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The Night I Almost Died
1,487 words
The Breeze

One tequila. Two tequila. Three tequila. Death? Not exactly the word you were expecting? Many of us have had those wild, blacked-out nights before, drinking shots of tequila that usually leave us hugging the porcelain sanctuary till the wee hours of the morning. But what if our night didn't exactly make it until morning and the sun that usually awakens us, gets replaced instead with a light at the end of the tunnel?

Enter JMU junior Devin Harris, who has experienced that end before. A freshman at the time, Devin was excited for his life in college to begin; little did he know, he would be seeing the end far too soon.

Much like other college students, a typical weekend night begins with pre-gaming. A handle of Cherry Burnetts stashed away for a special night, a bottle of Jose Cuervo bought by an older friend, and a case of Natty smuggled in by your roommate and you've got what most college students would call it—a pregame. A pregame, according to UrbanDictionary.com, is “to drink alcohol prior to a social engagement to make it more enjoyable.”

Many students feel the need to pregame as a means of loosening themselves up and to make them feel less awkward at a party. Junior Kari Van Treuren agrees, saying that “pregames are more intimate than a party but are just as fun because you and your friends are all getting drunk together.” She adds, “Also, sometimes it's cold outside and I like to have a liquid blanket.”

One particular pre-game took place on January 15th, 2010 in Eagle Hall. Eagle Hall, known for its hall-style dorms, made it very easy to socialize and drink amongst those down the hall. Cases of Bud Light Lime sprawled across the floor, along with a diverse selection of liquor to choose from: Captain Morgan, Malibu, Jose Cuervo, Burnetts, Smirnoff, 3 Olives, and Asbolut. Thirty students from sections B and C of Eagle Hall gathered all into one student's room.

The festivities began like any other normal Friday night; around 6:30 PM students started to drink beer, as they got ready for their night. "It was the first weekend back after winter break, so we had all been building up this big party in our head- we had even gotten a new futon," Harris recalls.

The anxious and thirsty students eventually switched over from casually drinking beer to pounding shots of liquor. By 10 PM, Harris had consumed 9 shots in addition to the beer he had already drank, some shots spread out and some back-to-back. Harris says 9 shots is his "usual personal drinking limit to feel good for the night." "I guess because I was already a little drunk, I thought I had a better tolerance and better abilities than normal," Harris remarks.

Harris continued to drink as his friends came in and out of his room. Each friend wanted to take a shot with him, and by 10:20, Harris had taken 5 additional shots of tequila within a span of 7 minutes. "I've been drinking here and there before since I was 13, but I had never really touched tequila," says Harrison.

Maria Ayala, Harris's girlfriend at the time, recalls her boyfriend "looking very relaxed, eyes really glazed with the biggest smile, and his body swaying." Ayala

notes, "I started worrying when he could no longer stand straight and was leaning in towards me as we spoke, for support."

As the night went on and people continued dancing in the room across from his, Harris quotes, "I felt really good for about 45 minutes until I passed out on the futon." His friends began to worry when all of a sudden he became unresponsive to their slaps and yells, ultimately leading them to dump water on him.

Harris awoke long enough for four of his friends to help carry him across the hallway into his room. As his friends scrambled to help him, Aqueel Akbar, Harris's resident advisor (RA), happened to be lurking down the hallway and saw the suspicious activity occurring. As Harris began throwing up, Akbar knew it was time to call an ambulance. "I had volunteered at the local rescue squad the previous semester, so I knew what was going on and that Devin was in the condition where professional help was needed," Akbar states.

When the ambulance arrived, Harris was immediately put on a stretcher, and only remembers bits and pieces from the elevator down to the lobby. "The last thing I remember is people jostling me into the ambulance- from there everything was faded in and out, kind of like a movie moment, where everything's silent and the lights go in and out, in and out and people are kind of moving and freezing all at the same time," Harris quotes.

As the ambulance sped to Rockingham Memorial Hospital, Harris's blood alcohol level content (BAC) showed up to be an alarming 0.42%, a highly fatal level. Around 11:00 pm, Harris went into cardiac arrest and his heart had stopped. "As I was laying on the gurney in the ambulance, I remember looking up and there being

two medics, on the left and right of me, and I remember hearing the medic on the left saying 'he's going into...' (cardiac arrest), but I actually never heard the cardiac arrest part," Harris pronounces. Harris continues, "Basically, it was as if you were watching a movie, and someone pressed pause."

Flatling for approximately half a minute, Harris had to be defibrillated 3 times. Normally in ambulance, when a person is defibrillated 3 times, they are usually pronounced as a goner. However, at the last minute possible, Harris was finally revived after the third attempt.

"It was like that first breath, was incredibly cold. It was like someone had hit the play button, but had hit the skip scene button first. And so the scene that I had been watching of me in the ambulance changed what seemed to me like, really quickly, because I had missed so much of that time because I had been out for that 30 seconds," recalls Harris.

Upon finally arriving at Rockingham Memorial Hospital, Harris was given a blood transfusion and a saline IV. After the first blood transfusion, Harris's BAC was still a 0.42, proving that the alcohol was so deeply saturated in his tissues, that even the new blood that was given to him was quickly absorbed into alcohol. The next 3 hours were spent pumping new fluids into Harris's body until the doctors cleared him to be stable.

As if dying was not substantial enough lesson to learn from, Harris still had to suffer the repercussions of his drinking.

Meanwhile, a police officer had been waiting in the hospital room the entire time during Harris's transfusions. "As soon I was cleared by the doctors, the police

officer put me in handcuffs, while I was sitting in the hospital bed, and then took me into a police car and then took me to the drunk tank,” Devin discloses.

Harris spent the night in jail and was not released until he blew a 0.00, which didn’t end up being until 14 grueling hours later.

The repercussions didn’t end there- Harris was charged with underage possession of alcohol and drunk in public (which eventually got dropped) and was slapped with 50 hours of community service, mandatory ASAP classes, and a requirement to attend “By the Numbers,” a JMU alcohol class and in addition, Harris was required to join a mentorship program.

While his traumatic experience took a toll on him mentally, it also took a toll on him financially as well. “It was a whole bunch of money gone- between ASAP and fines and court fees, paying for lawyers, yeah it was just a lot of money”, Harris exclaims.

Harris’s case is surprisingly not unusual, especially among college students. According to reports by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism in 2001, 1,700 college students between the ages of 18 to 24 suffered “unintentional fatal injuries related to alcohol.”

Many college students are unaware and naïve of their drinking habits. “A lot of people think that it can’t happen to them, or that they’re invincible. I think my story proves otherwise, because I thought the same thing and look what happened to me,” Harris argues.

That fateful night has impacted Harris and his life in many ways. For starters, he “can’t even remember the last time he *really* drank.” He does admit to drinking a

little bit of wine with his family at dinner and taking some shots, but never resorts back to his freshman ways of drinking.

Harris is now the RA for Weaver Hall as a result of his gratitude for his freshman year RA saving his life. With a major in Biology and a minor in Environmental Studies, Harris hopes to pursue his dreams of living in Australia as a marine biologist.

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