

A Pathetic Innocence

Liam O'Brien

'The innocence of the apathetic,' the words rang out among the silent mourners, 'is a falsehood that we, who are lazy, tell ourselves in order to justify death through our mediocrity. Am I being insensitive in blaming June's death on those who are here with us today? Yes. It is in the hope that you will listen and realise that ... We. Can. Do. Better.' Pastor Mark bit off each of the last four words as he walked around the stage, staring down each of us in turn.

My name is Derek Hanson, second-year police academy student, third-year Coles employee, and lapsed church-goer. June Harcourt was three years into her teaching degree and about to start a placement at my nephew's primary school, a young woman who deserved more than the 24 years she was granted. We had grown up together; we went to Sunday School and youth group at the same church, but I walked away from all that once my parents gave me my independence. She was always more into it than I was.

Last Wednesday night, June was walking home from a friend's house that was two blocks away. As she reached the first corner, two men walked up to her. The first kicked out her kneecap, and punched her in the face, knocking her to the ground while the second took her handbag. Security footage of the scene was shown on the news, and although there was only a small section replayed, it showed pedestrians walking around what we can only assume to have seemed to them to have been an unconscious, inebriated woman. She had been

knocked unconscious and left there after striking her head on the pavement. She was bleeding, but no one bothered to make sure that she was okay.

Pastor Mark had been enraged by the footage; his sermon on the following Sunday was about the Good Samaritan, and his talk at the funeral was far from the peppy ‘June loved Jesus and is now in Heaven, repent and you can go there too’ spiel that I had come to expect. He preached a challenge, a call to arms, a call to compassion. I like to think that I would have stopped for her — I used to know her — but then Pastor Mark’s talking broke into my thoughts again: ‘Even the heathens do such things ...’, and I realised that I would not have stopped for a stranger.

After the funeral I went home, and the lump in my heart was no longer due to the loss of a friend, it was the loss of self-confidence. I could no longer say without hesitation that I would stop to make sure a person was okay. I was not so sure of my self-appointed status as a good person. I had to forgive the people who walked past; if they weren’t innocent of blood on their hands, then neither was I.

I slept fitfully that night, waking up in cold sweats from the visions I saw in my sleep. My return to the church had obviously influenced my dreams. I was standing at the Pearly Gates waiting for my turn to enter. As I was admitted, the guardian angels spat at me. I heard a man behind me say ‘Pathetic’. I turned to face the man and his name tag said: ‘Welcome to Heaven, I am John the Baptist.’ Similar events happened until I found Jesus himself. He gestured around the environment and, looking me right in the eyes, said, ‘You are the least of these, you walked past.’ He then turned around and left me there, alone.

After that dream, I had to talk to someone, so I emailed my old minister, the man who had put these thoughts in my head. I described the entirety of the dream to him and the struggle I was having with my identity. His reply assured me that Jesus

would never treat me the way it had happened in the dream and that he forgives all mistakes through his blood. This last line was one that completely threw me — I was expecting sympathy and ‘It’s okay to feel this way.’ Heck, that’s all that I wanted from him. Unfortunately, with one line, he showed that he still considered himself to be my spiritual leader.



What would you have done if you were those people who walked past June?



I knew that I would have walked past, something I could never admit aloud, so I slept again. This time, I saw the crime that I had been shunned for previously.

I had just gotten off duty and was walking to my car when I heard a woman screaming for help down an alleyway. Her assailant had a knife and that was the clincher; I hurried on as I had left my gun at the station. When I arrived home I heard police sirens coming down the street. My partner walked up to my door so I opened it right away. Harry walked in and told me to take a seat, as he had news for me. I offered him a seat, but he refused. With ten words he proceeded to destroy my entire world.

‘Isobel is dead, murdered in an alleyway near the station.’

I sat up, gasping, struggling to discern whether it was true or not. Had I let my sister die? Was not going to help the factor that decided the murder? Was her blood on my hands?

She was still alive, but no thanks to me. I tried to call her, but there was no answer so I left a message.

‘Apathy is no justification. I’m sorry.’



Liam O’Brien wrote this in 2012 when he was in Year 12 at Damascus College in Victoria.