Jet Skiing

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My friend Trevor died of leukemia six months ago. It was only eleven weeks between diagnosis and death. He was twenty-five. While he was being treated, I was invited by one of his friends to join a Facebook group dedicated to supporting him during his chemo. That was the first time I had heard he was dying. Trevor and I were Facebook friends mostly out of obligation; we hadn’t spoken to each other since high school. I did not feel comfortable offering condolences on his wall, but I checked it daily to see how he was doing.

On September 3rd, the first day of Columbia’s term, the posts started coming in. “R.I.P. Trevor.” “You’re in a better place.” “You were so strong.” “We’ll miss you.” A few hours later, Trevor appeared on his own wall with a post that said: “We regret to inform you that today, at eight in the morning, Trevor passed on to a better world – Jan”. Jan was Trevor’s mom. I did not go to the funeral.

Trevor and I grew up in the same neighborhood in rural Michigan. We were in the same grade, went to the same elementary school, played on the same t-ball teams. We weren’t poor for the area; we both had nice houses. He had an above ground pool that his dad set up every May and took down in September. We spent a lot of time at his house, swimming, watching pro wrestling, building erector sets. At her request, I called his mom Jan. I was there so often, though, that on a few occasions I accidentally called her Mom. Afterward, I remember vividly feeling like I’d betrayed my own mother and that I’d somehow encroached on Trevor’s family. I felt like I’d stepped over a line, as if I had used Trevor’s toothbrush or went to the bathroom in his house with the door ajar.

By October, most of Trevor’s final goodbyes had been posted. People had complimented the nice ceremony and wake. They’d written things they remembered about him: funny stories, things he had liked, things he had frequently said. I had initially
not wanted to post, but after he died, I thought it might be crass for me to not say anything, so I posted “I’ll always remember our times biking to the woods and wrestling.” I later reread the post and considered deleting it so no one would get the wrong idea about us. But wrestling in the woods was something we liked to do. We’d find a clearing, brush away any bramble or rocks or poking things and imagine we were wrestlers. I once threw him against a pine tree, and he punctured his cheek on a small protruding branch. I remember the way his cheek rose like a tent as he pulled his face from the tree, and the way it snapped back to place when it was free. In the hospital, we told Jan that he fell off his bike and landed on a stick. The injury left a circular scar that he mentioned negatively to me only once, in middle school, after we’d already gone our separate ways. He told me the scar had left him disillusioned, but at the time I’m not entirely sure either of us knew what that meant.

In late October, another group was made, this one called, simply, “R.I.P. Trevor Hatley.” Now Trevor had three pages. This one was started by a girl named Sarah, a girl who, I figured out, was his fiancée at the time of diagnosis. She had started appearing in his profile pics a few years earlier. They had bought a house together, a one-bedroom in a new development. In the weeks before he died, they got married. She, like him, was from Northern Michigan, and, also like him, had never left. When Trevor friended me on Facebook so long ago, I read that he went to trade school, not college, and became an HVAC repairman. My reaction at the time was strong, and, retrospectively, shameful. I was disappointed he didn’t move on with his life. I thought he was being lazy. I thought he was just playing around, that he was too smart to work as an HVAC repairman. While I toiled at school, he rode around on his jet skis. Sarah had been similarly unambitious. She, I found, had worked as a secretary at her dad’s small company, and then
after getting serious with Trevor, got a job as a secretary where he worked. I've never met Sarah, so I can't speak of her potential, but I remember feeling that Trevor was squandering his.

But it was serendipitous that Trevor didn't go to college. If he had gone, he would have had, at most, three years of a professional life after he graduated. None, really, if he decided to get his master's. He had no student loans. He had no responsibilities. Before I knew he was sick I felt something like jealousy. Sometimes, I would look through the photos of the apartment he rented before he bought the house with Sarah. He had a big screen TV. He had what looked like a quality entertainment center. The apartment was clean and well furnished and had marble or faux marble countertops. He spent a lot of time at Torch Lake, boating and jet skiing. He could afford to throw extravagant parties at the beach. Until the summer he was on chemo, Trevor had been quite ripped from all the extra time he dedicated to the gym. I remember thinking, when looking at those pictures of him at the lake with his friends, that I'll have what he has ten times over once I'm out of school and established. Some people, I thought, seem to have things handed to them, while others have to struggle.

Trevor's birthday would have been in November, and when the day came, Facebook reminded me. A few people left him birthday wishes. I remember reading them the day they were posted and feeling embarrassed for the people who had posted them. They are still up, months later, which embarrasses me on a totally different level. I know Jan has access to his account, and I think it would be best if she closed it, or at least took down the birthday wishes and the posts from people who were hacked. Since he died, there have been two posts on his wall by clear Facebook account hacks. These seem even worse to me than the birthday wishes. It's like stepping on a grave.

I think I remember the moment our friendship started to
unravel. It was in our first year of middle school. We were in the same math class. We sat together every day, in the front row. But then one day I walked in, and he was already sitting at a table in the back with three other boys and no room for me. He looked at me standing in the doorway for a moment, then turned back to the boys. The word that kept circling in my head for weeks was ‘betrayal.’ Since his death, I’ve thought about this again and I think I went too far. I think it was a misdirection of ambition. I was already his friend. Trevor sat at the back table every day, until the boys got so rowdy and unmanageable that the teacher made a seating chart. She put Trevor and me next to each other, because she didn’t think we were friends. We were quiet for a few days but then started talking again. A week later, the teacher redid the chart, and for the rest of the year we were separated.

We still hung out that year, but we found barriers to build. He began projects that were too complex and fragile to have me help with. Both of us lost interest in pro wrestling. He liked computers and things that blinked. I did track and soccer. My birthday is in May, and even though by the end of our first year of middle school we weren’t speaking to each other much, I still invited him to my party. By that point, I had a whole new circle of friends, so the party was basically us and him. I’m sure we were clique-y and inside joke-y, but I do remember Trevor at the start of the party, in a conical hat, sitting at my dinner table laughing with the rest of us. Later, while we were supposed to be watching a movie, he sneaked out. I found him in my bedroom, still in the hat, sitting on my bed with the lights off. I took offense to this. I thought he was being snobby. Like all children, I thought he was out to ruin my party. I told him this, and left him there in the dark. Then I went outside and sulked in my parents’ camper, face down on the beige and pungent mattress, and waited for Trevor, or anyone, to come and apologize to me. I waited for what seemed like an hour,
but was probably only five minutes, because when I finally came back to the movie, no one seemed to have noticed I was gone. Trevor was sitting cross-legged on the floor next to one of my new friends.

September was my first semester as a PhD candidate at Columbia. I don't blame Trevor's death for my difficulties and academic spottiness last fall, though it was certainly a contributing factor. I've lived in big cities before, but none like New York. To say that I needed to adjust to the pace would have been a stretch, but I had this weird drive, a drive to which I submitted almost daily, to explore every road, enter every shop, eat at every deli. I don't plan on staying in New York after I defend my thesis — I plan on moving on — so I think I felt that I needed to get as vivid an imprint of the city as I could before collecting my letters of rec and catching the last train out. I thought about Trevor a fair bit while walking the streets, but it strikes me as incidental to my desire to explore. In December, my adviser had a heart to heart with me about my progress, and she used the words 'unthorough' and 'undergraduate,' which left me dopey and shattered for weeks. When I returned to New York after Christmas break, I returned with a new resolve to stay stapled to my desk and focused. And I've been good since then. My progress is progressing.

Then, one morning, mid-March, Trevor posted on my wall. "Hey! I found the most ammazing site for hot singles! Click here to join with me." It's hard to say who to feel embarrassed for in a situation like that. The hackers just unleash their virus on Facebook and let it spread to any account it can, so it's not like they set out to hack the dead. Jan's not as forum savvy as someone mine and Trevor's age would be; she must have logged on as Trevor and clicked on one of the bad links, compromising his account. It was such a perplexing thing for me to see Trevor resurrected as a computer virus, but then with things like Gmail and Facebook and
OKCupid and match.com, it's become quite hard to really pack up and bury the dead.

That morning, after seeing Trevor's message, I fell into a Facebook loop. I went to Trevor's profile and clicked on a name on his friends list — a person I never met named Nate. I read Nate's profile and then clicked on one of the friends on his friends list. And so on. After awhile, I moved out of Michigan. Then out of America. I tried to find more exotic names, names of people from other countries. I went to France, then Japan, then back to France. I looked through the photo album of a Thai girl's trip to Australia. I skimmed the profiles of people from Russia. I went to Africa. I saw pictures from a costume party in Kumasi, Ghana. I saw pretty Cambodian girls with big earrings and high cheekbones. This whole Facebook loop cost me at least eight hours. I clicked on city names if they looked compelling. I went to India, but not China. American music is popular everywhere, it seems. I went to South America. I saw pictures of statues from Montevideo, Uruguay. I saw a Brazilian exec type behind her desk, who was friends with a woman with triplets from Nairobi. I went to the West Indies. And then to England, where I came to the profile of a man named Jeffrey. Facebook said we had one friend in common. I'm not sure how they knew each other, but there was my friend's profile pic. Him on a jet ski on Torch Lake, his new wife's arms wrapped around his chest, a rooster tail arching high behind them. They looked like they must have been going incredibly fast.