# **I Was 16**

By [**Sean Christopher Lewis**](http://www.identitytheory.com/author/sean-christopher-lewis/) | Published: November 30, 2011

I was 16…

I was 16 in 1994. I had a crush on a girl at my high school named Stacy. She was two years older — blonde hair, a grunge band on her t-shirt and a constant half-smile on her face — and it goes without saying that she had absolutely no interest in me. She’d pat my head as I incessantly quoted the movie *Heathers* to her, and she’d say, “Aw, you’re cute. You’d be a good project this year.” I had a beat-up old Renault I drove to and from football games that I didn’t play in. I was wildly unpopular, and I basically thought the entire world sucked.

Emery was 18 in 1994. At 6’5,” he would’ve been the star on my school’s basketball team for his height alone. He was handsome, nice… His year was spent living in secret in a house on one of the high lifted hills of Kigali, Rwanda, a few meters from a church that he had hidden in a few weeks before. A church where, had he stayed any longer, he would have been slaughtered.

“Every church in Rwanda should be a memorial,” he tells me. “Because every church was a place where thousands of us died. We were told they were safe. They’d be respected. They weren’t.”

One church in the mountains saw 3,000 people murdered. The bodies have never been moved. Nothing exists of the people who died anymore — no bones, no skulls; it’s disintegrated. The only thing in that church today are the clothes of those dead. The clothes…

When I was 16, I had posters of John Elway all over my room. He, in my mind, was a hero — commanding his offense, running to the left, throwing back to the right 70 yards without breaking a sweat. I wore his jersey everywhere. On my walls were pennants of the schools I dreamed of going to. In Upstate NY those pennants read “SYRACUSE,” “COLGATE,” “CORNELL…”

In a room of the Rwandan Genocide Museum, Emery takes me aside and says:

“This display is simple. It is just the clothes people wore the day that happened. It’s just the clothes, but still.” Behind the glass are:

a dirty pair of jeans,

a ripped Adidas warm-up,

a Superman towel with machete cuts throughout, and

a lone Cornell University sweatshirt, letters faded, the blood permanently dried on its front.

Emery doesn’t cry as he leads me around. Instead, he laughs. Not an amused or vicious laugh, but a “can you believe it” laugh. Like a man looking back on something surreal that happened in his youth. If it were me, I’d be talking about Stacy, saying, “I can’t believe she broke my heart.” But it’s Emery:

“I can’t believe we survived.”

“I can’t believe that I had that stupid nickname”

“I can’t believe they called us cockroaches.”

We’re the same ages, but we’ve never lived in the same world.

“I thought it was the apocalypse. Everyone was dead. What else was I to think?”

When I was 16, mass graves were a photo in history class. They were Auschwitz and Trublinka. 16 years later, I’m meeting my first Holocaust survivor. He is not Jewish. He is not old. He is a tour guide at a museum that commemorates genocide and its survivors. Westerners who have been to his workplace send you to see him. “He’s amazing,” they tell you. “He’s the one you have to have show you around.”

“So, what did you think seeing everything today?” he asks.

I think when I was 16, I would’ve hung with you on the weekends, Emery. I think we’d have spent hours trying to invent the action sequences you’ve lived:

“This hill is where the rebel forces who saved us were. There were no buildings, just bush. I was in a house on that hill. Across the way, about ten kilometers… On the bridge were corpses. Hundreds. In Kigali Center were those trying to kill us. So you would run toward the gunfire, past swinging machetes, hoping to live. And if you live, you spent the rest of your life asking ‘Why?’”

He asks me again, “What did you think?”

“I cried a lot,” I say.

“Yes. But that’s what you felt. What did you think?”

“I don’t know. I think I need time to process it, to try and understand.”

“Tell me,” he says, “if that works for you.”

If he asked me now, I’d tell him I thought about the museum display of skulls and the endless Polaroids of children. I thought about the note that said:

Name: Herbert

Age: 5

Best Friend: Mom

Favorite Food: Rice

Died: By being slammed against a wall to death

I’d tell him that I can’t imagine him at 18, no matter how much I try. That boy doesn’t seem real, running under gunfire, knowing his parents are dead, knowing these corpses surrounding him are people who were simply a little less lucky than himself.

I’d tell him instead, I only see the man before me.

A man who smiles more than I ever did as a kid.

When I was 16, I sulked because I couldn’t wait for my future to arrive.

At 35, Emery laughs, because it seems so unreasonable that his ever did.