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The Abyss

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The Abyss

For the first time, Robbie would be collecting the firewood, laying it on the pit, lighting the kindling, and sleeping in his tent alone. For years he made the trip up to Acadia with Elijah and Foster: hitting the archery range, kayaking, mountain biking, and talking about climbing The Abyss. Elijah had always reserved Site Thirteen for the last week of August; this year he had reserved an extra weekend in September to get one more shot at the peak before the end of the season.

Elijah drowned on the first Monday of senior year. The funeral was held the following morning, three weeks before the boys planned to leave for Acadia.

Robbie came into the clearing where rain streaked down under the pale yellow glow of the outdoor floodlights and the light gray gravel of the parking lot was freckled with dark splotches. Twenty feet beyond the illuminated cabin deck of camp headquarters, known as The Meeting Place, stood a small wooden shack with the letters “QM” carved into the portico. He continued to the Quartermaster’s shed but found it padlocked with a sign directing visitors back to The Meeting Place for firewood and supplies. He looked to the edge of the clearing where the old Blue Dot Trail began. He hoped he would be able to follow the reflective blue dots without his Maglite, which he’d left in his tent.

Beneath the canopy of the pines, the rain slowed then ceased. The soft distant applause of water droplets falling through the low brush faded. Robbie’s eyes swept the ground, and he lifted his knees with each step, careful to avoid tripping over protruding roots as he scanned the trees for the blue dots. He reached at a familiar fork in the path and veered right.

He arrived at the old site, walking between the lean-tos and tent platforms toward the high reeds. Above him loomed the hallowed boulder, riddled with the same crevices he used to climb through with Elijah and Foster while still only dreaming of The Abyss. Some gaps were narrow enough to fit only a foot in, others were wide enough to walk through. Centered on the slope of the house-sized boulder was the painted target, a blue outer ring around a red inner ring and a yellow center, which marked the head of the archery trail at the rock's peak.

Robbie eyed the old beast. Before the face, five feet of vertical granite receded into the slope where the target was painted. He felt shaky and wondered if he could still make the jump, as he had last year. He crouched low and bolted, planting his left foot hard, pushing off the ground, and flinging his body into the air. His feet landed at the incline's base, and his hands slapped hard against the granite. He turned his back to the rock face and slid on his butt up to the center of the target that overlooked the old Site.

The plot looked smaller without the tents, the picnic tables, the rangers' trucks, and without the familiar voices. The crickets were loud, and the wind whistled through the reeds. Robbie could smell the salt carried in from Bar Harbor. It all felt louder, more concentrated than before. His pocket vibrated; it was Foster calling. He didn't answer.

Robbie wondered if Foster would ever lie on the rock again, if he would sit and watch the red efts emerge on rainy nights, smell the pines in the salt-tinged air, and listen for the eponymous call of the whip-poor-wills. He wondered if Foster would ever come back to Acadia, and if they would make a run at The Abyss together without Elijah. Robbie decided to make the climb in the morning; he would have to summit by himself.

The Abyss had a reputation for overwhelming novice climbers. It seemed that every time the boys were prepared to test out the trail, it was closed for an emergency rescue. From the base, they could see the hundred-foot drop-offs along the exposed foot-wide path, overlooking the coastal ridge. The boys had understood that The Abyss was not to be underestimated, and that they intended to one day conquer it together.

Robbie slid down the rock and returned to the clearing. He bypassed the Quartermaster's shed and entered The Meeting Place.

A woman in a red flannel shirt with a bronze Acadia pin stood behind the counter. Robbie inquired about the firewood. She asked for his site permit and he rummaged through his pocket, finding it stuck to the Eagle Scout insignia of his leather wallet. Foster and Elijah each had one just like it. Robbie

held the permit in the palm of his outstretched hand for the woman to see. "Expiration Time" was written on the beige slip in large bold print. It would be valid for two more days.

The woman nodded and went out the door behind the counter, returning with a bundle of chopped logs tied together with red nylon. Robbie thanked her and his stomach grumbled. He knew he should eat if he planned on finishing the climb in the morning, so he bought a hot dog and some fries, took a bite, and circled the room.

The cabin's walls were lined with framed newspaper clippings about the beauty of Acadia. "Acadia National Park Generates \$186 Million For Maine Economy," "Finding Serenity: Acadia National Park," and "Hidden Gems in The National Parks Service!" Thumb-tacked into the back wall, unframed and un-laminated, was a yellowed paper which read, "Acadia Hiker Dies in Abyss Fall."

Bar Harbor and its satellite neighborhoods were swept by the news of Sonya Larson's death four years ago. Robbie, Foster, and Elijah had heard that a young girl lost her life to The Abyss, but the article contained details the vague murmurs about the tragedy lacked. He pulled the tack out of the stiff parchment.

Sonya Larson had been a seasonal visitor, an experienced climber, and president of the University of Maine Climber's Club. She was completing a section of iron-rung climbing when she fell seventy feet onto a rock ledge protruding from the cliff face. Twenty minutes after she dialed 9-1-1, the park rangers arrived. Larson had sustained severe bone fractures and internal bleeding. They couldn't rescue her until an elaborate pulley system was set up to lift her to the top of the trail. After a two-hour operation, she was airlifted via helicopter to a hospital in Bangor, where she was declared dead.

Robbie heard from the rangers that the view from the summit was spectacular. He also heard that some of the campers referred to the area below as Larson's Landing.

Robbie took a second bite of the hot dog. It tasted dry and bitter. He tried a fry, but it was too salty, so he tossed them into the trash. He hadn't eaten since breakfast nearly twelve hours ago, and only had a cup of orange juice since then. He carried the log bundle out of the cabin and placed it on the deck. Pulling some twine from his back pocket, he lashed the bundle around his shoulders and across his chest to distribute its weight. The rope dug into his skin, but he was relieved to be back outside and away from the stale indoor air.

The sound of rain in the distance returned, and Robbie felt its gentle trickle as he stepped down from the deck. He took a deep breath and tilted his head toward the sky, rinsing his face and massaging his forehead.

His phone buzzed again. Rain soothed his skin and itchy scalp as he stood at the base of the steps.

“Hey, what’s up?”

“Hey man, how’s the site?”

“Fine, nothing special.”

Foster spoke softly, “How you feeling?” There was a pause, and Foster continued. “Making it okay up there?”

“I brought my bike—handles the mud—and the site’s good. Much closer to headquarters than Thirteen, latrine right near the lean-to, water pump, and plenty of hot dogs and chicken at The Meeting Place like always.”

“Cool, cool.” There was silence, like Foster was building the courage to ask a question. “You going up the trail?”

“Dunno, I’ll see.” The smell of wet garbage seeped across the gravel glade from the dumpsters opposite The Meeting Place. Robbie headed down the dark path between the high trees of the spruce-fir forest, back to Site Twenty-Four. His load felt heavy and his head hurt.

“Take a couple pictures okay? Especially if you make it to the top.”

“Sure thing.” Water began to drop from his nose onto his lips.

“Have you figured how long you’re staying? The whole weekend, or what?”

“Dunno. I haven’t really decided anything, but I’ll let you know once I figure it out. Maybe tomorrow, cool?”

“Yeah, gotcha. Your mom’s a little worried, so let me know whenever, as long as you’re good up there.”

“You can tell her I’ll be fine. I’ve been up here before.”

“Yeah, not alone though.”

“It’s not like you weren’t invited.”

“I know. I just didn’t really feel up for it.”

“Yeah.”

“I still don’t think you should be up there by yourself.”

Robbie bit his lip. “I’m just sticking to the plan.”

He arrived at the fence post for Site Twenty-Four and removed the bundle from his back. He placed the firewood at his feet and leaned against the outside of the open-air latrine beside him.

“Just don’t go doing anything stupid.”

“I can handle myself.”

“You wouldn’t be the first person to say that who got himself in deep shit.”

“I know. But I had to come up; I can’t be home right now.”

“Yeah, I get it. Just be careful.”

“I will. Later.”

“Later, man.”

He crumpled the site permit in his fist and flicked it off his palm. A breeze carried it to the edge of the trim grass, where it teetered on a fern and fell from

its wide feathery fronds, rolling away into the dark woods. He cut the nylon with his pocketknife and tossed one log into the fire pit for the next day, then he went into his tent and let the fatigue do its work.

When Robbie woke up, his lips were sticky, and his mouth tasted like sour milk. An aluminum canteen, hanging from the polyester ceiling, glowed pink-orange from the sunlight shining through. He took a sip of water, seeing his arm tinted the same pink-orange. His head still hurt and the skin over his brow felt tight across his skull. He got up, changed into hiking clothes, washed his face, and started out for The Abyss. The early morning dew made the air damp with the smell of wet pinecones.

Robbie hiked the twenty-degree incline that set the trail off over the worn and slippery rock face. He sprinted up the forty-foot slope and reached the flats, then he hiked the next half-mile of forest under the cover of the spruce trees. The narrow path was littered with fall leaves, acorns, and the occasional heady raccoon dropping. He made his way over the bouldering section, running up and down the rises and falls of the trail and hopping the gaps between rocks as he ascended the cliff. He looked up. The sun was directly overhead. The trail hugged the cliff and opened beyond the trees so that the cool shades of green yielded to a hot red. It felt like navigating the desert, as he followed the curving trail into the unprotected clearing, his legs shook, and his head throbbed. He finished off what was left of the half-full canteen from the morning. He still hadn't eaten since his two bites at The Meeting Place.

Robbie placed his right hand on the cliff wall for support. The tree line was just behind him now, and to his left was the open face looming over the trail's base. There was a sign in the middle of the path that read, "WARNING: OPEN CLIFF FACE. BEWARE, NO RAILING AHEAD." He remembered the sign from a picture in the article. This was where Sonya Larson had fallen. He removed his hand from the crusty rock face, his skin coated with a fresh layer of chalky, pale red dust. Curiosity drew him to the ledge. He took short steps—hands limp at his sides, shoulders sunken low—toward the edge of The Abyss Trail. The small sports bag on his back carrying his supplies pulled him downward and inward, toward the ground. He felt like it would pull him over the cliff, so he laid down and crawled to the end of the rock.

The town of Bar Harbor was set below him at the Atlantic's rim, three miles beyond the base of the trail. He stared down at the hundred-foot drop to the trail's start, and then at the spot where he used to gaze up in awe of the cliff with Elijah and Foster. He imagined the three of them, three twelve-year-olds with their brand-new pocketknives seeing the trail for the first time. Foster with his hands in his pockets, shuffling his feet and kicking up a cloud of dust. Himself, always a step closer to the cliff, staring with wild, blasphemous eyes at the towering slab of earth. And Elijah, nudging him forward,

punching his shoulder, and slapping him excitedly across the back to psych him up for the climb.

With his chin resting on the hot sunbaked stone, Robbie searched for the protrusion that Sonya Larson had landed on. He spotted it off to his right, about two-thirds of the way to the cliff base. It looked to be ten-to-fifteen feet long and extended only five feet out from the rock, but it was hard to tell without proper perspective. Robbie wondered if Sonya had thought this ledge would break her fall; he wondered if she'd thought that it would save her life.

Robbie slid back; feet shaking, hands trembling, head pounding, heart racing. He pushed off the ground to stand up. His mouth was parched. He rose halfway upright and felt a soft breeze pass over his ears, whirring tenderly, and nudging him forwards to the ledge. He thought about Elijah, how his last moments could have felt just this way: soft breeze, quiet air, even the water below. Stillness.

The green spruce trees behind him, the gray and green stained rocks, the brown pinecones, the raccoon feces, the red, clay-dusted patches of cliff face, and the distant, dark blue Atlantic water fading into the light blue horizon on this hot fall day; all turned black. Robbie collapsed, knees hitting the ground and torso flopping flush against the flat rock of the trail several yards short of the highest point, on which Sonya Larson last stood.

Two hundred students were bussed from the high school to the funeral. Black was everywhere, dark coats and pants, shining black shoes. Elijah's family stood beside the casket. Two brothers sung their favorite summer bonfire songs. They cried and choked, and Elijah's cousin turned her head to vomit into the plastic ficus behind Elijah's body.

Robbie woke up. He was lying flat on the ground and the first sight he glimpsed was the horizon beyond Larson's Landing. The sun was still directly overhead. He was alone; nothing had changed. Reaching behind his back, he removed his second canteen and three granola bars. He sat up as slowly as he could and drank even slower. Halfway through his canteen, he started on his granola bar. Chocolate bits and brown crumbs rolled down his shirt, spilling over his pants and tumbling to the ground.

When he gathered enough strength to walk fifty feet to the nearest water pump marked on the trail map, Robbie refilled his canteens and soaked his hand towel with the cold water. He returned to his previous spot to sit down, drank another canteen-full of water, and wrapped the cool, soaked towel around his head.

Robbie rested for another hour, eating and drinking, eyes fixed on the horizon. Wispy clouds swirled in the sky, tinting the firmament assorted shades of blue. The drop was far, but the small masses of land off the Bar Harbor coast were lush and green, and the air was dotted with gulls and fishing osprey skimming the water's surface. It was a sight teeming with life. In a week Robbie might forget about the new site, but he would remember the old days of hiking the Blue Dot Trail, the feel of the chalky boulders, the muffled sound of air brushing through the ferns, the smell of the North Atlantic, and how incredible the view was from the top of The Abyss.

He pulled his phone from his pack, pressed the call button, and waited to hear his friend's voice on the other side.