

Forever Unaware by Jeff Barry

When I was twenty-one I watched a boy die and did nothing. I barely made it through the next year of college, the drinking, the parties, the girls. Everyone thought I was just coming out of my shell. No one knew what I saw that day, what I didn't do.

You can't imagine me as a younger man. You just see me as old. But when I was your age, I looked different. I was thin. I had hair. I was fun. I was cute. You would have fallen in love with me.

But like everyone else you would not have known what ignited my sudden popularity, about the sadness that I kept hidden, about the afternoon I still carry with me.

Before that day I was still quite shy, especially around girls, those cherishable creatures I longed to embrace. I was a diligent student but not a good one. No professor remembered me years later.

On Saturday afternoons, after working in the library, I walked down the street that ran by my dorm. After about a mile the asphalt ended and the road turned to gravel, which eventually came to a bluff overlooking Franklin county. A trail led down from the left side of the bluff and on around the mountain. About

fifty yards below was an overgrown path, practically hidden among the brush, that led to an outcrop that received the direct sun in the midafternoon. In a year of visiting that rock, I had never seen anyone else there. But the occasional empty beer bottles and cigarette butts told me that others also had found their way to that place.

If the day was warm I would take off my shirt and lie down on the rock. I never had the patience for just sunbathing and in those days had no type of portable, pocket-sized stereo like those mp3 players that everyone has now. My accompaniment was simply a book. During those years I was into Kosinski and journeyed with his Eastern European voice through lands of horrors with painted birds.

The rock was a chance to be alone, somewhere other than the dorm, the library, or the classroom. After a few hours, when the sun started descending on the other side of the mountain, leaving the outcrop in shade, I rose and headed up the trail again, to the bluff, back to town.

On that day, as I emerged from the brush and onto the trail, a boy on a mountain bike was riding quickly downhill. Our eyes met. I remember him well, those blue eyes underneath that shock of blond hair, a handsome boy but one I've not seen before, not a student at the college, too young. He was

approaching too fast for either of us to respond accordingly, appropriately, safely.

Always will I wonder if I had stayed with Kosinski a chapter longer, if I had lingered a few seconds while pulling the shirt back over my body or tying the laces of my sneakers, would everything else have been different. The boy riding on down the trail to whatever adventure awaited him, passing me silently, still hidden by the bushes out on that rock, forever unaware of each other.

I fell to the ground. Wait, no, let's be truthful. It was more of a stumble, a tripping over my own feet when instead I should have jumped out of the way. My butt was in the dirt and the boy couldn't maintain control of his bike as it wobbled, twisted, then spun him down. For some odd reason, my mind retains this image of the word "Blizzard", letters printed across the black tube of the bike as it crashed on top of the boy.

He laid there, a few feet from me, on his stomach, cradling his hands around his head. I feared he had a head injury. I started to get up and go to him as he turned over onto his back, pushing the bike off himself. It was then, as he turned, that we both saw the stream of blood spurting from his thigh. The spray rose several feet in the air, an arc of blood that stopped me. He screamed, "My

leg!" His hands reached out to grasp his right leg, which he tried to raise off the ground.

I stood there motionless knowing that he needed pressure on the wound, a tourniquet around that leg. My belt, I thought. We could use that. My shirt also would have served the purpose but, honestly, I couldn't move towards the boy, couldn't allow myself to be covered with his blood. It didn't require bravery, only humanity, which I lacked.

I turned around and ran up the hill. The boy must have thought I was abandoning him and, certainly, that's what I was doing. Did I say, "I'm going to get help?" I can't remember. And if I did, I probably spoke so softly, inarticulately, that the boy knew not what I said.

When I reached the bluff, I thought that fortune had indeed proved promising that day. A woman with a young child, really not much more than just a baby, was sitting at the overlook. I ran to her, "A guy's been hurt. He needs help, an ambulance." I was hoping she was a nurse, but of course she was not.

She stared at me as I repeated myself, trying to make her understand. Then she looked towards the trail, grabbed her child and got into her car, saying, "I'll get

help.” Did she also say something more? “Stay with him” or “Stay here.” I don’t know. Her car pulled out hurriedly, leaving me there on the bluff.

I went back to the trail. From the top I couldn’t hear the boy’s cries any longer. I walked down but stopped when I was close enough to see that there was no movement, no sound coming from him.

The minutes passed as I stood there gazing at the still body of a boy whose name I later learned was Tim. I heard the sound of sirens approaching. Again, I have no explanation for my actions but I turned quickly and ran into the forest, scampering up the wooded slope away from the trail. I heard the voices of policemen and then another siren, probably the ambulance. But I stayed in the woods, twenty feet or more from the road, making my way back towards the college, remaining out of sight until the road turned to pavement on the edge of town.

A siren approached from behind me, coming from the bluff. I didn’t turn around to look. I was sure it was the police wanting to stop me, to ask me why I didn’t do more. “Son, you could have saved his life. Why? Why, did you not do it?” Instead, of course, it was the ambulance speeding to the hospital. For the rest of the day I tried to tell myself that he could still be alive, that everything worked out okay

News travels quickly around a small campus. I skipped dinner in the cafeteria but that night I overheard some guys talking in the dorm about Dr. Hester's sixteen year-old son dying in a freak mountain biking accident just below Gray's View bluff. While I had never had a class with Hester, who was chairman of the political science department, I had planned on taking his foreign policy course the next semester. That became impossible.

A memorial service was held at the chapel two days later. I didn't attend. I had, at least, thought about being by the side of the road as the funeral procession drove from the chapel to the cemetery. I had found a spot by one of the huge Tulip Poplar trees but at the last minute I went back to my room. I was always turning away.

Since Tim wasn't a student at the college, just the child of a professor, he was unknown to the other college kids and his death wasn't a big trauma for the campus, at least not for the students. The faculty were shaken as they reflected upon their own families but the students continued with the regular course of

their lives, studying and partying. He wasn't one of us. Today, few of my classmates probably even remember this boy's death.

The drinking started typically enough, hanging out with friends. But before long I would head into town to buy my own liquor. Most of the guys who drank something other than beer chose southern whiskeys from Tennessee or Kentucky Bourbon. Perhaps because I just wanted to be different I always opted for the Canadian whiskeys, one or two bottles a week, by myself, my preferred way of drinking.

No time wasted by mixing the whiskey with cola, just slugged it straight from the bottle. It left the mouth rather numb but was the quickest way to get drunk and that escape was all I sought, to lose my inhibitions so that I gladly staggered out to whatever open party was happening at the fraternity houses.

Dancing was the way I worked it out, the music of a live band, those indie college bands so popular around the south in those days: the Primitons, Love Tractor, Dreams So Real. At first, I didn't care if I danced alone. I had fun. Then I realized that girls liked guys who danced. It didn't take me long to sidle through the dance floor until the sway of my own body latched onto that of some girl who was equally drunk. There was blond, blond Leslie but it was Natalia who left the biggest mark.

In a way Natalia Avignola is how I ended up here in Buenos Aires. She was one of the few foreign students on campus. With her auburn hair I didn't believe she was from Argentina. I demanded to see her passport. I had never thought about Buenos Aires before meeting her and it took fourteen years before you found me here. But I like to think that she laid the seed for bringing me here. If she had been Brazilian, would I be in Rio now? So, you have her to thank. If, that is, you're thankful that I am here, that we have met.

Well, I have to finish this now. It's almost time to meet you at the café. Anyway, you know the rest but now maybe you have a better idea of who I am, why I'm the way I am. Sorry to disappoint you.

Perhaps, when you step away from the table, I'll place this letter between the pages of your book. Will it be your Whitman? Or, maybe I'm still a coward.

After you go, and surely you'll find a reason to leave first, I'll leave these thoughts of mine lying on the table awaiting a random fate.