

Austen and Jausten The Twins of Time, Ray Bradbury

This is all about Austen and Jausten, two twins I knew when I was twelve and played with in an alley behind my house in Tucson, Arizona.

These boys both suffered from sins of pride.

Austen told me that he was going to live forever.

Jausten bragged that by the age of thirteen, next year, he would be dead, stone cold dead and gone. Forever, he added.

Then he coughed, spit blood and showed it to me as proof, and smiled.

I could never figure either of them.

But let's take Jausten first.

I didn't ask him about his stone cold future. Forever. Because

Sort of shy, his kind of sly, he traced his name in the alley dust one summer noon and without looking at me nonchalantly said, "Guess what?"

"I'm no guesser."

"You're looking at a real live dead person."

Well, I wasn't looking at him. Now I did.

"Say that again," I said.

"I'm good as gone," Jausten drawled. Doctor said so. Priest said so. Mom and Dad claimed it was a fact. They've bought me a great marble hut up at Green Meadows Cemetery—you know the place."

"They bought you a—"

"It's in the works. Should get the contract this noon and I'll show it to prove."

"The doctor told you that?"

"Sure did." Jausten nodded solemnly.

"And Father Riley knows?"

"He found out."

"Don't your folks mind your spreading it around?"

"That I'm gonna die? Heck, no."

"If I was your parents I'd tell you not to say."

"They don't mind. They tell it themselves."

Just then, Austen ran up and said, "Shut your eyes."

I shut them.

"Now, open."

I opened my eyes. The twins were standing there, smiling, in their bib overalls and bare feet. It was an old trick they loved.

"Now," both said at once, "which is which?"

I looked at the two heads, tilting this way and that.

"No fair," I said. "Stand still!"

They twitched.

"Which is Austen?" one said.

"And which Jausten?" said the other.

I ran my stare over their laughs.

"Heck," I said, "one of you is gonna live forever and one of you is gonna die forever! How can I tell if you don't hold still?"

"I'm Austen," one said.

"And I'm Jausten!" the other cried.

"Maybe," they added, running circles.

Then, quietly, the twins stood before me, blinking and smiling happily.

One of them stepped forward and said, "You want to know how to tell us apart?"

"Tell me."

He pointed to his forehead. "See? In my left temple, right under the skin, a blue vein I have and Austen doesn't. That blue vein is my future, real dark, down below."

"Well, then," I said, "you're Jausten."

"Yeah!"

And the two of them ran shrieking around me and then stood very still. I couldn't see the brow of either of them, so I shut up. One nodded at the other and said, "Git," and the other walked off up the hill.

Now this twin turned to me and said, "I guess you'd like to know about my future?"

"Yes."

"Well, I'll tell," he said. "In junior high I'm gonna kill algebra, easy. And geometry. That's easy, too. I'm gonna take drama, write poems, study Greek. In high school I'm gonna write ten dozen stories, act Hamlet, be student body president, graduate all As. Get a job right off, make five thousand a year, by gosh, five thousand. Find a house and wife and kids and live forever. Live forever!!

"You're Austen," I said.

"How'd you guess?"

"Well," I said, "your talk. Easy to tell between you two."

He said, "Right! Now what about your future?"

I said, "Well, if I can make it out of seventh grade, I'll be lucky."

"Try," he said, and walked away. "Try."

I met Jausten up by Green Meadows Cemetery and he showed me the final papers signing him into the Gothic marble hut, a bit more than a hut, almost a white gazebo in the backyard where you could hide from the sun.

"Go on," Jausten said. "Get in."

"No thanks," I said.

"It's cool in there, summer day like today."

"Cold's more like it."

I shivered. Jausten pretended not to see.

"There's lots of room to stash folks." He pointed. "Up left is where Mom will visit, should I need visitors. Papa, up on the right. Grandma's already down below, see, and my Aunt Mollie's way there in back. Still lots of shelf space, as they say. Don't that cook the cabbages?!?"

I stared at the dark.

"Where'll they put you?"

"Now you're talking. Jump!" Jausten leaped into the hut. "How come you're shivering?"

"Naw, just trembling."

"How come you're holding onto your elbows?"

"Heck, no." I dropped my elbows.

"Now head on in. The water's fine."

I hesitated. "Looks deep to me."

"You a sissy?"

"I don't mind sissy. It's other stuff I mind."

"Like what?"

"Like not being out in the sun."

"You sound like my brother!"

"He's okay."

"You hear him talk?"

"Once in awhile."

"He can't stop! Start him up, get outta the way! Forever, he says."
Jausten snuffed and chortled. "He uses big words like destination and eternity!"

"They're swell, if you can get your tongue around 'em."

"So what! Eternity! Gosh, what a bore!"

"I'd give it a try."

"And be asleep on your feet by breakfast?"

"I'd wake up for lunch."

"Naw. Day after day, year after year! What a drag! Over and over!"

"I bet I could coast through."

"Naw, you'd just give up the ghost."

That clicked the hammer on my gun. "Speaking of ghosts," I said, "what's so special about...." I waited. "Death?"

"You finally said 'it.'" Jausten's face melted into a terrible pity. "Death? Want me to tell?"

"Try," I said.

"Not try," he said, "just be. The great thing about death is it's always around. Never leaves. Pays attention for a billion billion years. Now that's eternity! Right?"

"Talk about boring. That's it!" I replied.

"It's all in the way you see it. You're out there in the sun. I'm here in the shade. Where's the weather report?"

"Ain't none. But how come you're holding onto your elbows now?"

"Who says!" He let go of his elbows.

"Not me." I turned away. "I gotta go. Lots of things to do. Mostly boring, maybe."

I looked back. "You gonna stay up here?"

"A little while," he said, from the night within the marble hut.

I looked at his face. There were bright tears in his eyes.

"Want me to walk you home?" I asked.

"I'm already there," he said.

"Sure," I said, and started off.

"Aren't you going to say goodbye?" Jausten called.

"Oh, yeah," I said. "Goodbye." And walked away in the bright sunshine.

Soon after, my dad drove us all to L.A. to work for a year, and then we came back to Arizona when I was thirteen.

I was home about ten days when I saw someone running around the block on the other side of the street.

"Jausten!" I cried.

The boy froze in place.

"My gosh!" I shouted. "You're still alive."

That did it. The boy flashed across the street like a lightning bolt. He jolted to a halt, his cheeks red, panting, his hands clenched into fists.

"Austen!" he yelled.

"Oh, yeah, sure," I blurted. "You look so much alike!"

"Austen!" he cried again, angrily.

"Don't get mad," I said. "How is he?"

"Who?"

"Jausten, of course!"

"Dead!"

"Ohmigosh, when?"

"A long time back!"

"Long time?"

"Last spring, I think. Yeah, last spring." Austen weaved lightly in his tennis shoes. "What else you wanna know?"

"How?"

"He died like he said, just like he wanted."

"You miss him?"

"Why? We never saw eye to eye."

Austen glanced up toward Green Meadows a mile away. "You going to visit?" he wondered.

"I might."

Austen studied the horizon. "Tell him he's a damn fool."

"I couldn't do that."

Austen regarded me with his cool clearwater eyes. "No, I guess you couldn't."

He shrugged and measured the sidewalk ahead. "Well, gotta go."

"Where?"

"Tell you when I get there."

"Is that [all?] Nothing more to say about Jausten?"

"He's dead."

"Yeah, I guess that says it all."

"Sure does. So long."

"So long."

He ran in place, bouncing in his tennies, and then took off lickity-split, bounding, leaping, cavorting over the lawns.

"So long, Jausten," I called, and stopped.

I felt a sudden wetness in my eyes.

"Yeah, that's what I mean ..."

"Jausten," I said, after a long while. "So long."

The End