A Square Peg in a Round Hole

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When I heard the municipal band playing the other night in the park, I remembered BNR. He would have liked listening to the band here in the park among the trees. I wondered if he would sing along if he were here. The last time I saw him—the last time anyone saw him—was ten years ago.

Nobody knew much about him. The first time I remember hearing about him was once when he walked past the house lounge.

"Hey, there goes Bruce's new roommate."
"You know what he's like?"
"Is he like Bruce? I sure hope not."
"Yeah. What's his major?"
"Yeah, really. One Bruce is bad enough."

Bruce was the latest house abuse-target. He had a knack for saying something stupid to no one in particular, usually when no one wanted to hear about it. Word was that he was really smart in technical matters, but a dope when it came to understanding people. As it turned out, BNR was on the same frequency as Bruce.

We called him BNR because no one took the trouble to find out his real name until much later, and even then, BNR seemed to fit him better anyway. BNR; short for Bruce's New Roommate. After a while, Bruce moved off campus and Daryl got stuck with BNR. Since we all knew Daryl, or "Derelict" as we called him, we now had an
insider living with BNR.

"Guess what happened yesterday? I was coming back from class and I heard this voice from inside my room. So I kind of snuck up and looked in. BNR was looking up at the crack in the door and he was talking to it."

"What'd he say?"

"Get this—he looked up and said, 'Gosh Mr. Crack, I hope the heat transfer problems go okay today.' Can you believe that? I had to sit down for awhile, I was so shaky."

"I always knew he was a space case."

So BNR had his debut on our dorm floor without even being there. The story got around pretty fast, so whenever he would walk by, there would be lots of suppressed laughter. As we saw more and more of him, he became more and more bizarre. He had a knack for making himself the brunt of a lot of ridicule by making small social errors like rarely taking showers and singing off-key very loudly. He had straight, dark, greasy hair and a Vaseline face to match. When he went down the stairs to eat he slammed each foot on every step as fast and as loud as he could. Mannerisms such as these were not good for the house image.

I had my first real encounter with BNR all by myself. I have this love for climbing trees and there was this park just a few blocks from campus that had the nicest climbing willow I had ever seen. So I took to climbing it whenever I felt like getting away from dorm life. So with me up in this tree so often, I was destined to see a side of BNR that no one else had ever seen.

One Saturday evening, just around dusk, I was up in the tree and I heard two voices approaching. One very high-pitched and nasal, the other rather low and gutteral.

"So what do you care what they think?"

"Oh, I don't know. I guess I wish they'd talk to me the way they talk to each other."

"Why do you want that? They're not worth being friends with."

"Yes, they are."

"No, they're not."

"Yes, they are!"

"No, they're not!"

I was lying in the crotch of the tree when I saw him
come up and sit down below me against the tree trunk with a battered old trombone case. I knew that if I didn’t move, he would never know I was there. So I listened some more. By now he had the trombone out and was playing snatches of rock and roll songs on it. His playing wasn’t bad, but somehow a trombone and new-wave music just don’t fit; kind of like a square peg in a round hole. In between songs, he would talk to himself.

“What’re you doing, Dave?”
“Playing my trombone.”
“Why are you playing it here?”
“Because no one can hear me and so I have someone to talk to.”
“That’s nice you want to talk to me. Can you play John Phillip Sousa marches? He writes good trombone parts.”
“I don’t like marches. The guys wouldn’t think they’re cool.”
“But I bet you can play them.”
“I don’t want to talk about it anymore.”

This went on for almost an hour in pretty much the same way. I began to wonder if he actually heard voices talking back to him. I found out later back at the dorm.

Ralph came into the lounge looking kind of pale with a towel wrapped around himself.

“Well, BNR is getting worse. I was behind the shower partition drying off when I heard a voice go ‘Dave. Dave! What are you doing?’ Then a different voice answered, ‘Brushing my teeth.’ Then there was a long pause and the second voice goes ‘No, they’re all straight.’ When I finished drying I walked out and BNR was the only one there. Talking to yourself is one thing, but hearing voices talk back like that is too much for me.”

Of course, after that the ridicule got worse and we began to make fun of him to his face, rolling our eyes at each other to show our contempt of his naivety. As the ridicule became more blatant, I would see BNR more often at the tree, talking more and more about “the guys.”

One time especially stood out. It was near finals when everyone was crabby and on edge. A bunch of us were in the lounge watching TV when BNR came catapulting into the room in his usual manner.

“Hey, what are you guys doing?”
“What’s it look like? We’re out on a boat tuna-fishing, you dope.”
"Yeah, what’s wrong with you, BNR? One of your brain transistors burn out?"

This got a lot of laughs and BNR joined in, looking furtively from face to face. He had that puppy-dog kind of expression, one that simply wanted to please. I don’t see how I could have been the only one who saw it. I was compelled to at least try.

"We’re watching M*A*S*H, Dave. You all ready for finals?"

"Well, I guess I . . ."

"Shhh. Keep it down, BNR!"

From the looks I got from the other guys, that was all I dared to say. Well, actually, it would have been all right for me to talk, as long as BNR wouldn’t talk back. When they saw he wasn’t going to shut up, they took the opportunity as a chance to ridicule him some more.

"Yeah, BNR, are you going home for break? Neptune is a long ways away."

"Don’t worry, Ralph. BNR can get Mr. Crack to send him home, can’t you BNR?"

BNR was aghast. He stood up and looked around wildly, then he just seemed to wither like a scorched leaf. He walked very slowly out the door. I stood up and watched him as he then ran down the hall to his room, grabbed his trombone and ran outside. I made up some excuse and took off for the willow. When I got there, I found the case all smashed and the trombone bent hideously backwards around a limb. I stood there staring for a long time. Then I tried to get the trombone off of the tree and into some recognizable shape. But it was no use. The horn was beyond repair and BNR was gone.

Later that week somebody came by and moved all of BNR’s stuff out of his room.

We were all sitting around in the den when another new kid moved in. Ralph came in and flopped into a chair.

“Did you guys see this new guy? I hear he’s a real jerk. I heard his old house called him ‘Spit.’ Probably because when you see him, you want to spit.”

Not much had changed.

The band was through playing. They finished the concert with The Stars and Stripes Forever, one of
Sousa's most popular marches. I wondered if BNR was still around and if he found another trombone to play. Myself, I don't care much for marches anymore.