

HERO-TYPE

OVERTURE

YOU KNOW THOSE PICTURES OF FAT PEOPLE?

I'm talking about the ones in the ads for diets and weight-loss drugs and stuff like that. You know them. They always show the "Before" picture of the person back when they were a big, fat slob. And then they show the "After" picture, which is like this totally buff hottie.

Here's the thing about those pictures, though: for the longest time I couldn't figure out why the pictures were labeled "Before" and "After" because to me it was obvious they were two completely different people.

But I get it now — we're at least supposed to *think* that it's the same person, made over thanks to the miracle of whatever the company is peddling. It doesn't have to be just for weight loss. It can be for any big life change.

I've always been skinny, so I don't need to lose weight, but I think about those pictures a lot. Especially now. After my own big life change.

So why do my "Before" and "After" pictures look exactly the same?

HERO

Chapter 1: Surreal

EVERYWHERE YOU GO, IT SEEMS LIKE THERE'S A REMINDER OF what happened, of what I did. You can't escape it. *I* can't escape it. I wouldn't be surprised if someone suggested renaming Brookdale "Kevindale." That's just how things are working out these days. The whole town's gone Kevin Krazy.

Take the Narc, for example. The big sign out front, the one that normally announces specials and sales, now says "THANK YOU KEVIN FOR SAVING OUR LEAH." That's just plain weird. The same spot that usually proclaims the existence of new flavors of Pop Tarts or 2-for-1 Cokes is now a thanks to me. It's just surreal, the word my friend Flip uses when he's slightly stoned and can't think of a better word to describe something strange.

But I sort of understand the Narc sign. After all, Leah's dad owns Nat's Market (called "the Narc" by every kid in town *except* Leah), so I get it.

But...

Then there's the flashing neon sign that points down the highway to Cincinnati Joe's, a great burger-and-wings joint. Usually it just flashes "JOE" followed by "SAYS" and then "EAT" and then something like "WINGS!" or "BURGERS!" or "FRIES!" or whatever the owners feel like putting up that day. Now, though, it says:

JOE
SAYS
GOOD
JOB
KEVIN!

Even the sign at the WrenchIt auto parts store wishes me a happy sixteenth birthday. And when you drive past the Good Faith Lutheran Church on Schiffler Street, the sign out front reads: “GOD BLESS YOU KEVIN & LEAH.” Which almost makes us sound like a couple or something. And I don’t even *go* to Good Faith. I’m what Mom calls “a parentally-lapsed Catholic.” (Usually followed by “Don’t worry about it.”)

Continuing the Tour of Weirdness that has become Brookdale in the last week or so, you can see similar signs all over. My favorite — the most *surreal* — is the one near the mall, where someone forgot to finish taking down the old letters first, so now it says, “SPECIAL! SAVE KEVIN ROSS IS A HERO!”

Gotta love that.

And, God, don’t even get me *started* on the reporters.

You probably saw me on TV. First the local channels and then — just this past weekend — the big time: National TV, courtesy of *Justice!*. I didn’t want to do the show, but *Justice!* was one of the big contributors to the reward money. I don’t have the money yet, and it’s not like the producers are holding it hostage or anything, but when someone’s planning on dumping thirty grand into your bank account... I sort of felt like I *had* to go on. Dad said it was my decision, but I could tell he was waffling. It’s like, one part of him figured I deserved the money, and another part of him hated the idea of this big media company having that over my head and *another* part of him probably wanted the whole thing just to go away.

Anyway.

They (you know, the *Justice!* people) filmed in Leah’s living room, Leah being the girl whose life I saved.

See, here's the deal the way I told it on TV and in the papers: I'm walking along near the Brookdale library and I hear this scream from down the alleyway. So I go running and there's this big guy and he's hassling Leah and he's got a needle in his hand.

He was big. I was — and am — small. But I couldn't help myself. I just threw down my, y'know, my backpack and I charged him and somehow I managed to get him in a wrestling hold like they taught us in gym class. He dropped the needle and Leah screamed again and the guy grunted and tried to shake me off, but I was sticky like a parasite, man. I just held on and tightened my grip and he couldn't move.

And Leah called 911 and that would have been that, but it turns out the guy in question was Michael Alan Naylor. The Surgeon. Or...

"The man responsible for a series of abductions, rapes, and murders throughout the Mid-Atlantic," said Nancy deCarlo, the host of *Justice!*, just before she introduced me to the nation in all my zitty, sweaty, panicky glory.

They stuck me on Leah's sofa with Leah, who looked poised and calm and radiated perfection. It was like Beauty and the Beastly or something. Nancy talked. I listened. I answered her questions, but I can't really remember it at all. I was too caught up in the moment, sitting so close to Leah that I could smell her perfume and the hot TV lights and the *Justice!* people running around and everything. It was crazy.

They showed a re-enactment of the whole thing, shot in grainy black and white, with some little emo kid playing me, running down the alley, jumping...

It was TV. They didn't tell the whole story, of course.

Maybe that's because *I* didn't tell *them* the whole story.