

## **All Else Follows**

Joseph Snow has been jogging along icy roads for an hour. The knee's bothering him. It's an old battle wound, from back when he was Joe Snow and someone took a bat to it. He's wearing heavy gray sweats and he keeps a white towel around his neck. He feels like a boxer, training in the high elevation, in freezing temperatures, in athletic shoes with deep-grooved traction. It feels serious. Except there are no real bouts and nobody really knows him in this town. He has only been a free man for three weeks.

He eases to a cool-down trot and turns into the campground off Highway 36. It's one of those campgrounds for people down on their luck. Shaggy pine trees. Potholes. Broken chairs, old couches, bald tires tossed along the road. The sound of trucks rumbling down the highway. As he approaches the manager's place, he slows to a walk. The lungs burn. He hock up globs of black spit. Too many cigarettes. He'll work on that much later. He turns to watch the highway one last time, watching for a woman with dyed yellow hair and a little boy in the front seat. No idea what kind of car she would have. It's been nine years and he can only picture her the way she used to look. As for his son, he can only imagine the boy as a toddler, his mother holding him in her arms, red lights and fear flashing across the boy's face.

Across the road, an old woman sweeps snow off her fake grass landing. As soon as she sees him, she stops sweeping and disappears inside her RV. Joe Snow used to get that kind of response before he went to prison, but now he's trying to be more like a Joseph. With more

jogging and no lifting, he figures he can look like a runner, just a regular man, instead of a thug. Still, there are the deep grooves in his forehead, purple scars here and there, the ashen coloring, the heavy stare, the tattoos running down his arms and creeping up his neck. He knows he looks like a convict.

He walks the three steps up to the manager's door. Bells jingle on the handle when he opens it. He checks the clock on the wall. He's got a half-hour until his parole officer stops by.

The manager, a great big gal with pigtails down to her waist, calls from another room. "Be there in a minute, hon."

He wants to call her Maryann or Luanne, something like that. "Just uh..." he begins. "Mail come?"

"Who's that?"

"Joseph Snow. Back in A-36."

"Go ahead, Snow," she calls out. He appreciates her trust.

He walks behind the counter and searches for his name on the wooden slots. "Snow, J." The slot's empty. Empty as he found it yesterday, the day before that, and every single day before that. He checks the mail every day just in case Kim decides to write back.

After Joseph went to prison, she wrote these long, rambling letters about how he'd fucked up her life. Elias kept running away and it was all Joseph's fault. With Kim, it was always somebody else's fault – first her crackhead family's, then Joseph's. It was the family thing that united them. Kim came from a long line of petty-thief welfare cases, and Joseph came from a more violent brood, descendants of a Hells Angel who, on birthdays, used to shoot up each of his boys with a good dose of heroin. Joseph became intense, watchful, a contender for a prominent seat with the Angels, whereas Kim seemed to let life happen to her. She had a hard face, like she

was raised on liquor, until she smiled. That girl had a smile. She could also spend more money on Walmart crap than anyone would believe. Dollar store rings on every finger. A pill-popper. The girl blew through cash faster than Joseph could supply it. He never blamed her for his involvement in the family trade, the things he did, but if she had cut out the pills, if she had been a different sort of woman, he might have made his exit sooner, before the law caught up to him.

After his first year in prison, the letters died off. He received only two more; the first was one he'll never forget. Kim was pregnant – whose kid, she wouldn't say – and she had to move in with her invalid mother and some uncles, most of them junkies, one of them a known pedophile. Of all the times Joseph had wanted to scratch his way out of jail that was the worst of them. He'd stare at the dirt on the yard, the concrete walls, then at his fingernails, and wonder how long it would take. He did push-ups until he could think straight. The calm would last until he pictured his little boy with those people... Joseph focused on his behavior, his outlook. He did everything he could until finally the parole board gave him a break. He called Kim and she promised she would be waiting outside the gates. She promised she would bring the boy. She promised the world. But nobody met him at the gates. Nobody came. And for the first time, he didn't want to leave the prison. He wanted to stand right in front of those gates until she showed up.

Joseph exits the manager's door, trying to keep the bells from ringing. He feels sharp pains in his knee as he makes it down the stairs. He takes the icy road slowly from there, favoring the one good leg, trying not to fall. Of course any other free man would be home by now, blowing his \$200 on the very things that landed him in prison. But Joseph has a plan. Staying in Susanville is part of it, even though staying here feels like a continued sentence. It's a

prison town – desolate, full of cops, far from anything fast and easy. Susanville is perfect in that respect.

The campground road forks into two curved roads, roughly shaped like a wishbone. One road for long-term residents, the other for short-term camping. Joseph takes the former. He crosses an icy wooden bridge and he heads for the back corner, where the road dead-ends. He chose this spot because it was mostly empty, and he needed to be alone. Plus, he liked the trees, the feeling of river-water nearby, the concentrated light beaming through the dripping branches, these barren branches raised and clenched like claws reaching for the sky. He spent his first few days watching dozens of little black birds flitting around in the trees. He'd always thought birds flew south for the winter, but what does he know? He's never lived in nature before.

Two black dogs run up to him before he reaches his trailer. They're skinny black labs with name tags, but no address: Bo and Luke.

“What's up, dogs?”

The dogs lick his paws and snuzzle up to his legs. He stops to give each of them a good rubdown. Someday he'd like a dog. Someday he'd like to have a yard for his dog. Before that there will be a job. Savings. A house, yard. Stability. One foot before the other. Slow-like, for the rest of his life.

Ice crunches under his shoes as he makes his way to the brown and beige camper. It's a 1976 Palomar he bought off an old trout fisherman for a hundred bucks. The fisherman was up front about the condition: “She ain't seaworthy.” Tires went flat the next day.

The bum knee can hardly get him up the metal stairs. Once he has a job, he'll buy some aspirin. For now he'll settle for snowballs to reduce the swelling. Inside, the cabin reeks of cigarettes, some from the fisherman, but mostly from Joseph keeping himself occupied at night.

Everything else looks pretty good. The sleeping bag is zipped and straightened up. The pillow's tucked under the bag. Kitchen table's wiped off. Floor's swept. Black floor mat for the shoes is clean. He cranks the heat, undresses, and wraps a towel around himself.

As soon as the hot shower water hits his back, someone knocks on the aluminum door. He calls out to Harrigan, tells him he's coming, and turns off the water. The mirror's too steamed for him to see himself. The knocking continues.

“Said I'm coming!”

Harrigan knocks again.

“Fuck, man. All right!”

He slips on his boxers, sweatpants, t-shirt, and opens the door. Instead of his parole officer, two children are standing in front of him. Joseph takes a step backward. The boy is wearing a blue backpack and the girl has a pink pillow and a doll. The boy is not quite a teen, not a little boy either. He has Joseph's brown hair, long bangs hanging down to his nose, Kim's sharp black eyes somewhere under there. He's wearing a black sweatshirt with a snowboarder on it, black jeans. A scrawny kid, too small for the backpack, carries himself like he's ashamed, and Joseph remembers standing like that one time, his oldest brother noticing, and suddenly all his brothers were descending on him, breaking bones. The girl drops her pillow and hides behind the boy. She's strawberry blond, with fuzzy curls, light blue eyes, a cropped little nose – perky, nothing like her mom. She's wearing a pink coat with fake white fur around the hood. She looks just like Joseph's cousin Nelson. Nelson's fucking kid.

A car engine rumbles like an old boat, a cloud of white exhaust drifting past the door. Joseph steps out to the top stair and spots the decades-old black Trans Am. He remembers this

stupid car. He knows this fuckhead driver. There's nothing Joseph would enjoy more than slamming Alex's weaselfuck face into the asphalt. Again. And again and again.

His brain is a maelstrom of static, all coming in at different frequencies, partial words and pictures he recognizes but can't make any sense of, and the black birds are going crazy in the tree with no leaves, like they just realized it's winter, it's freezing cold, there's no food here. There's no food here! He just wants to turn it all down. Turn it all off, just like that judge did when she sentenced him.

"Let's go," the boy says, tugging the girl's arm. "Go, stupid."

The boy and girl are moving away from him like shadows in a dream. The boy is hunched over, carrying things, shuffling along like a hobo. Joseph can't see his face. Just like in his dreams, Joseph stands there watching his boy recede. His mouth can't form the words he needs. Joseph has never been able to find the right words; his body, his appearance have always done the talking for him. He wants to walk toward his son but he knows that if he reaches for him, Elias will disappear. Then there's his father's voice – Pops – the only voice that sounds clearly in Joseph's head. Pops would tell him to grab his boy by the hair, knock him around. But he's not going to do that. He's not going to be like Pops. What's he going to be like, though? Beyond his own father, everything's a blur, and Joseph has no idea how to act. Meanwhile, he knows he'd better do something quick, because *this is real, this is your boy and he's leaving*.

Joseph starts down the stairs. He can hear things now. Elias is yelling, "I'm not stayin' here!" and the weaselfuck's yelling about how far he's driven, that Elias had better get out of the damn car. Joseph approaches the car. He tries to think of the right thing to say, what a regular

dad would say. Alex's greasy head dips down and he takes in all 200-plus pounds of steaming Joe Snow in a towel coming at him. The Trans Am engine roars. Alex takes off.

Joseph watches the exhaust trail disappear, knowing he's done the wrong thing again. He returns to the camper, paces, and slams his fist on the dinette table. The cheap slab tilts. He stands there for a while before he tries to straighten the table. He realizes what's just happened, how he reacted, and now he has no table. It's his brain. He freezes in moments of uncertainty. It's not that he goes blank; it's just the opposite. He vacillates, frantically, in every direction, looking for a clear outlet until he finally lunges. But it's never based on all that thinking, never based on anything but raw emotion, usually anger, and that has always sent him in the wrong direction. Every time. He should have done something different, that's for sure. Standing there with his brain short-circuiting, probably looking like a monster to those kids – that was a bad move. Getting pissed off at Alex, who, on the one hand sent Joseph to prison but on the other was only trying to save his sister – *that* was a bad move. And why was Elias being delivered here? What kind of bad shit would make Alex, of all people, drive hundreds of miles from Cucamonga up to Nowheresville, to face the man who'd put him in the hospital? Joseph is reminded that something is wrong with his brain.

He'll tell Harrigan when he gets here. He'll tell Harrigan about Kim and Elias and the little girl, and he'll ask how he can get his boy. He'll do exactly what he was taught *not* to do, which is to never involve outsiders, and never talk to cops.

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Harrigan drives a white mini-van. He shows up unarmed, alone, with just his canvas tote full of files and piss cups. He's an older guy, retired prison guard, one of those walrus types

with the white handlebar mustache, pear shape, polyester tracksuit. Joseph takes him for a family man. He's fat, for one. He also wears a wedding ring.

Joseph opens the door and motions for Harrigan to come inside. The officer kicks off his beige shoes, lines them up on the mat, which Joseph appreciates. Harrigan extends a hand.

"Mr. Snow," he says, looking at the narrow space beyond Joseph.

Joseph offers a firm handshake. He steps out of the officer's way.

"Think I'll sit if you don't mind."

"Careful on that uh," Joseph says. "It's..."

"It's fine." Harrigan sits at the dinette table sideways. He pulls a pen and some yellow sticky notes out of his sweatpants pocket. The notes fit perfectly in his meaty palm. "All right then, I'll keep it brief," he says. "So I can get outta your hair." Harrigan said the same thing last time.

Harrigan puts on his glasses and strains to read the yellow post-its on the kitchen cabinet. He mumbles, wagging his pen, before he looks at Joseph's face. "So. How'd we do this week?"

"Uh... All right," Joseph says. He wonders if this is the right time to bring up Elias. What should he say? What if Harrigan gets involved, decides Joseph is unfit to care for Elias, and Joseph's son disappears into the foster care system? Then Pops would be right, and Pops was usually right when it came to cops.

Harrigan reaches into his bag and pulls out the piss cup. He hands it over to Joseph. "Okay. How's the job pursuit?"

Joseph thinks of the time he looked at the want ads in the local newspaper, but he's pretty sure that doesn't count. He shrugs and leans back against the sink. For the past week, he's



focused on living clean, keeping to himself. He has no idea how to pursue a job, no idea who would hire an ex-con.

“Mr. Snow?”

“It’s uh – slow, I guess.”

Harrigan jots something down on the sticky note. As he writes, he says, “Why don’t you go do the honors while I finish your Action Plan?”

At the end of each visit, Harrigan gives Joseph a numbered list. Three simple goals to focus on. Something to stick on the refrigerator if he had one. The goals for the first two weeks were the same.

Action Item 1: Self

Action Item 2: Piss

Action Item 3: Job.

He’s hoping for something different this time, some sign of progress.

Joseph takes the cup to the bathroom.

“Any contacts this week?” Harrigan calls out. It’s what he asked last week, the week before.

Joseph doesn’t answer. He’s not one to talk while he pisses, especially not when there’s a man sitting a few feet away, asking stupid questions. It’s part of maintaining a man’s dignity. Even before prison, he’d be in the bathroom, and Kim would be talking to him through the door. Harrigan must have daughters, Joseph figures. A bunch of daughters. He could just tell Harrigan about the kids, ask for a real plan for getting custody, none of this *job, self, piss* bullshit. Just ask: how does a felon get his kid back? He knows the response.

Action Item 1: Fill out these forms. You’ll have to ask the Whatever Office for them.

Action Item 2: Wait. Keep waiting.

Action Item 3: Fill out that form again. You forgot to sign it. Be patient.

He's supposed to be patient while his son gets ruined? The thought of his ashamed boy, almost a man, standing there all but telling him what's been done to him...

When Joseph comes out of the bathroom, he finds Harrigan by the door. He's bent over, tying his shoes. He's got his tote bag ready. A new yellow note is stuck to the cabinet along with the others.

Action Item 1: Job

Action Item 2: Self

Action Item 3: Piss

*Job + Self = Piss*

Joseph can picture the smirk on Pops' face, just before he knocks him upside the head. Harrigan extends a hand. Joseph passes over the warm plastic cup.

"Same time next week," the old man says on his way out. "Take her one hour at a time, stick to the plan, Snow, you're doing great, Snow."

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"Fuck you." Joseph rips all the sticky notes off the cabinet and crumples them in his fist. *Take her one hour at a time?* How's that supposed to help anybody? Joseph's got to make his own plan, do it all himself just like Pops says, but the right way.

Action Item 1: Find Elias.

Action Item 2: When you find him...

Action Item 3: Don't look for Elias. Don't call anyone. Figure out what YOU have to do... Think. Eat. Snowball the knee. *Shit.*

It's all a jumble in his head. Joseph puts his damp sweats back on and heads out the door. He needs another run to get his thoughts straight, all the way out to the tow yard, beyond which there's nothing but high desert, the smell of Christmas trees, and a maximum-security state prison somewhere out there as a reminder.

He walks the campground road out to the highway. He jogs along the narrow shoulder, checking out every car that passes by. It's all too close though. Trucks, cars, big rigs, RVs pass within a couple feet of him. And how about that? Man's just out of prison, getting his act together, and some old fucker in a motor home comes along. Joseph focuses on taking long, quick strides, pushing off like he's got springs under his feet. Pushing past the knee pain. He picks up the pace. He finds himself trying to catch up with that stupid car.

Yellow lights flash ahead, warning drivers of the hairpin turn where the fast mountain highway hits old downtown Susanville, pioneer-style Main Street, and suddenly everyone's braking, going two miles an hour. Joseph slows to a walk because jogging in front of these tired old shops feels too conspicuous. Country people don't jog or walk around town; they drive around in their trucks. He walks past the sewing machine shop, the used bookstore, the insurance broker, the tattoo parlor. Beyond Main Street, the road opens up to four lanes and there are no sidewalks, just parking lots. He picks up the pace again. He checks all the gas stations, fast food places, cheap motels in that part of town that caters to visiting families. He passes the Greyhound station, where he could have spent all his gate money on a one-way ticket to Cucamonga. But this is too damn slow.

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Joseph bolts across the highway the first chance he gets, cuts it close, draws some honks, but who cares, he's lost his boy again. He runs faster, aiming for this long side road out to

nowhere, Ash Street, a road that will take him to the end of the world. It's silent, still, real high desert country, and the noise in his head eventually quiets. He feels a lightening in his limbs, and in his mind. Runner's high makes it all so simple, everything possible. *Stick with the plan, Snow.*

*Job.*

Job is first priority now, because with no job, there's no kid; no job, no money; no money, no clean piss, no freedom. It's a moment of clarity, the truth that comes to him after running. *Stick with the plan*, he thinks. *Stick with the plan*, he repeats, bobbing his head. *Stick with the plan, man, stick with the plan.*

He follows the road to his turn-around point, where Ash Street veers to the north. He passes a tow yard, a fenced lot with a small beige office, a wide-open rolling gate, a black Trans Am parked just inside. It looks newer than Alex's. Bold black paint. Arizona plates. Still, Joseph stops at the gate.

Someone shouts. "Hey! Rocky Balboa!"

The tow truck driver hops out the cab of a yellow truck. He's got a mess of keys in his hand, cigarette dangling from his lip. His cheeks are lumpy from acne scars.

"You trainin' for a marathon, man?" he says.

"Uh... Nope."

The man turns to look at the lot. He waves his cigarette at the cars. "See all that? Towed every single one of those fuckers'n the last 36 hours. 18 tows."

"No shit."

"Shit. Roads get icy, and I'm pullin' 24-hour shifts."

Joseph wonders if this guy knows he's from the prison. He nods his head in the direction of the Trans Am. "What's up with that one?"

"What? Knight Rider? *Shit*. I picked that thing up three days ago. Lady on her way to the prison, drove all night, runs out of gas outside Reno."

Joseph nods.

"Yep. Good money, but shit. I'm worn out."

Joseph crosses his arms. He checks out all the cars. He nods, thinking he could do this job, he could do any job. Pops would call him all sorts of names, starting with pussy, then on to the worst. Joseph issues some silent curses right back at him, and then he clears his throat.

"Looks like you uh... could use another guy," he says.

"What's that?" the tow man asks.

Joseph just looks at him. Pops would call this groveling. Begging. Joseph rephrases it as an attempt to find honest work. Because that's what fathers are supposed to do.

The man tosses his cigarette on the ground and steps on it. He's grinning. "What? You? Rocky Balboa wants to run a tow truck?"

Joseph shrugs. "Something like that."

"You tow before?" the man asks.

"Back in So Cal."

"No shit. You do snow in So Cal?"

"Snow, rain... Sun," Joseph says.

The man laughs. "How 'bout stars?"

"Stars, too," Joseph says.

The man blows smoke up at the sky. He swats his gloved paws together. “My wife is gonna love you!”

Joseph doesn't know what to say to that. He manages to smile at the guy.

He offers to take Joseph out tomorrow, check things out. See how it goes. Maybe he can start work next week. The all night shift. Ice, snow, deer, lot of fucked up crashes especially with these prison visitors from Frisco. And tits cold. But Joseph can handle it. They shake hands. The man's name is Dale. He's got it embroidered in yellow thread on his blue mechanic suit.

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Running home along a country road. Employed. Running is all about feeling light and lean, nimble and loose, employed and free. Action items one and two done. Actually he's hit all three. Self piss job. Take that, Harrigan. You lazy fuck.

A truck drives past, some good ole boy on his way to work, arm and a cigarette hanging out the window, really staring at Joseph, staring hard – like he's wondering what Joseph is doing out here running along the highway, and what kind of man has time to go out for a jog like a woman, like he's some guy with nothing better to do – when he's got something very important to do.

Action Items 1, 2, and 3: Get your kid.

He runs harder now, but his mind runs harder, faster, wilder. He's outpaced, thinking too far and wide, thinking about one of the motivational signs he saw in the prison counselor's office, “Care for the small creatures and all else follows,” and how he felt that sign was just for him. It made sense: do right by others, and all else will follow. Do right by your boy, be a father to him, and all else will follow. Do right on the small things, it all adds up. Sounds so simple, so

easy, like there's some natural progression, an order. Normal families always seemed to have that order, and good things would happen to them. Get your kid and "all else" what? He's just agreed to work nights. You can't leave a kid home alone at night. Then there's the job itself. He's never driven a tow truck before. He'll have to drive in the snow. He's never done that before either. What about school? How will he get Elias there? What about the little girl? He has to take her in, right? Save her too. And then what, he drives a tow truck for the rest of his life? He hides in a prison town forever so he can stay out of trouble?

Joseph's running slows. It's a mind game, running. It gets worse. He pictures Elias getting dumped off in Reno, Sacramento, Chico, who knows where Alex has people. And why? Where was Kim? Who could possibly be lower on Alex's list than Joe Snow?

Joseph's legs feel heavy and his breathing's all over the place. And something's torn in Joseph's knee for good. Just when he needs to speed up, the body quits, and he's hobbling down Main Street, headed back for the campground, getting all kinds of stares. Hell, even the tweakers in their beat-up Datsuns are staring.

At the end of the line, one block ahead, Main Street makes its sharp turn and heads back for the mountains. There's a curved concrete wall along the turn, and yellow lights that all but shout at you to slow down. There are lights, symbols, words, every warning they could possibly put there, yet the concrete wall has dozens of black skids along it. There's even some red paint where it looks like the entire side of a car dragged along the wall. Of course, there is an easier way to get his kid. Phone call to big brother Pops, and it's done, and before Joseph knows it, he's down south again, doing the same old things. But that's not what you do with a kid. That's not who Joseph wants to be anymore. *Stick to the plan, man.*

Joseph makes it to the last shop in town. It's a movie theater, the Uptown, which is sad because there's nothing up or town about it. There's a pay phone next to the box office, a phone for normal teens to call their normal moms to come pick them up when the movie's over. He knows it's too late for Elias to ever see himself as normal. Joseph's already ruined that for him. But to be a normal father, what would he have to do? Joseph stares at the pay phone.

Joe Snow's last interaction with the local police ended with him in the back of a police cruiser, cuffed, bloodied, his life over, feeling like a man. Outside, there were cop cars, fire engines, bystanders, ambulances. His wife, his little son watching the whole thing. One ambulance came for Alex; the other came for the police officer he'd managed to disarm, and bludgeon upside the head. He felt proud of himself in the back of that cruiser. He'd gone down with a fight. "Never surrender" was one of Pops' cardinal rules. Even if it means you lose everything. Joe Snow thought he had demonstrated all the best qualities in those final moments: loyalty, honor, strength, courage. Loyalty to what, though? Only in prison did he realize he'd demonstrated obedience. Naivete. Ignorance. He realized he'd never been free.

It's the idea of calling a police officer – surrendering – that makes Joseph stand there for so long. He's always seen the world as a battle between Us and Them. Us, being those who resist authority, and Them being those who embrace it. He has only lived on the Us side of that line. But what else does he have now that he's done with Joe Snow? What else can he do but erase all the lines and do whatever it takes to keep his boy?

Dialing three little numbers comes easy, and it's free too. It's the talking that's tough. As he gets going, he wonders at his voice. It comes out smaller, softer, but stronger. It's the voice of a different man, one with an address and a job, and as it keeps going, he feels the gates around him finally lifting.



**END**