

CREATIVE NONFICTION

Larry

By Aidan Nelson-Sandmark

He was a funny guy. Not necessarily the kind of thing you'd want to be remembered for, believe me, but he never seemed too concerned with being remembered at all. That's how everyone acts when they're nineteen, I think. We started hanging out the most then, when he was in first year and I was in second. I always had a strange reverence for the time we spent together. Not really knowing why people enjoy my company is my problem, but as we got more familiar, I grew to understand that he was more or less the same. He just didn't show it. We'd leave campus in the afternoon to go smoke somewhere. This one spot by the water was where we usually ended up, at least until we could pester someone enough to let us over to theirs.

The hill was off a beaten narrow hiking path overlooking the ocean. A small grove-like area separated the perch from the outside world. Some homeowners from down the bluff climbed up one evening brandishing wine glasses, their dinner guests gushing about the view they had just beyond their backyard. Being burnouts (although particularly sly ones), we tended to get flustered when people disturbed the peace of the hill. They joked about how we had something figured out knowing about this place, and we laughed playing along, paraphernalia conveniently hiding underneath an old jacket we kept around for that express purpose.

We'd be there rain or shine, but I remember the spring there most vividly. There was a sense of timelessness about it all. The moniker 'Garden City' seemed to make more sense from up here. All but a few houses were drowned in a sea of trees. It was an important place for us; I garnered an appreciation for our environment there, an environment that is so easily taken for granted. I think he did, too. It was always hard to tell what he took for granted, though. He had a flippant exterior and a crude sense of humor. Using both as a sort of protective shell against any responsibility or pain, among

other things. I never asked him about it; he and I were similar in that regard. I had an idea of where our other friends were at in terms of psyche based on how often they'd speak frankly with me on emotional subjects or the like. With Larry, it was like looking in a mirror. He rarely had anything serious to say, and I mean rarely. I liked that about him, but it also frustrated the hell out of me. If he spoke about something personal, you listened, but those moments were often brief, and there was usually an air of discomfort about him when he got like that. Perhaps he was a little too stoic for his own good. I think he was just afraid of being embarrassed.



Another spring. We had known each other for almost four years by now. We had just gone out the night before, and Larry was on his way to the hospital to get checked out. He said his vision had been doubled for about a week or so. I didn't want to be involved, but I had offered some words along the lines of, "It's a good idea to get it checked, it's probably nothing." I had to work that day. That's the excuse, but I could have gone with the rest of them to visit before I started. The truth is, I was scared. I don't like hospitals, and like him, I tended to sleep in if I worked nights.

One of our friends showed up to my work to tell me it was a tumor, most likely benign. Which is something I'm starting to think they just tell everyone, but a tumor it was, nevertheless. I got drunk that night—very drunk. Another excuse. I struggled with the idea of how he would have acted if our roles were reversed. If I was more trusting, perhaps it would have been a simpler problem.

I wasn't there for him when it counted. I told myself I was too busy, and that the rest of our friends knew him better, and therefore were more appropriate companions for him at this time. He went through radiation for the better part of six months. I felt like I was missing something. If it was benign, then why was he being subjected to this? Was it precautionary? I made a mediocre effort to

spend time with him, but now his time was mostly occupied with treatments. I made it to his place maybe twice over the summer. Our time together seemed to slip through my fingers. The price of negligence, I suppose.

September came around and he found himself back in the hospital. Some of our friends began to spend more and more time with him, and his mother urged the more distant of us, to come and see him. A hospital much closer to me this time. Newer, more specialized. A frightening thought. I went to join them one day, after school. A few of us had made plans, but those got circumvented. I'd been by this place so many times since it had been built, several years before. It seemed fitting that this should be the reason that I set foot within, for the first time. The lobby was huge, and I was nervous being in such a sterile place with a cold. I thought everyone that worked at any medical institution was finely tuned enough to pick out my minute sickness and slap a mask on me. I arrived gingerly at reception. They were replacing some electronic bits in the front desk and, after a quickly assuaged apology, I was given a room number.

The eighth floor. Hospitals always terrified me, and as I would find out after the fact, the higher up you go, the more severe your situation. Such was the case here, at least. The floor was calm. Very few people shuffled about their business, and no one stopped to ask what I was doing there.

There were more people than seats in his room, to be sure. Hardly anyone spoke. By the door, his mother quietly thanked me for coming. I could tell where he got it from. She could barely hold it together, but you wouldn't notice had you not known her. I stepped into the room proper, and crammed myself between two of my friends who looked relieved to see me. I struggled to hold back a sneeze, and made myself cough as a result. A bad luck charm, I decided I was, knowing full well how ridiculous that would have sounded to anyone there at the time. He lay there in the center,

fully integrated into the works. The system of tubes and monitors that most hospital patients find themselves subject to. Reliant. So far from the independence he showed back in the days of the hill, almost four years prior. He was pale, barely present.

Six months' worth of explanation caught me silently in the face, and I found myself sitting for the next few hours without saying a word. Family and friends would come in, catch up, speak to Larry for a moment. A friend of ours would crack a joke, and we'd all giggle softly, as if the room was made of paper. Larry himself was in and out of consciousness by the minute, often during conversation. An effect of the experimental steroid which seemed to burn him from the inside, it hadn't exactly dulled his wit. The two of our friends that knew him the longest had been there with him for days, weeks possibly. They fed him ice chips and helped clear the bile from his throat with a suction device. They did the dance with our usual sense of humor, despite Larry being nearly speechless as a result of the surgery he'd undergone. Normally boisterous and unfiltered, he now struggled to whisper. It terrified me, although I knew he was still in there. He was always unbreakable in a way. And here he lay, a broken figure, somehow stronger than ever. We stayed late and mostly just sat. The only thing I could think to say as we left was "Try and get some sleep, okay?" I barely heard him respond. He said, "Okay."

I never spoke to him again.