Nasdijj

Seven years ago, he was born in this magazine as a significant new Navajo writer. The story of a fraud.

By Andrew Chaikivsky Apr 30, 2006

TIM BARRUS IS ALONE. He's making coffee in his daughter's house on the western edge of North Carolina. He moves his solid, short frame around the kitchen with a lagging bounce, the consequence of a double hip replacement a few years ago. He's wearing jeans, a gray sweatshirt, and a pair of black-framed Rec Specs that wrap over his buzzed gray hair and around his block of a head. It's morning, and it's very quiet. A few days ago, Barrus complained in an e-mail about tele-vision vans parked outside, reporters at the door, photographers following him on the street, but apparently they're all gone now.

Barrus's wife, Tina, is out running errands. His daughter is away, too, teaching at an international school in Bolivia, and she's letting them live at her place, a three-bedroom cottage tucked away on a dead-end street. At fifty-five, Barrus has never owned a house in his life, his current home offered to him by his only child. He thanks her in every Skype phone call.

Skype is cool, he says. You dial a number in the United States and the software program relays your call to any computer in the world, free of charge. He had his own Skype account, listed under Nasdijj, but recently the number of messages popping up on his computer screen became overwhelming. It was constant. A call from China, another from Norway, from Finland, from all over the world. "Nasdijj," Barrus says, "had to get rid of Skype."

There's a sound from the front room: Tina entering with a bag of groceries in her arm, and Navajo, their blue heeler mix, by her side. Navajo is wearing a red assistance-dog vest, which allows her to accompany Tina to stores, office buildings, nearly anywhere; Tina's vision is fine, but she wears a pair of sunglasses in case anyone gets suspicious. She

looks worried; the money's running low, she says, and she's not sure how they're going to pay for food much longer, never mind the credit cards and Tim's medical bills.

Barrus plans to continue with his writing, something he's done for most of his life, but Tina says she needs to find a job fast. She has spent more than twenty years working with autistic children, but she's not sure anyone will hire her now. Last week, both families whose children she was tutoring dropped her. "They were polite about it," Tina says. "They said it was scheduling problems or it wasn't a good time, but it was because of Nasdijj."

Nasdijj. He is behind all of their current distress, and indeed he is the reason I'm here. In late January, the *LA Weekly* newspaper reported that Nasdijj--the celebrated Navajo author of three books about his tragic life, a writer who first gained attention with an unforgettable story in Esquire about the death of his son--doesn't exist, had never existed, and that all of his work was a literary fraud perpetrated by a middle-aged white writer of gay pornography named Tim Barrus.

In December 1998, an unsolicited manuscript typed on sixteen pages of notebook paper arrived at the offices of Esquire. Addressed to Mark Warren, the cover letter read in full:

In the entire history of Esquire magazine, you have never once published an American Indian writer. This oversight is profound. I am a Navajo writer who has written (enclosed) an article about the death of my son from fetal alcohol syndrome. FAS is an issue of concern to Native Americans. It should be an issue of concern to white people, too. I hope my article--The Blood Flows Like a River Through My Dreams--interests you. Thank you. Sincerely, Nasdijj.

Warren, Esquire's executive editor, read the manuscript, an essay about the author's adopted son, Tommy Nothing Fancy, a young Navajo child. In the story, Nasdijj wrote that he knew FAS intimately because he had it himself, and he knew Tommy's disease was slowly killing him. He wrote that as the end of Tommy's life approached, and against his wife's pleas to admit their child to the hospital on the reservation, Nasdijj offered his son the only solace the boy knew: He took Tommy fishing. The young, damaged son and his damaged father fished the Colorado and the San Juan, and on the banks of the Rio Hondo, Tommy succumbed with a final, painful seizure. He was six years old.

It was a deeply intimate story, and, to Warren, the writing was spartan, quietly furious, beautiful. He passed it on to Esquire's editor in chief, David Granger, who was equally impressed.

But who was Nasdijj? There was a Key West, Florida, address on the submission but no phone number, so Warren sent an overnight letter asking Nasdijj to contact him. The next day, a woman left Warren a voice mail. She said Nasdijj was in the hospital, and she would deliver the letter to him that day.

Warren finally reached the writer two weeks later. Nasdijj told him that he had been gravely ill with pneumonia. Warren asked Nasdijj to tell him more about Tommy Nothing Fancy, to flesh out his life beyond the few facts in the story. Nasdijj did, though hesitantly. His son had died ten years ago, he explained, but it was still painful to talk about it. Had he published anything before? Nasdijj said he had once written a story about fishing for *Gray's Sporting Journal.* After several more calls about Tommy, Warren asked Nasdijj if there was anything more he could provide him about the boy; Nasdijj mailed two small photographs of a dark-haired, dark-skinned child, along with some official-looking identification papers, purported to be Tommy's.

Warren edited the article and forwarded it to the research department. The fact checker, Robert Scheffler, contacted medical experts to determine if the symptoms of FAS described in the story were possible. He verified details about the Navajo reservation and called Nasdijj to confirm his fishing trips. A photographer, Raymond Meeks, was sent to Key West, where he shot a distant portrait of the author standing on a pier.

The article, "The Blood Runs Like a River Through My Dreams," ran in the June 1999 issue of Esquire; a year later, it was a finalist for a National Magazine Award in the essay category, alongside entries by Tom Wolfe and Oliver Sacks.

Nasdijj went on to publish three memoirs, the first selected as a Notable Book of the Year by *The New York Times.* He was acclaimed as a new and powerful American Indian voice. The more he wrote, the more awful a life he revealed. Nasdijj was an uneducated, destitute Navajo enraged with the white man's world and the injustices that had befallen him. His white father beat him and raped him raw. His Navajo mother, pimped out by his father, died young and drunk. Another child that he'd adopted died of AIDS at twelve.

Writing, sometimes an impossible feat given his own birth defects and his long stretches of homelessness, was Nasdijj's only redemption.

Barrus now acknowledges--sometimes with regret, at other times with angry defiance--that there was, in fact, no such man as Nasdijj. The *LA Weekly* story, "Navahoax," written by Matthew Fleischer, was correct in its assertion: Nasdijj was the brazen invention of Timothy Patrick Barrus, who grew up and went to high school in Lansing, Michigan, whose father was employed by the local power plant, and whose mother's family is Scandinavian. Fleischer found that for years, Barrus had written gay leather porn and sadomasochistic novels. He interviewed people from Barrus's past who described him as a liar, a natural impostor, and a sleazy, unstable guy. The story created a small sensation, and, coming as it did in the wake of the James Frey debacle, Barrus has found himself completely embattled ever since.

It is noon, and Barrus has set three place mats around the table for lunch. Each is carefully arranged with a paper plate, a knife and a fork, and an unopened can of soda next to a glass. A big, ripened tomato, cut in perfect disks, is neatly fanned on another plate. Others bear slices of turkey, cheese, and a small pyramid of rolls. Near the center stand two short jars, mayo and mustard, and beside them lie two clean silver knives.

His meticulousness and careful good manners belie his circumstances as a man under siege. He is generally soft-spoken, at times even uncomfortably reserved. But he enjoys telling stories, which often grow exceedingly vivid and dramatic, his voice rising and falling with his shifting emotional temperature. This morning he veered deep into the dizzying conflicts he, as Nasdijj, had with editors, agents, and publishers. "She told me I had *abused* e-mail," he said of an editor who told Nasdijj to leave her alone. "I *know* what abuse is. How can you *abuse* someone with *e-mail*?"

Sometimes he comes upon a subject--his problems with the publishing industry, the medical establishment, the news media--and he will work himself into a full roar, his closed fist slamming down on the table: "I'm married, I don't have sex with anyone else . . . *and I don't understand why it's anyone's business*!"

But then it passes, and Barrus is again calm and accommodating, as he was when we exchanged e-mails shortly after the *LA Weekly* story broke. "I am WARY of hostile

interviews but ESQUIRE is different," he wrote. Later, in another e-mail discussing his deception, he weakly explained, "I never really thought RIVER would ever be printed, much less cause the commotion it did." He has agreed to tell me the real story behind Tommy Nothing Fancy--"things no one knows," he wrote me, "things that could be independently verified"--but for now he wants to talk more about Nasdijj.

It is after lunch, and he is in the living room, slouched down in a comfortable chair next to the TV, his legs crossed in front of him. He says that he remembers when Nasdijj first came to him. Came to him? Yes, he says, "Nasdijj came to me." There was no plan, he insists, nothing calculated. He knows the exact spot where it happened ten years ago, near Mariano Lake in New Mexico. He was driving past Indian hogans abandoned long ago and sealed tight to ward off the spirits when, with a wild rush, Nasdijj came to him. And Barrus let him in.

Nasdijj was good for Barrus, at least at first. Barrus's manuscripts had been ignored by book publishers. Nasdijj, however, was sought out and quickly signed to a book contract valued in the low six figures.

The first book sold respectably, about twenty-seven thousand copies in all. His two other books did not sell as well. He tried to start a documentary on Leonard Peltier, but it stalled. Agents and editors stopped replying to his constant, lengthy e-mails. He was rejected for a Guggenheim grant. He pitched a book of photos and essays about every Indian reservation in the country. It went nowhere, and as Barrus says now, "It really pissed me off."

Then he was busted. He knew the unmasking of Nasdijj would come someday and that he would have to face the consequences as Tim Barrus, but for whatever reason he seemed unprepared. Did he think about it? He thought about it for seven years. Did he do anything? Yes. He kept on being Nasdijj.

It's past nightfall, and except for Navajo's occasional barking, the house has been as quiet as a vault all day. The phone hasn't rung once, and Barrus has not moved from his chair in hours. He is thinking back to another time--San Francisco in the late 1970s, when he was organizing photo exhibits in the city. "I knew Robert Mapplethorpe," he says. "He would fly out for exhibits. Photographers just flocked to me, and so did the funding."

As Barrus tells it, his life, like the life of his creation, has been fractured and itinerant. He grew up in Lansing, where he often fished with his father, with whom he had a very turbulent relationship. He wrote and performed plays and frequently traveled to California and Florida to spend time with his grandparents. At eighteen, while working at a construction job in Michigan, he says he found a Chippewa baby abandoned in a house, and he took care of the infant by himself for three months.

He married early, at nineteen, and left for Florida with his wife, Jan, but a few years later returned to Michigan, where his daughter, Kree, was born. He kept uprooting himself until he settled in San Francisco, accompanied by Kree but separated from his wife. He immersed himself in the art world there, and for a time, he also became a "guerrilla artist" at night.

By his thirties, he was moving around the country regularly, to San Francisco, to New York, to Key West, where he says he befriended Tennessee Williams, who encouraged him to write. At Williams's urging, Barrus says, he entered a writing contest and won, and it led to work he could both do quickly and sell. He wrote porn--straight and gay, he says, but "twenty times more straight," under numerous pseudonyms. He also published four gay-themed novels as Tim Barrus.

From time to time, he's held down jobs in social work, he says: special-needs children in Florida, Apache kids in New Mexico, disabled adults in Michigan. While working in San Francisco at a residential center for autistic children, he met Tina, a special-education teacher. They married in 1989.

Barrus was living in Fort Lauderdale in the spring of 1996 when his wife learned about a job at a Bureau of Indian Affairs School in New Mexico. They packed their pickup and left for the West, for Mariano Lake and the coming of Nasdijj.

One afternoon, Barrus tells me about the first time he came across the word *nasdijj.* He says he heard it from a young Navajo man he met while doing laundry at a trading post on the reservation. Then the tale hops to the public library in Gallup, New Mexico. Many of Barrus's stories don't move in a straight line or stick to their subject. At times, they bound away on a tangent that keeps going until a hint of a lost look spreads across his face. The Gallup library, he explains, has an extensive Native American collection, and

who knows how or why they got all this . . . and the telegrams from the Grant administration . . . and let's talk about the BIA and the conspiracy to kill Sitting Bull and . . . With a little prompting, he returns to the point at hand. "It was an old Navajo text from back in the 1890s," he says. "I found the word *nasdijj,* and it meant 'to become again.' And that confirmed it for me."

So it was as Nasdijj that Barrus channeled the Navajo spirit who'd come to him. "When you create a character, create someone with an emotional life, you see the stories through his eyes," he explains. "So to me, he was very real." But it went further than a purely literary conceit. He adopted it as his own public persona. As Nasdijj, he greeted people, posed for photographs, gave readings at bookstores, and granted interviews that allowed him to speak, at length, about his impossibly difficult but heroically redemptive Navajo life. How did he manage it? "It was *soooo* awful," Barrus says now, rubbing his forehead with the meat of his palm. "It's hard to have to lie to people. It's creepy."

He says he is sorry, but it seems pro forma. "I understand that a trust was violated," he says. "I'm not defending it." At other times, he'll proclaim, as if with a shrug, "It was a good run." An apology seems beside the point. Over the three days I spend with Barrus, I don't believe much of what he tells me. The levels of deception can run from white lies and wild exaggerations to matters that touch on our most fundamental illusions--how we try to convince ourselves that we are wiser, more strong-willed, braver, more significant. Many of Barrus's stories about himself suggest that, and Nasdijj, too, appears to have spun out wildly and recklessly from that most elemental place.

Before Nasdijj, some of Barrus's literary deceits were so blatant, they're puzzling and strangely funny. The article he published in *Gray's Sporting Journal* in 1996 under his own byline was palmed off as the true story of how Barrus, a young boy growing up in Key West, sailed to Cuba with his grandfather and fished with Ernest Hemingway. Barrus never fished with Hemingway. He doesn't remember anyone at the magazine ever asking him if it was true or not. It wasn't true, and he seems completely unbothered by it.

"It's not a question of whether he's lying or not," says one of his longtime friends, Jack Fritscher. "He's exploring the territory of identity." Fritscher was one of the founding editors of *Drummer,* a now defunct gay leather magazine where Barrus edited and wrote stories in the 1980s. "Tim Barrus is a very talented, wonderfully stylized writer," Fritscher

says, "and he's completely off the wall." For some time, Fritscher suspected that Barrus's wife, Tina, did not exist; he was sure Tim/Tina were two people living inside one man's head.

Fritscher isn't surprised that Barrus claimed another life or that he would choose that of a Navajo man. One night, he found Barrus hanging naked, tethered by straps and hooks, from his living-room ceiling like something out of *A Man Called Horse.* It was a performance piece, and, as Fritscher remembers, it was brilliant. Years later, he was sent a random, cryptic e-mail from a Native American writer with a name he didn't recognize. Almost immediately, he knew: Barrus. "It was just one more persona," he says, "another voice he was channeling."

Barrus hardly seems like a diabolical master of deceit. Instead, he was a man trapped, if willingly, in an imagined world. Hidden behind his computer or typewriter, he was confident and aggressive. "Nasdijj spoke to the issues. FAS. Child abuse. HIV. Sexuality," he explains with real feeling. "These are secrets, and I confronted the secrets." But stepping out from his screen, he was frequently ineffectual, sometimes lost, entangled in his own delusions.

It all started with Tommy Nothing Fancy and Esquire. Barrus says he wrote the fake story because it was the only way he could confront an awful truth. "To write it, I had to hide under my desk," he says. "I got on the floor and got *under* the desk. I had to block *everything* out. It was just so visceral for me."

But he also saw an opportunity, and he took it. He adopted a voice and a story he could sustain for three thousand beautiful words. And then he capitalized on the fraud.

Barrus really was in the hospital in late 1998 when he received the letter from Esquire. He was in bad shape, and, as a result, he says he can't remember much from those weeks. But he says that letter gave him the will to recover, and maybe it did. Nevertheless, he couldn't find the capacity to end the deceit. He would be Nasdijj now.

On the night before my last day with Barrus, I take out a copy of "The Blood Runs Like a River Through My Dreams." I know it almost by heart by now. *My son is dead,* it begins. *I didn't say my adopted son is dead. He was my son.*

My son was a Navajo. He lived six years. Those were the best six years of my life.

The social workers didn't tell me about the fetal alcohol syndrome when they brought my son to the hogan I was living in on the Navajo Nation. Perhaps they didn't know. . . .

I took my son fishing in the Rio Hondo. . . . I was catching brown trout. I was thinking about cooking them for dinner over our campfire when Tommy Nothing Fancy fell. All that shaking. . . .

The pediatric neurologist at the hospital had seen FAS deaths before.

"*He died fishing,*" *I said.*

He had lived fishing, too. I was glad I could give him that. Anyone could have given him hospitals. I was not anyone. I was Tommy Nothing Fancy's father.

I drive out the next morning to see Barrus one last time.

Starting with our first few e-mail exchanges, Barrus has said he would tell me the real story of Tommy. On the dining-room table sit two stacks of photo albums. Barrus doesn't keep much--all of his and Tina's possessions can fit in their Jeep Wrangler--but Kree has taken on the challenge of trying to chronicle her father's peripatetic life. The books, the magazine articles, hundreds of snapshots.

We start looking for Tommy's pictures. There is Kree at five in San Francisco. There is Tim as a baby, smiling with his teddy bear, Poochie, the name he bestowed on Tommy Nothing Fancy's bear.

Another album. Tim again, with Jan at their wedding reception in 1970. Another album. On the inside of its cover, TO TOMMY, JAN, AND TIM is written in black marker and surrounded by a constellation of signatures. On the first two pages are photographs of children, alone or in pairs, on what looks like a school playground. "The school in Florida gave this to us when we left," he says.

"That's Tommy." He points to the photo in the middle, of a boy in jeans and a striped T-shirt, maybe seven years old, with blond hair and brown eyes. "After we adopted him," Barrus says, "I had his name legally changed. I wanted to imbue him with a new identity."

Turning the page, he shows me more pictures of the boy, taken at a family gathering. He is slightly bigger now. Barrus points to where some of the photos are marred with a chaotic scrawl of blue crayon. "That was Tommy, too."

With the album in front of him on the table, Barrus begins what he calls the true story behind Tommy Nothing Fancy:

"It goes back to my adoption of a very damaged little boy. Jan was working at the Pinellas Association for Retarded Children in the preschool, and she would bring Tommy home. She adored him. You couldn't help but love him.

"We knew he was damaged. He had serious, serious neurological and behavioral problems. Was it FAS? Yes. But the doctors were always reluctant to give a specific diagnosis. His ability to reason or to reflect his reality was nonexistent. He lived in an imaginary world.

"I took him fishing. He would be calm when we were fishing. I took him camping. I worked to provide a family setting for him. But he could not do it. He needed a staff of people. Two people could not do it.

"When we moved back to Michigan, I enrolled him in a normal second-grade class. I wanted to give him that chance, but it was probably one of the biggest mistakes I made. The calls would come. He was throwing temper tantrums in class, and the call would come. He'd pee all over the playground at recess, and the call would come.

"It got worse after Kree was born. He discovered that he could mess his pants and smear it. He was smearing feces everywhere.

"I was so afraid he was going to hurt Kree. He was that out of touch with reality. He was in Kree's room. He was rocking, sitting there and rocking back and forth. I had never seen him do that before. I was terrifed. I took him to the emergency room. They kept him hospitalized for weeks.

"We loved him very much. We did our best, but it was not enough. We gave him back to the state, and it nearly annihilated us. The gravity of it and the subsequent guilt over having failed him was like a death to us."

Shortly after that, he and Jan separated and later divorced. They don't speak much anymore. "The memories of having to give up a child are like arrows in your heart," he says.

"I was living in San Francisco the last time I saw him. I went back to Michigan to see him for his birthday. He was going to be ten. I saw him from far away. He was outside, flying a kite. He wasn't with any of the other children. There wasn't even a teacher with him. It was his birthday, and he was so alone."

By the end of the story, Barrus can hardly speak. For me, it is unlike anything else he's told me about himself these last few days; it is a story of shame and failure. It is almost the opposite of Nasdijj's version (*Anyone could have given him hospitals. I was not anyone. I was Tommy Nothing Fancy's father*);it is the story of the father who abandoned his son.

But is it any more true? The photo album on the table before us is all he has for proof, he says. He has no adoption records, no medical histories, no documents attesting to Tommy's fate. Jan, his ex-wife, has remarried and is living out west; she would not comment for this story. Tina wasn't there, and Kree was too young to have been aware of any details about Tommy; she knows it only as family history. "It was a very tragic episode for them," she says.

As it happens, in the files of the Pinellas County Circuit Court, there is a record of the adoption of a child by Tim and Jan Barrus, finalized on June 2, 1975. The full files are confidential, but a person with knowledge of the adoption confirms that the child was a boy with severe developmental problems. His name was Tommy.

According to the Ingham County, Michigan, probate court records, the Barruses released their parental rights in 1977 and the child became a ward of the state. All other details of the case are sealed because of privacy laws.

But we know that there was a child, and his name was Tommy. For a time, he was Tim Barrus's son.

A month after the Nasdijj scandal broke, Tina was able to find work through the local school district, tutoring a girl with autism. Unchastened, Barrus is still at his computer, working on his next project, a book that he at first said would be the true story of his

time as Nasdijj, but which soon morphed into a sprawling, novelized account with chapters credited to Barrus, Nasdijj, and several HIV-positive teenage boys who claim to have lived in a shelter run by Nasdijj. He has sent the manuscript to several publishers but says he is not altogether hopeful for its prospects.

WATCH NEXT

MORE FROM

_books

The National Book Awards 2021 Finalists Are Here

The Biggest Reveals From Stephanie Grisham's Book

What Did They Love Me For?

10 Terrifying Books About Ghosts

The 10 Best Horror Books for Spooky Season

The 2021 National Book Awards Longlist Is Here

It’s Time to Get Into Mythology

Inside Ernest Hemingway's Summers in Wyoming

Colson Whitehead Masters a New Genre

We Rise or Fall Together

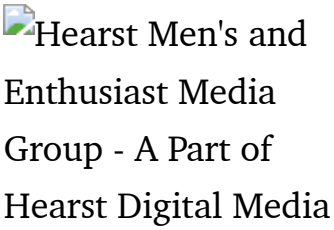
Books Entertainment

Bitcoin Wound Up Being Just As Broken as the Corrupt Banking System It Was Trying to Kill

The Greatest Story Never Told
The Golden Age for Writers
Why I Keep Rooting for the Cleveland Indians
No. 56: The Cleveland Indians Are for Real This Time
Style Across America: Palm Springs

Esquire

Newsletter
About Us
Press Room
Community Guidelines
Customer Service
Other Hearst Subscriptions
Events & Promotions
Digital Editions
Media Kit
Contact Us
Advertise Online
Subscribe
Give a Gift
Giveaways



Privacy Notice/Notice at Collection Your California Privacy Rights Interest-Based Ads Terms of Use Site Map

Do Not Sell My Personal Information