“A Senseless Death in Our Age of Anger” – Mitch Albom

He was running from them now, a teenager running from other teenagers, and he felt the terror you feel in dreams when someone is gaining on you and you can’t get away. His friends were running ahead of him, and they made it to the car and dived inside and locked the doors but he kept running, the way he used to run down a lacrosse field, heart pumping, legs churning. He ran to the front of the school but the others caught him, tripped him, pushed him to the ground. They were around him now and they began to kick. One to the stomach. One to the head. Another to the head. Maybe he tried to say something like “No” or “Please,” but you wouldn’t have known it because he was sucking air by this point, gasping, and they were all too young to understand that the life had begun to ooze out of him. Another head kick. Another.

It was Friday night, teenagers doing another teenager, but this was not inner-city violence, this was not about money or drugs or a new coat, this was

about nothing, a fight after a dance, suburban macho, some of the kids barely knew who they were kicking! And they kicked him again. Eight times. Nine times. Now he was on his hands and knees, halfway into blackness, and the kid who had at least partly started all this, the skinny teenager from the initial fight that was supposed to be one-on-one, came staggering up from behind, his eye bleeding, and he stood over his fallen rival and allegedly said, “This is for breaking my gold chain.” And he kicked him in the face.

Alex Stachura never got up again. He was rushed to the hospital. His parents were called. As they drove to the hospital, they thought “auto accident” because that’s what you think when you live in the suburbs and you get a call from the hospital, right? Auto accident? You never figure your 16- year-old boy got his head kicked in.

“There’ll be an operation,” his mother told herself in the waiting room.

“He’ll be sick, but I’ll nurse him, I can do it, I am his moth–“

The doctor came out.

Alex was dead.

This is a story about how violent we have become, even our most pleasant neighborhoods, and how this all has to stop, this teenage fury, because it’s so damn senseless. They act tough, they talk tough, but they have no idea what

their bodies can do — and soon we have one more mother’s son buried in the earth, and four others facing a second-degree murder charge.

“They’re just kids,” you want to say.

Yes. They are. Grab and roll

“This is Alex,” says Walter Stachura, sliding a high school yearbook across the table. He is sitting in the kitchen of his home, the same place he was sitting that night when the phone rang. Across from him sits his wife, Alicia, who is biting her lip and dabbing her red eyes, because this is the first time she has talked about her son’s death with a reporter. In between is their 14-year-old daughter, Colleen, and their eldest child, Jason, a college freshman whose blond hair and pout give strong resemblance to his dead brother. Both boys played lacrosse at Warren De La Salle High School, and the yearbook photo shows Alex running down a field, stick in hand. He earned a junior varsity letter in the sport, and once bragged about a game in which he scored two goals and checked his opponent really hard. So he was not afraid of contact, but fighting was not his thing. He had a quick wit, he

could cut you up verbally. He didn’t need to throw punches. But someone else did.

“These boys who fought Alex. Some of them had called and threatened him before,” his mother says. “Once they got Jason on the phone by mistake and threatened him.”

“It was your typical teenage stuff,” Jason says. “They said, ‘We’re gonna come beat your head in.’ “

On the final night of his life, Alex Stachura knew he would fight. He knew where. He knew the opponent. A kid named Nicholas Del Greco, who used to attend De La Salle but had transferred that semester to Sterling Heights High School, had been stirring a feud with Alex since last spring. It began over a girl, but the girl was now history, yet the anger lingered. Why? Who knows? Why do teenagers stay mad over anything?

On more than one occasion, Alex tried to stay clear of Nick. Once, according to the Stachuras, Nick and his buddies even pursued Alex in a high-speed car chase. Alex got away. By autumn, things had come to a head: Without the parents knowing it, Alex and Nick agreed to fight Sept. 20 after the dance. Alex reportedly told a friend, “I’m going to get my ass kicked tonight.” He went anyhow. Because of that, he is not blameless. But in this story, nobody is.

They met behind an elementary school. Alex came in a car with three friends. Nick arrived in a four-car entourage, maybe a dozen kids. A judge would call them “a gang,” but truth is, many barely knew Del Greco or Stachura. They came to watch, which is even more sick.

What happens next depends on your witness. Most agree the two boys traded punches, then began a grab-and-roll on the asphalt. After a few minutes, Alex had clearly won the scuffle, and they disengaged. There was yelling. Alex began to walk away, he may have screamed at the crowd, and Nick hollered something like “Get him!” and then Alex began to run. And suddenly, the group, these children, took on the bloodthirsty coloration of the moment, and they began to chase him, kick him . . .

Cause of death was head injuries, swelling of the brain. Witnesses suggest Alex was kicked 11 to 15 times by the four Sterling Heights students who were arrested and charged: Del Greco, 16; Matthew Trout, 16; Arthur Zrodlo, 15, and Marek Sobotka, 17. The prosecutor asked for second-degree murder charges — he said you kick someone in the head, you know what you’re doing— and another thing: He wanted them tried as adults, not juveniles. The judge agreed.

So now the four teenagers, if convicted, could be sentenced to life in prison.

In the meantime, three of them are back in high school.

“They’re just kids,” you say . . .

‘So horribly final’

Inside the Stachura home, upstairs in Alex’s room, the bed is neatly made, as if he might be home soon. His lacrosse stick stands in the corner, and a picture of him in his lacrosse uniform sits atop the bureau. There is a Bible on the desk, with his doodles on the edge of the pages. One of them reads: “You can die before you get old, but me, I’m gonna live forever.”

Sixteen years is not forever. And Alex is never coming home. Downstairs, the house is quiet, save for the hum of the refrigerator and the sound of a mother crying into a tissue.

After Alex was pronounced dead at Macomb Hospital Center, the very hospital where he was born, Alicia and Walter were permitted a few minutes with the body. A nurse said, “Be quick.” Walter pushed aside the curtain and saw his son on a gurney, a tube still stuck in his mouth, the red blotches on his chest where they had tried to revive him.

Alicia leaned over to kiss Alex, and his skin was cold. “I kept remembering how he liked to stay in bed in the morning,” she whispers now, her eyes beginning to crumble in tears. “You kind of had to wiggle him out . . . and . . . I used to wake him up by kissing him and . . . I would kiss him and he was always so warm, so warm and now he was so cold and oh, this is . . . so final! So horribly final!”

She is trembling, squeezing her eyes shut. Her husband begins to cry with her. “They keep saying it gets easier,” Alicia says, “but it . . . it doesn’t get easier. Every day Alex gets further and further away. . . .” It’s time to change.

Where is the lesson in all this? By all accounts, Alex Stachura was a good kid — not a saint, but a responsible young man who helped out at his church and worked summer jobs and liked music and had friends. And the others were supposedly good kids, too. Played on the sports teams, played in the band. No previous crimes.

So how could this happen, that their lives and families are now soaked by this bloodshed? For what? Teenage pride? Outside of Del Greco, the others barely knew Alex. How could someone do this to a stranger? Kick him in the head? Allow others to do so? What kind of children are we raising? Do they think it’s not real? Is it all those violent movies we let them watch — Chuck Norris, Steven Seagal? Is it sports, from football to pro wrestling?

Or is it simply the age we live in — an age of anger and blaming others and feeling good when we flatten someone? A recent poll was conducted among Macomb County students. They said their top problem is no longer drugs or alcohol. It is “student conflict.” Kids making war on other kids.

What does that tell you?

Not long before he died, Alex Stachura wrote a composition about God. These are his words:

“I believe God is different things at different times in your life. Right now, I think God is a stand-up comedian trying out his act on the human race.”

How sad a world we give to our young. The new year is upon us, and if you make no other resolution, make this one: to spend more time with your children, deal with their anger, teach them peace, before we have another Alex Stachura story, one dead, four arrested.

“They’re just kids,” you say.

Not anymore.