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Dahne

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Barton’s girlfriend was Janice, 2 a short-haired, opinionated, outspoken young woman who had the interesting misfortune of looking more like a male than a female. I remember Barton telling me the story about the Friday-night cop at McDonald’s, in which the cop, approaching Janice from behind, addressed her as “sir.” This accident did not pass without a certain number of “fuck-you’s” and “asshole’s” for the blundering officer, who must have been, no doubt, truly aghast that he had gotten it wrong; she really did look like a man, especially from the back. But whether or not Janice was being mistaken for a man, she always had the approximate disposition of an edgy rattlesnake.

I never got to ask him, but more than once I wondered what it was about Janice that Barton found attractive. She had a decent body, some freckles that I suppose could have been considered cute, and wore nice clothes. Physically that’s all that could be said about her, aside from the mentioned gender dispute between her anatomy and her face. In terms of personality, Janice was, any way you cut it, just nasty. So I never understood the connection they made. I suppose it had a great deal to do with the amount of marijuana Janice kept around her, and a greater deal with the amount of it Barton liked to smoke. It certainly wasn’t physical, though they did have an active sex life, and no two people that ever got together were more likely to disagree just for the sake of it, but somehow they went on together. Personally, not even a highly mobile morphine-drip unit could have gotten me through a night with her.

Two years later, however, I did spend a night with Janice, in the front seat of her car wacked out of my brains on drugs after a Grateful Dead show. We each slept in a front seat, and between disturbing hallucinations I managed to keep focusing on her face, remembering that she had been Barton’s girlfriend: in the two years that passed between the McDonald’s incident and that night in the car Barton had killed himself.

Now don’t immediately groan to yourself, because this is not going to be an overly dramatic exposition about suicide. I’ve tried writing something of that

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1 This paper was originally written for Prof. Philip Simmons’ English 440-Advanced Writing Seminar.
2 Names have been changed for confidentiality.
nature about my friend Barton before, but it never really worked. Words fail it, it’s that simple. Worse, though, is the part of Barton’s suicide that has only become clear to me recently, which is the sad fact that I can’t really even remember Barton. Despite the shrine I constructed for him in my closet at home, which consisted of his funeral program and a shirt we used to share, and despite the innumerable memories we shared, Barton has come to represent a blank more than an actual person.

Somewhere in the second semester of my junior year in high school Barton, for vague reasons, asphyxiated himself with carbon monoxide from the tailpipe of his mother’s car. Sounds like fun, eh? This was a hard thing to resolve at seventeen, and I’m not sure I ever successfully explained it to myself. The nature of suicide is inherently confusing because no one alive can satisfactorily justify it: unless you’ve actually done it you can’t understand it, and if you have, then the explanation, of course, is moot. So there’s a dead end involved, and this episode remains as confusing today as it was when it was actually happening.

Before any of this happened, though, Barton and I shared the same sort of brotherhood, call it, that I share with most of my very good friends, an attraction characterized mainly by stupidity and irresponsibility. We drove around a lot, drank a lot, went to school, did poorly, considered the merits of pot as a religious sacrament, ate, talked, and racked up speeding tickets. Considering that most of what we did was utterly repetitive, it was surprisingly fun. I remember vomiting in my closet at home, before the shrine had been built, after Barton and I had been to a party up the street from my house. Somehow I had thought that my closet was a door outside, and while I was busy purging myself in the closet, Barton was following suit all over my bed, and with both activities my mother must have been genuinely alarmed when she walked in to see what the noise was all about.

Barton Dahne Adams was his full name, the Dahne pronounced like the “Dane” in Great Dane. I first met him in chem lab, where we both witnessed some of the more ambitious experiments of Dr. Harry Triller, better known to the student body of our school as “Captain Harry.” He was a small man with a large brown head, adorned with a large mustache, and an equally impressive set of sideburns. Additionally, he always had a tremendous amount of energy, rumored to have been for years attributable to his cocaine habit. Some stories
held that he made his own cocaine somehow, right there in the lab. Of course, back then most of us could have believed it. He twitched his nose ceaselessly, and never seemed to be thinking about less than four or five things at once. Barton and I both failed chemistry first semester, and yet we were more familiar with Harry than anyone else in class. He didn’t seem to mind giving us F’s, though, and we didn’t mind getting them.

By the end of the second semester Barton was dead and I had completely reversed my grade to an A. I remember Professor Triller blowing up a giant coffee can somehow in lab, unfortunately, better than I remember the general time frame of Barton’s death. The noise the can made when it hit the roof was tinnish and exceedingly loud, something like you’d imagine the sound of an exploding spray-paint can to be. The feeling I had standing graveside, in comparison, is muddled, noteworthy only because I remember doing it: there are no details, no tears to remember falling on the freshly turned earth, no clear-cut sense of loss. The coffee can had hit the roof in a spot stained dull brown by water leakage. It looked like wet cardboard there.

The wake and the funeral shared this property with the ceiling, both giving the impression of cardboard—something temporary, impersonal, and makeshift. But I remember, for good or ill, the artificiality of the services much less clearly than I do the ugly spot on the ceiling and the exploded coffee can (Folger’s, it was). There may be reasons for this, Freudian transference or a subconsciously intentional memory block, but I don’t really buy either. What I do remember are bits and pieces of events before and after Barton’s death: where I was when I heard, the way he talked to my parents, sitting at night on a one-lane bridge that crossed the town’s only river in my car with the windows rolled down, passing a joint back and forth during a Pink Floyd song. These are the type of thing I recollect, general things that more than anything else reminds me he is dead; none of them reminds me what sort of person he was.

Somewhere during the period when I was utterly failing chemistry, when Barton was alive and everything seemed normal, I was sitting in my room at home inspecting my new skis. The New Hampshire winter had shown enough of itself to me that fall that I was persuaded to buy new skis, boots, and bindings. The doorbell had just rung, and it was Bart. This was ironic, I thought, for it was with Bart that I had recently made a good deal of money selling fake
concert tickets to unsuspecting prep school kids in town. Strange he should show up to see what I had bought with my proceeds when he never knew I intended to buy anything.

I could hear him exchanging greetings with my parents, noticing for the first time how timidly they treated him. He, in response, was equally vague and unaggressive. My parents knew that his parents had long been divorced, that they still both lived in the same small town, and that their kids, Barton and his younger brother Dave, both seemed a little troubled. This explained for me why they treated him as if he had FRAGILE stickers pasted all over him.

“Hi Barton,” my father had said to him.
“Uh..Hello, Mr. Beard,” he returned, “Travis here?”
“Upstairs.”
“Thanks.”

One-word answers and polite questions were always the bulk of the conversations between my parents and Barton. If a stranger had ever heard them he would have thought they didn’t know each other. As Barton trounced up to my room I was thinking about not only the way he talked to my parents, but the way he talked to all parents. He treated them like people who for some reason had never been accepted in his world: to Barton parents were only sources of anxiety, useless authority, and incessant bickering. To be sure, I never witnessed a civil discussion between him and either of his own parents, and of course this carried over into his dealings with other parents. I dismissed these thoughts quickly, however, for as soon as Barton entered my room I could tell he was stoned as a monkey, eyes a disturbing shade of red.

“Jesus Christ Bart! What the fuck are you thinking? You look terrible, man. My parents must know you’re high.” I said.
“Yeah, your Mom didn’t look too psyched.”
“Oh—wonder why?” I scoffed.
“Wow, nice skis though. Wha’d you pay for these?” Barton asked, changing the subject.
“Uh, ‘bout four for the skis, seven all together.” I said, allowing him to dismiss the possibility that I might have been angry with him for showing up obviously high.
“I thought you were going to buy K2’s?” he continued.
“Yeah, well, they only had 185s in those, and I really wanted 195s. Listen,”
I said, finding more resolve, “you can’t come over here looking like this—my parents will think I smoke dope. Guilt by association, ya know?”

“All right, all right,” he said, laughing, “I didn’t know I was so high until I got in here. Besides, your parents don’t know shit.” He was right, for the most part, so I relented.

“Yeah, yeah. I know. Still, it makes me nervous. Use Visine or something next time.”

“Okay, man, okay.”

Interestingly, this is the last time I can remember talking to Barton before his asphyxiation. What stands out here is the odd sense that what I recollect of this last meeting is the wrong sort of thing: once again, the memory doesn’t reveal anything about him, or how good of friends we were, just what was going on at the time. In retrospect it seems that I should have intuitively known to take extra notice of him, but this, obviously, is wrong. I couldn’t have known, of course, yet still it seems like I should have. Compounding this problem is the incomprehensible nature of suicide itself, the fact that no one can understand what drives one to take his or her life. Sounds terrible I know, but no amount of cosmeticizing will help, much like no amount of make-up could ever help Janice look like a girl.

When Barton finally reached his breaking point, which he attributed, naturally, to his parents, he took his mother’s car to his grandparent’s house in Rangely, Maine. He parked in their garage, ran a garden hose from the tailpipe through the hatchback to the front seat, put in a tape, and started the car. He inhaled the noxious fumes until he died. His grandparents, of course, were not home. Barton had always been resourceful, and the method of his self-designed death was a grizzly testament to this. His grandparents returned home later that day to find their grandson dead in their garage, without any idea why. Imagine that.

The last song Barton heard was the Rolling Stones “You Can’t Always Get What You Want,” which was later played at his funeral by his younger brother Dave. This part of the service was aimed at Barton’s friends and peers, and it ended up being by far the most uncomfortable part. They had set up a large portable tape player on top of the piano, and the music that came from it was all but inaudible because of the size of the church. The tape player had wobbled noticeably when Dave pushed the play button with his tremulous
hand, and it was his sobbing, more than the music, that was heard. We also heard Billy Joel’s emotionally wrenching “Piano Man,” which, like its counterpart, was barely heard. Both songs, which had been intended to make people feel better, gave a Top 40 feeling to the ceremony, as if Barton had not really died, but was waiting for a radio announcer to introduce him.

Two weeks prior to this scene at the funeral service Barton had spent his portion of our proceeds on a plane ticket to Hawaii. The notable part of this was the fact that he hadn’t told anyone he was going, leaving his mother and the police to uselessly speculate about where he had gone. All of us who were Barton’s good friends had personal theories, all of which turned out to be wrong. When he got back, Barton told me he had a great time, and had liked not knowing anyone there. He had a hooker up to his room at one point during the spontaneous vacation, but said that he couldn’t have sex with her because he kept thinking about Janice. Whether he saw Janice’s face on her shoulders or felt guilty about being unfaithful I remain uncertain. In any case, now I wonder if he’d be alive if he had stayed in Hawaii, if, without the disturbing memory of Janice, he could have somehow taken the strange woman and started a new life.

While Barton was in the fiftieth state I was doing the same thing I had been doing before he left, the same thing I would do after he left for good. In the two weeks between his return from his unannounced hiatus and his similarly unannounced demise I saw nothing that would have told me what was going to happen. I cannot say that I would have preferred to have known somehow, but neither can I say that the raw shock was any better; it’s another dead end.

I left Barton’s wake rather abruptly, for after viewing his placid, slightly blue face in the casket all I could think of was driving around in my car. This, however, was no remedy, which I figured out at about ninety miles an hour, heading tentatively for a tree on the side of the road. There’s no objectivity to suicide, unfortunately, that will permit a person, like me in my car, to understand, well...to understand anything about it. It was then and still is the confusion I regard Barton’s death with that makes it so bad. Moreover, this confusion tends to make me remember the actual incident better than I remember the person behind it.

Then Vice-President George Bush spoke at our graduation that year, and at one point, while enumerating some of life’s greater difficulties, he made refer-
ence to Barton. Not a name, just a short, passing comment. At the time I was very annoyed at this, and purposely coughed very loudly. Now I can barely remember what he said. For that matter, neither can I accurately remember what Barton’s voice sounded like, how tall he was, or the manner in which he used to speak. Instead, Barton has become for me a sad, personal example of a stupid philosophical question that has no answer. Albert Camus stated in *The Myth Of Sisyphus* that suicide is the only serious question in all of philosophy. I would argue something quite different, namely that suicide is one of the most preposterous ideas going.

Of course Barton wouldn’t argue anything, being dead as he is. Janice, the boyish girlfriend, who went on to some exceptionally troubled years after this episode, would probably skip arguing altogether, opting instead to give Barton some kind of beating. We never talked about it all that much together, Janice and I, probably because we both knew there was no resolution to the matter. At the Dead show that night Janice did ask me, however, while we were both struggling to get comfortable in the car, if I ever thought about him.

“Ya know, Janice,” I said, “I would if I could remember him well enough,” turning then to look out the window, up at the sky, where there was and will always be a gaping hole.