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## INTO THIN AIR

The four boys went camping in the state park on the mainland the weekend after their high school graduation, eating fire-cooked meals and playing cards and goofing off, assuming the entire time that the town of Echo Island would still be there when they returned.

Early Sunday, the last day of their trip, Jason George, a boy most average, emerged from the tent first, escaping the mélange of breath and feet and passed gas, sealing his friends back in with their rankness. He stretched his sore arms up toward the glowing canopy of the forest and inhaled the dewy morning of the Pacific Northwest.

When Jason was halfway through making oatmeal for the group, Jason's closest friend, Archer Baucus, exited and joined him by the fire, rubbing his sticklike forearms for warmth and repeatedly snorting through his hooked nose.

"Man, it's cold," Archer said. "You sleep okay last night?"

"Eh. Okay."

"I couldn't sleep at all," Archer said. "Can't get comfortable."

"You're too bony maybe."

Archer *was* bony. He was tall and stick thin, all angles and points. “Yeah, well,” he said, without finishing the thought.

Jason opened another packet of plain oatmeal and poured it into a pot, adding water.

Archer poked their fire with a branch. “I don’t know how Bradley can sleep in there with the way Tim snores,” he said, pointing the branch at their friends’ tent, still zippered.

“Tim says they’re gonna room together in college, assuming Tim can get a scholarship to play ball. I think he’ll shrivel up and die if he has to go somewhere Bradley isn’t.”

Archer shrugged. “We all used to feel that way. But then we had to grow up.”

“Yeah, maybe.”

“I meant to ask you last night. Are you still thinking about Washington State?”

“I think it’s too late. I don’t know. I have no idea what I’m going to do.” Jason looked out at the trees, as if the answer to his academic future might conveniently be found there.

“I’m sure you still have time,” Archer said. But he didn’t sound convincing.

“If we all still played football, we could just ride on Bradley’s back like Tim.”

“I’m glad those days are long gone,” Archer said.

They heard a rustling in their friends’ tent, and the tousled blond hair of Bradley Hershon emerged.

Bradley joined them, clad only in plaid boxer shorts and flip-flops, a pale Adonis posing by the flames. He seemed unaffected by the early summer chill.

“Dude, what are you doing?” he asked.

“Making breakfast,” Jason said as if it should be obvious.

“Oatmeal? Man, Jason, you are the most boring dude ever.”

"I'm sorry I didn't have room to pack the hibachi," Jason said.

"I was hankerin' for eggs benedict," joked Bradley. He hocked a loogie and spit into the fire. "Archway, you got any more of those energy drinks?"

"Fresh out," said Archer.

Bradley stuck out his bottom lip in a feigned pout.

"I'm not sure we wanna see you hopped up on any more energy drinks," said Jason.

Bradley lumbered maniacally over to Jason and elbowed him in the shoulder. "You don't want me to Hulk out, young sir?"

Jason pretended to find Bradley funny. "Definitely not. Hey, man, stop. You're gonna make me knock over the oatmeal."

Bradley backed off. A rustling behind him made him turn around.

The fourth camper, Tim Cooper, a meek, pudgy, butt-of-jokes sort of boy, completed the fellowship, as Tim was never far behind Bradley.

"Did somebody say eggs benedict?" Tim said.

"Listen to this guy," said Bradley. "Class of 2002's finest. No, man, it's porridge."

Jason stopped stirring. "So, don't eat it. Whatever."

"All right, dude," Bradley said. "Don't get all chicky on me. We'll eat oatmeal. Won't we, Timmy?"

"Yeah, sure."

"Oatmeal's good for pooping."

Tim chuckled.

"And maybe it'll put some fat on Archway's bones."

Archer said, "Why don't you put some clothes on, man?"

"Why? Am I making you feel self-conscious?"

“More like revolted.”

Bradley walked with a dramatic lope toward the tent, arms bent before him like a white gorilla. “Well, I wouldn’t want you to revolt,” he said. He emerged wearing a baggy pair of shorts and tank top while Jason ladled bubbling oatmeal into four bowls.

“Mmm. Prison food,” said Bradley after his first bite.

“Shove it,” Jason replied.

Bradley shoved Tim off his rock.

Tim squirmed back up. “You almost made me spill.”

After they’d eaten and dressed, they packed their gear and loaded it in Bradley’s open-top jeep.

“What’re you guys doing this afternoon?” Tim asked.

“Just hanging out,” said Bradley. “Come over if you want.” Then turning to Jason and Archer, he said, “How about you two?”

“I think my dad wants me to help with some stuff in the yard.” Jason tucked his sweatshirt into the top of his backpack.

“I guess I could hang out,” Archer said. “I’ll check in with my mom first.”

“Whatever,” said Bradley as he launched his sleeping bag into the back seat.

The red jeep was a graduation gift from Bradley’s father, who happened to own the only car dealership on the island. It was Bradley’s pride and joy, and for the last two years, it had been the boys’ means of getting to the mainland for their annual start-of-the-summer camping trip.

The boys had been friends since playing on the peewee football team together in grade school. But time and seasons change things. As their personalities took shape into adolescence, so too did the unspoken fractures between them. Every summer since

middle school, they'd kept up the camping tradition, and this was to be their last hurrah before parting ways for college.

They all hopped in the jeep and were soon speeding along the narrow, winding road out of the park.

Bradley, ever careless, pushed the jeep to fifty-five.

"Slow down, man," Archer said. "You'll get us all killed."

"No can do, Archway. I feel the need!"

"The need for speed!" Tim finished, completing the line with false cheer. Of the three passengers, he was the most terrified.

The apple-red projectile skirted the edge of the road in tight careens and pushed its cargo's luck on the straightaways. Barreling down a short, mist-laden grade, Bradley had no time to react to the doe leading its fawn across the street.

Tim screamed.

Bradley cursed.

They all braced as he braked hard and jerked the wheel to the right. The piercing pitch of skidding tires filled the woods. The deer froze and watched with incomprehension as the vehicle rushed at her and her fawn sideways. And then, they darted away, barely avoiding impact.

The jeep kept sliding perpendicular to the road. By the time Bradley had thought to correct his steering into the skid, the carriage was tipping, the left-side wheels lifting slightly off the ground.

When they touched ground again, Bradley was still braking, but the momentum proved too much. The jeep slid off the pavement at a sharp curve in the road and plunged briefly into a rocky ditch. The jolt knocked his foot off the brake. Packs flew out of the back; the ice chest opened its plastic mouth and spewed empty soda cans in a wide, rattling arc onto the rocks.

When Bradley finally sought the brake, he found the accelerator instead. He realized his mistake immediately and switched pedals, but the brief rush of gas gunned them up the far bank of the ditch and flipped them right-side down, skidding them into a tree. The hood crumbled like tin foil.

Some indiscernible hiss gushed from the engine, and the only other sound in the air was that of four boys panting heavily.

“Man,” Archer whispered. He wasn’t angry, just relieved.

More heavy breathing. A groan from the back seat.

The four of them hung suspended a few feet from the ground by their seatbelts.

Bradley could see Jason in the passenger seat blinking his eyes rapidly.

“You okay?” Bradley asked.

Jason looked up at him and nodded.

Bradley craned his neck. “You guys okay?”

Archer and Tim gave him looks that said no, but they both said, “Yes.”

Bradley looked straight ahead. “Wow,” he said. He gripped the steering wheel. “Can you believe that?” He snorted a laugh. “Man, my dad’s going to kill me.”

Archer said, “Justifiable homicide, if you ask me.”

Bradley grinned from ear to ear. He gave Jason another look, one that bore the unmistakable mix of *I’m glad to be alive* and *Look what I did!* He said, “That. Was. Awesome.”

“Awesome?” Jason said. “You’re an idiot.”

Archer waved his hand for attention. “Can we get out of the car now?”

They did, and only Tim needed assistance.

Standing in the ferny grass on the hill above the wreck, they surveyed the damage. The jeep looked so much smaller that way, like a gigantic toy tossed aside.

“I guess we should call somebody,” Jason said.

“Yeah, okay.” Bradley dug his cell phone out of his pocket. “Battery’s dead.”

“You didn’t charge it?”

“Charge it in what? The fire? Tim’s ginormous stomach?”

“My stomach’s not ginormous.”

“Eh,” Bradley said. “No . . . I didn’t bring a battery pack.”

Jason said, “You could’ve charged it in the car.”

“I don’t think I have the, uh, little thingy,” Bradley said, and he was making a stretched-line motion with his hands. “I charged it before we left. But it must’ve run down.”

Archer said, “Tim, you got yours?”

“Yeah, I think so.” Tim retrieved his phone, now a shattered black brick.

Jason looked ruefully at the jeep. Steam escaped from the edges of the crumpled hood and commingled with the dissipating morning fog.

“So, I guess we’re hoofing it.”

Bradley groaned. “Wait, let me check the glove compartment for my cord.”

He circumnavigated the wreckage and crouched by the upturned passenger seat to remove a charger cable from the glove compartment. He plugged one end into the car’s lighter and then snapped the other end into the phone.

He stared at it a few seconds. “No juice,” he shrugged.

“Yeah,” Jason said. “Your car is broken.”

Bradley smirked. “Oh, is it?”

Archer and Tim collected the backpacks.

Bradley said, "Well, ramblers, let's get rambling."

They walked for three miles along the park road with Tim lagging behind. The trek was long and monotonous. They had covered two more miles when the urgent wail of a siren cut through the air.

"Is that behind or in front?" Bradley asked.

"Can't tell," said Jason.

Eventually, an ambulance broke into view and zoomed past, apparently oblivious to the four boys on the side of the road.

"Dude, what a jerk," said Bradley. "He flew right by us."

"Maybe he's going somewhere else," Jason said.

"That'd be quite a co-inky-dink, don't you think?"

"Maybe."

Tim said, "Maybe he just didn't see us."

"Oh, you think?" said Bradley.

"Should we go back in case they're headed to the campground?" Jason asked.

Bradley said, "Dude, that's like ten miles!"

"It was actually about five," Archer broke in.

"Thank you, Captain Odometer."

Tim looked over his shoulder, feigning consideration. Backtracking didn't appeal to him at all.

It didn't appeal to the others either.

Archer said, "When they see we're not there, they'll come back this way."

"We're closer to the pier now anyway," Bradley added. "Let's just get to the pier and take the ferry back, and I'll get my dad to take care of the car."

"Are you sure?" Jason asked.

"Yeah. There's no sense in waiting around. I can sort it out from home."

Tim said, "The Mariners are playing the Angels tonight."

"That's right," said Bradley. "Who wants to miss the game? So let's go."

Jason said, "The police, though. They'll be looking for us, trying to figure out what happened."

"Dude, I just said I'd get my dad to handle it."

"Yeah, but—"

"Jason!" Bradley looked around, clearly agitated. "Look, when we get back to the ferry landing, we can talk to somebody there. We can find a phone. Will that make you happy?"

"Yes," Jason said.

"So, losers, are we walking or not?"

They carried on then, but when they reached the pier, they found it vacant.

"Is there some sort of holiday I forgot about?" Bradley asked.

"If there was," said Archer, "everyone would be in the park."

"Dude, then, where'd everybody go?"

"How should I know? Church?"

"Lucky us; we missed the Echo Island revival."

Jason found the tiny office building empty as well. And no workers occupied the machine room.

Tim said, "Maybe something serious happened in the park. A fire or something. Maybe everyone's helping out."

Bradley said, "Did they just fly over us or what? We would have passed anybody going that way."

Tim said, "Oh, yeah."

Jason found an old pay phone, but there was no dial tone.

"They don't use those anymore, Jase," Bradley said. "Look, guys, let's just get back home. There's obviously nothing we can do here."

They all agreed and boarded the wide-open ferry.

They could see the greasy black head of Gerald Farmer, Echo Island ferryman for as long as the boys could remember, protruding from the seat of the elevated cabin.

“Should we say something to Mr. Farmer?” Jason asked.

“Be my guest,” said Tim. “That dude freaks me out.”

“Oh, he’s harmless,” said Jason, as he walked toward the metal steps ascending the cabin. He felt the flimsy platform sag under his weight.

When the door opened, the man swiveled slowly in his chair. But their pilot wasn’t Gerald Farmer. Instead some stranger, a middle-aged man with froggy gray skin and a black skullcap snapped over his bald head, stared blankly at them.

“Oh,” Jason said. “Um . . .”

The man wore a baseball jersey-style white shirt with black sleeves. Over a faded band photograph, in peeling letters, the shirt read: I SAW STYX AT THE PARADISE THEATRE.

Jason stifled a laugh. “Um, is Mr. Farmer off today?”

“Yes,” the man said. He looked back out at the ocean pass.

“Oh. Okay.”

He wanted to say, *We just had a car accident back in the park, and I was wondering if you had a phone or a radio that we could use to tell the police that everything’s okay.* Instead, he knew home was just thirty minutes away, and the man creeped him out more than Gerald Farmer had ever creeped out Tim, so Jason simply repeated, “Okay,” and exited.

Rejoining the group, he said, “Mr. Farmer’s off today.”

“So, who’s driving?” Archer asked.

“I don’t know. Some random dude.”

Bradley waved at the cabin. “Hey, Some Random Dude!”

Bradley and Archer eventually eased into an argument over which actor played the best James Bond, Tim assumed the position of silent observer, and Jason hovered at the edge of the boat, resting his right knee on the rusted railing.

The gray ocean swirled in foamy green eddies off the ferry-cut ripples, the lumbering wake a minor disturbance in the bay. The waves rolled short and white and folded back into the opaque expanse. To Jason's left, the sun still hung low in the eastern sky, and the vast green woods of the Washington coast sunk lower and lower, as if recoiling from the sun in the slow inhale of the horizon.

When it thinned to an invisible line, he looked right, anticipating the imminent rise of the Echo Island coast from the western horizon. As soon as the land of one side dipped below sight, the land of the other poked into view, like the pass between them was some gigantic oceanographic teeter-totter, like each world hung in the balance of the ferry's traversable scale. One coast down, the other up. Inhale, exhale. That was how it worked, and since making this discovery, Jason had made it a secret ritual to watch this balance shift every time he'd traveled by ferry between the island and the mainland.

Like clockwork, like the tipping of that scale, the island slowly rose from the sea, taking its jagged shape of rocky beach and angular forest. Eventually, the beach ran as far east and west as he could see, and the ferry's bumpered hull gently rubbed against the concrete dock. The ferryman descended the cabin without a word, locked the vessel to the broad boat ramp, and lowered the gate, which usually withstood the passage of cars, but that morning only upheld the unloading of the foursome.

No sooner had their feet crunched the gravel in the landing's lot than the ferryman scooped the gate back up, unlatched the steel fasteners, and began chugging the ferry back out to sea.

"What's up with the hippie dude not waiting?" Bradley said.

Archer looked around. "I don't see anyone waiting to board."

"Yeah, but homeboy's supposed to wait. There's like, what, one-hour intervals or something? There's a schedule."

The whole thing bothered Jason, but he didn't say anything. He'd found the emptiness of the ferry station back on the mainland unnerving. And now the Echo Island landing was vacant too.

Archer asked him, "You gonna call your mom to come get you?"

"They're at church," Jason said. "I'll walk. How about you?"

"We'll just hitch a ride with Archway." Bradley turned to Archer. "You parked in the lot, right?"

"Yeah," Archer said. "Sure, no problem."

Jason said goodbye, slung his bag over his shoulder, and headed for home.

Only three blocks away, paranoia set in. He hadn't encountered a single person yet. Jason tried coming up with as many rational explanations as he could for why he hadn't so much as heard the *sounds* of other people—no voices, no cars, no machinery of any sort—in the typically bustling streets adjacent to the ferry landing. But no explanation would come. He tried telling himself that he was just tired, that his imagination was getting the better of him. It worked for a while, but the uneasiness nagged.

Jason passed through the close-set intersections off the town square. The landscape was a still life. In the parked cars, the

waving flags, and the glint of sunlight off windows and chrome, the presence of people was suggested, but nowhere was it confirmed. He tried opening the door of the library, the post office, and the cell phone store, but he had chosen those doors in a strategy of self-reassurance, knowing he could tell himself they weren't open on Sunday mornings anyway. He only glanced into the windows of the diners and restaurants he knew should have been open and bustling with people.

Entering the bushy enclave of the Royal Garden subdivision, he finally breathed a sigh of relief to see a group of cars parked in the lot of the Lutheran church. He almost laughed at himself.

Once inside his house, Jason flipped the kitchen light switch. Nothing happened. He tried the living room. No light. Trying the hall light switch with the same result, he suddenly realized the unnerving quiet he'd experienced throughout the town was no doubt due to a power outage.

He climbed the carpeted steps to the second floor, entered his messy bedroom, and collapsed into bed, seeking the sleep that the previous night's goofing off had prevented.

Sleep never came, however, and after an hour of a restless tossing in his bed, Jason was startled by a pounding on the door.

He scrambled downstairs, pulling on his shirt.

Whoever was knocking was practically beating the door down.

"Hold on!" Jason said.

He turned the dead bolt and opened the door.

Archer, Bradley, and Tim stood on the front porch, huddled together as if for warmth, all of their faces terrified.

Bradley said, "Everybody's gone."

