

Last Words

by Jason W. Stuart

I met Barry Hannah once in my life. I'd come to Oxford, MS, to meet an entirely different writer whom I thought then and think now very highly of. I'd also come to escape from another slew of regrets. Oxford is a great city to run away to.

I was standing outside a bookstore during a live radio show, the weather already turning bitter for my Florida blood. I peered over others' heads (a talent I grew into) to get a glimpse or hear a peep from that night's featured guest (someone I'd once known in some other life). Next to me, sitting on a bench, was a short, old man holding an oxygen tank. He sat to himself, seemingly uninvolved and ordinarily easily forgettable, and I wasn't sure if he was here for the show or just waiting for someone. Only after his persistent presence did it begin to dawn on me, his shape, his demeanor, his almost flawless aloofness. At some point, I noticed him speaking quietly to a friend of mine. After a moment, I leaned over to my friend and asked, "Hey, is that Barry Hannah?"

"Yeah, you want to meet him?" My friend asked.

Of course I did. How odd, I thought, standing next to him for better than a half hour and having not the slightest idea who he was. But, I guess it's that way often with writers. Unless you memorize their photos from book jackets (assuming it's a photo taken in the last ten years), who would ever really recognize an author on the street? We're not exactly Brad Pitt or Joey Lauren Adams (inside joke for any other *Oxonians*).

We spoke only briefly about motorcycling. Both avid riders, we swapped a few quick tidbits about our machines. As I recall, Barry rode Kawasakis. Mine's a Honda. We talked engine size and horsepower and few other things. We didn't talk long. I mentioned I might do a full-on interview about bikes and books with him sometime for a magazine sometime. It seemed like the perfect match. That, of course, never happened. We never met nor spoke again. He was dead just a month or so later.

I remember going to see my father in the hospital before work. I was in high school. It was my first real job. I was still new, then. I wanted to do well, not show up late, etc. I didn't spend much time that day with my father, in fact wouldn't have gone at all had my mom not said I should stop by and see him. I didn't even know he was in the hospital. Some kind of surgery he had done or something was all I knew at the time. So, I popped in real quick on the way to work, already in my uniform. He told me I'd grown, and he asked about my shoes. He was staring at my work boots, these big black \$10 Walmart things that tore apart and dry-rotted within a month or two. Get what you pay for. Said I had big feet, my dad. Big feet. I told him yeah, I guess. I told him to get better and that I had to get to work. He said okay, he'd see me later. I started to tell him we'd go see a movie when he got out, but I didn't say it (we weren't all that close).

This was, of course, the last time I ever spoke to him. He slipped into a coma the next day and never came out. Died a few weeks later. So, the last words my dad ever spoke to me were about my shoe size and how big my feet were. No I love you's, no I'm proud of you's nothing fatherly or adoring sonly. Just shoes.

But, last words are always odd, because, of course, neither of you knows it's going to be the last time you speak. It just turns out that way and it's all you ever have.

I've carried that moment with me since that day, the regret so thick some days it's like slogging through a swamp. I think there are people out there that count out the days of their lives by their accomplishments and the things they're proud of. Not I. No, I belong to that other set, those of us who count out our days in long lists of regret and poor decisions, decisions we knew better than, or should have known better than. Maybe I write now because I'm always looking for the better thing to have said, the right thing, the smart thing, the loving thing, that perfect thing for a son to say to his dying father. Maybe I just want him to know I did something.

I don't know why I put these two incidents together in my head, but I never think of one without the other anymore. Certainly, I don't think of Barry Hannah like a father. I never knew the man. I didn't even "find" him in the writing sense until late in my development. He was never more to me personally than a blip on the radar of the writing world. His presence is a dominating one, maybe now more than before. A dead man is always stronger than any living. A dead man becomes an idea.

Maybe, that's why it sticks with me. It's the idea that there once was this greatness, and that for a fleeting moment, I almost touched it.

Would I have a different conversation with Hannah if I could go back? Of course I would. But, I don't know what it would be. Likely a just as pointless waterfall of words about what it is to write. A conversation, in the end, just as forgettable as any other. And one had a thousand other times with a thousand other forgettable people. We remember last words only because they're last words. We try to assign them extra meaning than they have because we want that. We want some sense of direction, of meaning, of purpose and, in vanity, of greatness. We all want to have touched the sun. But, it's never true because you don't really know it's your last until it's too late.

Barry and I talked about bikes. My father and I talked about shoes. None of it means a damned thing.

