fu flick?”

“Whats a commie?” I asked.

“A commie? A communist! You know . . . those bastards who want to take away your freedom of speech, thought, and opportunity, in the name of equal outcomes?”

I mutely shook my head.

“Well . . . what the hell do they teach you kids in social studies?”

The evening unfolded exactly as he said; deep pan supreme and a Chuck Norris movie. Once the last commie had been pummelled into submission and the credits started rolling Kev looked at his watch. “Hey what time do you go to bed?” he asked.

“Nine o’clock.”

“What? On a Friday night?”

“Yeah.”

He looked stupefied for a moment, gazed back at his watch, then announced “Well . . . that gives us an hour and a half. Wanna go smash some tellys? I counted at least half a dozen on the street verge as I drove up here.”

“Yeah okay,” I answered. I didn’t really know what he was asking, but I was willing to go along with whatever was on offer.

Kev got up off the couch, walked out into the backyard and disappeared into Granddad’s

garden shed. He came back out with a sledgehammer over his shoulder and a cigarette hanging out of his mouth. With his shaved head, beard, tattooed shoulders, smouldering Winfield Blue, and a convict-esque sledgehammer, he carried an air of unhinged masculinity that I found completely foreign, frightening, and somehow impressive.

“You reckon you can swing this bad boy?” he asked, as he handed me the sledgehammer. I held its wooden handle in my skinny arms and took a measure of its weight.

“Yeah,” I replied

“Great. Lets go.”

I followed him through the house and into the front yard where he took the sledgehammer from me and casually tossed it into the tray of his ute. Then we opened the doors, buckled up, and started cruising the streets. It was one of those breathless summer evenings. Each streetlight illuminated a still life of discarded household trash resting on the road verge in small piles, and small winged insects were lit up like pixies as they swarmed beneath the eighty-watt globes. Uncle Kevin started talking as he drove us through the suburban streets: “Did you know that old analogue tellies have cathode ray tubes inside?”

“No.”

“Well they do. And inside each one of those tubes is a strong vacuum that permits electrons to fly freely . . . you know what electrons are right?”

“Yeah. We learned that in physics.”

“Good. Okay, so if you take that

sledgehammer we've got in the back, and bash the top of an old analogue telly hard enough, that vacuum tube will implode and let out a bang like a twelve gage shotgun. Watch."

He let the car roll to a stop in front of a pile of discarded white goods. In between a broken dryer and a rusty, old BMX, there was an analogue TV lying on its side. Kev stepped out the driver's door, grabbed the sledgehammer from the back of the ute, then flicked his cigarette butt into the street as he walked up to the telly. There was a moment when he cast sidelong glances up and down the street, with a look on his face that I hadn't seen anywhere before. It was the look of a crim taking measure, making sure nobody was watching. I read a lot in that glance, it communicated cunning and calculated risk, and that unhinged masculinity I'd noticed earlier. It became obvious that I was rubbing shoulders with an entirely different breed of man to the type I had known in the pews.

Suddenly he hoisted the sledgehammer over his head then brought it down top of the TV with impressive force and stunning violence. A God almighty explosion rang out across the neighbourhood. He laughed, ran back to the ute, jumped into the driver's seat and we took off again.

"Pretty cool huh?"

I was smiling from ear to ear. Hell yeah it was cool. To a twelve-year-old boy, completely uninitiated in the ways of mischief, it was downright awesome. We cruised around the

empty streets until we found another television set.

"This one is yours Bodhidharma."

I stepped out of the ute and felt my oesophagus grow shorter. My stomach had crept up to push against my fluttering heart and I felt a sudden urge to pee. I pulled the sledgehammer from the tray and approached the telly.

"Hey!" shouted Kev. "Make sure you're standing behind it. In fact, here . . ."

He jumped out of the car and handed me his sunglasses.

"For your eyes, mate. You should always remember to be sensible about being stupid."

It was dark, but this particular television set was nicely placed under a streetlight, so there was no problem wearing the protective sunnies.

"Now . . . give it all you've got!" said Kev.

I lifted the hammer over my shoulder and brought it down on top of the telly. There was a bang, and the screen smashed, but it was nothing spectacular. I looked at Kev.

"Not hard enough mate, the tube didn't blow. Give it another go."

I hoisted the hammer over my shoulder again and brought it down with all my might. But in that split second between committing to the swing and its ensuing impact, I heard a shout come from the front porch of the house whose trash we were hammering.

"Oi!" yelled the occupant, but it was too late to stop. The head of the hammer came down on top of the television and this time the set blew up

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like a satchel charge. The sheer volume left me momentarily dazed. I could hear Kev laughing and the man from the house shouting. I ran for the ute, dropped the hammer in the tray, and jumped in the passenger seat. Kev piled in just as the owner of the house stepped out under the streetlight. He was shouting something, but his voice was completely drowned out by the roar of Uncle Kevs V8 engine and the screeching of spinning wheels. The ute slowly drifted forward as a cloud of burnt rubber enveloped the man on his front lawn.

“Ha! I fumigated the bastard!” said Kev as he let the tires gain traction and his vehicle took us away from the scene of the crime.

My heart was pounding in my ears, I was more excited than I’d ever been at any point in my life, I was also laughing hysterically. This . . . this was living!

“Holy fuck!” I said “That guy nearly caught us!”

“What?! Na mate. Guys like that don’t want to mess with blokes like me. He was just making a show. You don’t really think he cares about a broken telly he’s thrown out, do ya?”

I had to think about that for a moment. In the heat of the moment it felt like I was committing

an act of wanton vandalism. But Kev was right. These telly sets had been thrown away, presumably they weren’t working, or had been replaced by plasma screen upgrades. Whatever caused their redundancy, they’d been relegated to the trash heap.

“Then why was he so angry?” I asked.

“Beats me mate. But people are like that. They just don’t like it when other people get their kicks in different ways, I guess. Hell . . . I dunno. But do you wanna do another one?”

I was feeling a bit rattled. “You do the next one. We’ll take it in turns.”

“Suits me,” replied Kev.

We must have cruised about the streets for a couple of hours. I lost count of the number of televisions that we’d smashed between us. Then, as we were coasting down a back street after the latest tube implosion, a cop car rolled around a corner just ahead of us. It drove past us once to get our profile, then pulled a U-turn and flicked on its flashing lights. I looked over at Kev. His eyes were flicking between the rear-view mirror and the street ahead. He must have been weighing up his options.

“What are we gonna do?” I asked. I was imagining a court case, juvenile detention, and the

wrath of my parents. But when Kev looked over at me a certain tension left his face, as though my question had broken an internal dialog that he'd been having with himself. In hindsight I believe he realized a high-speed pursuit was absolutely out of the question with his nephew in the vehicle.

"Oh, leave it to me mate. Your old uncle is all the legal representation you'll be needing. I'll talk us out of it you'll see."

He wound his window down as the Police Officer approached.

"Evening Officer," said Kev.

"Evening. I've had a report of someone driving around in a ute smashing old televisions with a sledgehammer."

"Have ya just?" Kev replied. "Well you've caught your villains Sir. It was us! But I have to confess, I didn't really see a problem?"

"With vandalism?"

"Oh no. I see a problem with vandalism sir. Absolutely. But something needs intrinsic value before it can be vandalized. Me and my nephew here have been smashing rubbish. Just junk that people have thrown out, stuff that's heading straight for compaction and landfill."

"And why are you doing that?" asked the Officer.

"Well . . . His granddaddy just went to hospital you see, and the poor lad needed some distraction. I thought it'd be good for him to let off some steam, you know, rather than bashing the shit out of one of his classmates. But what do

I know, I'm not a parent."

The Officer cast me a scrutinizing look. "Alright" he said. "Well, now I'm telling you to knock it off or you'll be up on charges."

"No problem, boss. We'll go back to playing Nintari. But I am curious, what sort of charges?"

"Whatever I can hit you with" said the Officer. "Now piss off and call it a night."

"Aye aye, Captain."

The Officer walked back to his patrol car and Uncle Kev wound up his window.

"See mate. No problem. Just gotta let 'em know you're not a dumb shit. He doesn't want to be having a philosophical discussion about the inherent worth of trash in front of a magistrate anymore than you or I do. Anyway. I think Fat Cat has already hit the hay."

We drove home, and I spent the rest of the night learning how to play poker, and betting with matchsticks. I had to run off to bed when my Grandparents arrived by taxi around one o'clock in the morning. The old boy had broken his coccyx but was otherwise okay. I never mentioned a word about my adventures with Uncle Kev, not to anyone in my family.

That was the only time I ever got to hang out with my Uncle. He died about a decade later after sustaining head injuries in a drunken bar brawl. I remember my Father's sermon at the funeral; some crap about loving the people you can't understand. The idea was sweet. But, in reality, my Father just avoided anyone he didn't agree with, especially my uncle. I think the hypocrisy of

that sermon was the beginning of the end of my childhood religion. It all started to unravel on that precept. I was twenty-two by that stage, and a couple of months after the funeral I travelled to San Juan de la Vega in Mexico, to partake in the exploding hammer festival. Once a year the locals strap satchels of gunpowder to sledgehammers and bash them into the streets. The explosions ring through the whole town. Everything gets covered in small bits of asphalt, bitumen, rock dust and gun smoke. Participants are invariably injured, some are blinded by shrapnel, or knocked out when the force of an explosion rips a sledgehammer from their hands and sends it flying across the piazza. Of course, I remembered to wear a helmet and a pair of safety glasses. One has to be sensible, about being stupid.

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Image: "[Dumped old TV](#)" (CC BY 2.0) by [Ruocaled](#)