

## Crashing

During the few minutes they spoke, Tim heard little of what Jason Green's father said, distracted as he was by scrolling words on a silent flat screen television mounted on a dingy wall of a hospital waiting room. The wall may once have been the golden hue of a spectacular sunrise, but now its faded color more closely resembled a dried out ear of corn. The television, only slightly larger than a laptop computer, was at eye level just behind Mr. Green's head. Words scrolled at the bottom of the screen below the intense faces of the male and female newsreaders. Tim nodded a lot as Mr. Green spoke, all the while holding his breath as much as he could for fear of smelling the smells of death all around him. When he was a boy, he and his younger brother Ben had played the cemetery game in the car—holding their breath as they rode past, then keeping it held sometimes until they felt light headed. Tim felt that way now.

Tim understood he should listen to Mr. Green, that to ignore him especially now would rightfully be perceived as disrespectful. But he couldn't look him in the eye. He'd tried to yesterday when just the two of them had been in the hospital room together with Jason, and Tim's gaze could only reach Mr. Green's chin before he averted his eyes. When he looked away, it was always toward Jason—motionless, except for his diaphragm's up and down movement as the machines helped him to breathe. He couldn't look there for long, though—at his silent best friend with a head bandage and no other visible signs of injury. Tim wondered if Jason knew they were there in the room with him. He had an

impulse to hit Jason for screwing up their plans. *You never wore a goddamn seat belt, you idiot.*

So he stared now at the TV instead, holding his breath for long stretches, trying to focus on what Mr. Green said, but imagining the words scrolled at the bottom of the screen like a news report about Tim and Jason. As Mr. Green's message settled in, the light headedness Tim had felt from holding his breath intensified into something very different, as if he were in free fall after jumping out of an airplane. He'd never done that before—jumped out of a plane—but he thought this must be what it's like. A combination of fear from having no control, and joy because nothing mattered anymore, so fuck it.

“Non-responsive,” Mr. Green said, and then Tim imagined these same words appeared within those scrolling on the television. Then, “No brain function. We have a decision to make,” and they too scrolled along the bottom, entering on one side, disappearing to the other, then reappearing again.

Jason's father, his red cheeks brightening, stopped talking and looked at Tim looking at the television.

“What the hell are you doing, Tim?” he said. “Are you holding your breath?”

“Huh? Oh, no no,” Tim said, trying to exhale slowly and quietly. “You okay, Mr. Green?” Tim said, looking at his nose this time, and trying to change the subject. Mr. Green had a lone white hair poking out of one of his nostrils.

“Something on the TV?” He sounded frustrated.

“Oh,” Tim said. “No,” he said, shaking his head and pointing to the television. “I've heard everything you've said, sorry. It's just...I don't know.”

“Timmy, please. Focus, will you, son?” he said, softening his tone. He put his arm around Tim to guide his attention away from the television.

Then Mr. Green looked back down the hall where Jason was lying comatose. “I can’t let you in there today, Timmy. Jason’s mother and Lisa are in there with him right now. It’s a goddamn scene—Mrs. Green with her rosary, and Lisa constantly thumb-punching her iPhone.” He said this last sentence almost under his breath, as if the information were not to be repeated. That Tim was the last person to see Jason conscious didn’t come up—but it was there, this unspoken thing, right there in the waiting room with them hiding in the pauses as Jason’s father talked. Tim felt its presence as much as he did Mr. Green’s. He half expected this thing he’d conjured up to pounce and grab hold of him to ensure he understood the aforementioned sensation of free fall would not be an escape from what was happening—what was about to happen. Tim felt an uncontrollable need to look back at the television to see if those unspoken words appeared on the scroll line: *You Killed Jason. It’s your fault.*

*I’ve got to get the fuck out of here,* he thought.

“Tell you what,” Mr. Green said, finally, looking exasperated at Tim, who by now felt sweat beads rolling down his forehead. “You go on home now, before the girls come out, okay?”

Tim felt only relief, even after the uncomfortable hug from Mr. Green. Then Tim made it worse by thanking him and shaking his hand. He’d never felt more stupid, though the freedom he felt afterward made up for it as he walked out of the hospital into the snowy night, an inmate sprung from jail. He stood for almost ten minutes in the parking lot, leaning against the hood of his mother’s SUV and took deep, deliberate breaths.

“No fucking cemeteries tonight,” he said aloud.

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The basement ceiling above Ben and the other two card players creaked under the weight of a living room full of college-aged boys pacing around, standing up and then sitting back down again, waiting for some news about Jason and whether or not he was dead.

“When’s he coming back?” Chris said.

“Who?” Ben said, playing a card.

“Your brother? —Tim? —From the hospital?”

“How the hell should I know?”

With elbows on the table, the three teenaged boys sat on wooden dining chairs from a set Ben’s parents had found at a yard sale a couple years before.

Chris drew a card from his hand and then tucked it back in between two different cards. He turned his attention to Ben. “How long’s he been gone?”

“Jesus, Chris!” Freddy said. “Play a card.”

“Must be three hours.”

“Just play a goddamn card.” Freddy’s tone was now pleading.

Ben pretended to be focused on his cards, but he was really listening to the goings on upstairs, and not letting his two friends’ bickering take his mind away in case he heard Tim’s footsteps as he returned home from seeing Jason in the hospital. He imagined most of the boys upstairs had already made it a point to say a sweet hello to his mother, their favorite, who no doubt was feeding the boys dessert to go with the beer supplied by his

father. That these boys, his brother's friends, liked their mother best out of all the boys' mothers didn't bother Ben, not really. Especially since she didn't seem to mind it one bit.

But, truth was, they weren't there for Ben's mother—no matter how much they loved her—or for the beer, though Ben was sure they were quite pleased to be able to drink it without having to worry about being harassed because they were under 21. No, they were all here for Jason, who was dead. Or, more precisely, was on life support with no brain function at a Boston hospital. Some time around 2 a.m. yesterday, after leaving this very house, his golden Camaro had been found on its roof in the middle of a dry road, engine still running, no skid marks, no one else around, and him inside with a fractured skull.

Outside, a late December snowstorm had brought light snow a few hours before. As Ben dealt the cards, he thought about Tim driving in the snow. This caused the uncomfortable heaviness in his stomach to intensify—the one he'd been feeling ever since they'd heard the news about Jason. When Ben was finished dealing, he and his two friends fanned six cards each in one hand, just like they'd learned from the older boys, some of whom were upstairs now.

“Your bid,” Chris said to Freddy.

“Three,” he said, squinting at his cards.

“Pass.”

“Take it,” Ben said.

They each played a card, and Ben grabbed them up.

“You suck,” Freddy said, flipping his black bangs with a quick shift of his head. He'd started to do this more and more lately as he let his hair grow longer. Ben found it annoying.

The basement smelled of mildew. The tan carpeting had been flooded just the one time during a two-day rainstorm, but once had been enough to keep the lingering smell permanent. Faint music from a clock radio sitting on a cluttered shelf—Norman Greenbaum’s “Spirit in the Sky”—played in the background. In the ceiling overhead, copper water pipes and electrical wiring ran along the joists and wood furring strips crisscrossing between them. The floor above them continued to creak. *A goddamn herd of wildebeests*, Ben thought.

A single 60-Watt bulb with a drawstring gave off just enough light for the card players to see their hands. Dark paneling covered the walls, and on it were old oil paintings by Ben’s grandfather, who’d framed them with wood scraps and tacked them together like he’d been in a hurry. There were paintings of fruit, a snow covered pine tree, an antique car, some tools. He’d delivered milk for something like fifty years before retiring to Miami where he died at a Jai Alai fronton. His favorite bet was a Quinella Boxed 3-4-8.

“Three four eight,” Ben said.

“What’s three-forty-eight?” Chris said.

“No,” Ben said. “It’s three four eight.”

“What did I say?”

“Three-forty-eight.”

“So what the hell is it?”

“Nothing. Never mind,” he said, feeling queasy. “I don’t feel too good.”

“It’s stuffy down here. Deal the goddamn cards, Chris.”

“Tim must have been gone now for like three hours,” Chris said. “Let’s go see what’s going on.” He stood up, knocking the table and causing his glass of melting ice to spill onto it.

“Jesus, Chris!”

Freddy and Ben stood up, too.

“Sorry.” He swiped at the ice cubes with his sleeve, pushing them into the carpeted basement floor.

“Forget it,” Ben said. “I got enough shit from Tim before he left. He said to stay down here, and my parents are totally siding with him.”

“What’s his problem?”

“He’s an asshole.”

The three sat back down to play cards.

“Yeah, well,” Freddy said.

“What?” Ben said.

“Tim’s best friend’s basically dead, Ben.”

“I know.”

“So Tim’s probably being an asshole because of that.”

“No, it’s not because of Jason,” Ben said. “Tim’s just an asshole.”

“Jesus, Ben.”

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“This chair’s gonna break,” Chris said.

“Lose some weight, fat boy,” Freddy said, flipping back his hair and giving off a laugh suggesting he’d just uttered one of the funniest things anyone anywhere had ever said.

“Fuck off, pretty boy. Nice hair.”

“I already told you,” Freddy said, combing his hair with his hand. “She likes it.”

“Whatever,” Ben said. “Shut up. Let’s play cards.”

“Sorry, Ben,” Freddy said.

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Jason had owned the Camaro since well before he and Tim had gone off to college. It was his pride and joy—a 1970 restored Super Sport with 300 horsepower. Jason used to walk around singing, “I’ve got the fastest car in town,” to some tune he’d made up. He drove everywhere. Tim’s mother called it Jason’s taxi service, to which Jason politely smiled. He was always trying to get Tim’s mother to come take a ride with him, which would drive Tim nuts.

As Jason drove Tim home Saturday night—the night of the accident—he’d brought it up again. Tim had been deep in thought, anticipating the Sunday morning conversation he’d be having with his parents—the one that was sure to create chaos.

“Your mom’s a babe,” Jason said, driving his Camaro too fast for the neighborhood streets near Tim’s house.

“What?” Tim said. “Is that what you’re thinking about?”

“Always do when we’re home, Timmy.”

“Man, stop fantasizing about my mother.”



“Come on,” Jason said, downshifting into a turn, “I’m not seriously thinking your mom’s like that. But,” he said, taking a quick look toward Tim, “I do think she likes the attention.”

“Please, God, just shut up. It’s too fucking late to entertain your twisted mind.”

“Yeah, I know, okay. So, listen,” Jason said, suddenly flipping a switch into serious, “when are you going to tell them?”

“First thing,” Tim said quickly, then paused to think. “They’re going to shit.”

“No kidding. But we gotta do it now. I mean, no way I’m going back there.”

“Back where?”

“To school, dumb ass.”

“Yeah, no shit. Slow down! Jesus.”

“What?”

“Seriously?”

“Take it easy,” Jason said, sitting up more erect in his car seat, involuntarily puffing his chest out in that supremely confident way he’d done since the boys were in middle school.

“When you seeing the guy about your car?” Tim said.

Jason put the palm of his right hand on the dashboard. “Tomorrow at two. My little baby here’s gonna get me enough so we can walk Europe for a year.”

“Think so?”

“I know so.”

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Tim had gotten the call yesterday afternoon while the family sat in their dining room eating Sunday dinner. The voice on the other end of the phone was so faint, Tim thought the call must be long distance, maybe from another country. *Maybe Europe*, he thought. He let his mind wander, and in the moment before he realized it was Jason's mom's voice, he imagined the call came from a small village surrounded by rolling hills. *Maybe somewhere in Italy or Germany*, he thought. *Jason and I will be there soon enough*. The thought vanished when Jason's mother spoke up a little louder and more forcefully.

"Timmy," she said. "It's Jason—he needs you."

He listened for he didn't know how long as Jason's mother told him what she knew about the accident and about Jason. After he hung up the phone, he'd stood in the doorway to the kitchen, and then with no emotion told his family that his best friend was in a coma.

"What could have happened?" his mother asked.

"I dunno," Tim said, fixing his gaze on the patterned table cloth next to his mother's full dinner plate. "He was fine when he dropped me off."

"You guys drinking?" Ben said.

"We weren't drunk, dip shit," Tim said, directing his stare at his brother, who at fifteen was old enough to know you don't say that shit in front of parents. For a second he actually enjoyed seeing his brother squirm in his seat as he stared him down. He wanted Ben to understand that right now, they weren't buddies or confidantes, and that above all, more than anything, Tim didn't have an ounce of desire to talk about this with him or his family.

"Ben," their father said. "Eat." Then he turned his attention to his other son. "You going to see him?"

“I guess.”

“Want a ride?” his father asked. He was a big man—not tall, exactly, but solid and imposing.

“No,” Tim said. “I don’t know. I have to go,” he said, but he didn’t move.

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The police said Jason fell asleep at the wheel, colliding off the curb and flipping the Camaro. Tim had said he doubted it, Jason was a good driver, and wasn’t tired the night of the accident. Ben wanted to ask Tim—what did he see in Jason before the accident, before he’d been dropped off? Did Tim feel guilty he was the last one to see Jason before he more or less died? But the brothers had never had that kind of relationship. The idea of asking Tim a personal question was as foreign to Ben as was his friend Freddy’s need to have his hair look pretty for his new girlfriend. Ben just couldn’t imagine actually doing it.

So, with Norman Greenbaum singing in the background, he continued to play cards with his friends, waiting for Tim to come home from the hospital, feeling the sensation of weight deepen as if it were ready to turn him inside out. He imagined himself exploding from the pressure, right there in the basement with his friends as witnesses.

“Your bid, Ben.”

“Who bid?”

“Nobody. I dealt. Your bid.”

The sound of someone coming in the front door of the house distracted Ben. He knew Tim had arrived, and from the noises above them, the wildebeests in the living room must have stood up all at once readying themselves to hear the news about Jason.

“Tim’s home,” Ben said. “Screw it, let’s go see what’s up.”

Except for the Christmas tree, covered as it was with dozens of red, green, silver, blue, and gold ornaments along with strings of white lights, the living room looked like a doctor's waiting room. Both couches and all the chairs were filled with older boys, most with an open can of beer in their hands. Some of the herd stood off to the side, but they were all looking at Tim as he peeled off his coat and winter hat. He banged his snow-covered shoes, one foot against the other, in an attempt to knock the snow onto the floor mat. Ben's parents stood together in a doorway to the hall. Ben's mother wore her green and red Christmas sweater. It looked like a ridiculous decorated wreath. Still, Ben supposed it to be true, that his mother was pretty. The girls who Tim brought home during high school and now college seemed to think Tim had gotten their mother's good looks, which is what Ben kept hearing along with speculation Ben was getting to look more like Tim every day. This was all presented, to Ben's mind, in a way that was supposed to make him feel special, but usually left him feeling uncomfortable. Their father stood next to his mother, but really over her, as a proud owner does of his most special possession. They'd been married for more than twenty years, and as far as Ben knew they still had a good marriage, but who could really tell such things? When they saw Ben and his friends pop out of the basement, they put a finger to their lips in unison and then watched Tim as he spoke.

"He looked pretty normal," Tim said. As he took his seat, one of his friends handed him a beer, opening it quickly while he passed it. Tim drank it down, pitched his head back, closed his eyes and took three, four, five long swallows. Nobody said anything. Nothing. He sat between two very large boys wearing hooded sweatshirts who Ben hadn't seen since last summer, before Tim and Jason had gone away to college. "It's like he was sleeping," Tim finally said. He stared straight ahead, at no one in particular. "He's got a bandage

around his head and maybe his face looks a little puffy, but that's it." Then Tim stopped. Took another long swallow from his can. He crushed the can in his right hand, and then said, "His mother told me to say goodbye to him." He took a deep breath and looked down at his lap. One of his friends put a hand on his shoulder.

"I saw her in church this morning," their mother said. "I prayed for her and for Jason too."

"How was the driving?" Ben said.

Tim shot Ben an *I'm-going-to-kill-you-in-your-sleep* look.

"I mean with the snow and all." Ben said, feeling his heart beating hard, the weight gripping tighter. He wiped sweat from his forehead with the palm of his hand, and felt tears welling. The lyrics of "Spirit in the Sky" flashed in his head for just a second before his brother ripped them away.

"Shut the fuck up, Bennie," Tim said, still sitting. "I told you guys to stay in the basement. What is he *doing* here?" he said, looking at his parents as if the very idea of Ben's presence was simply a ridiculous notion.

"Shut up, asshole!"

"Benjamin!" their mother said.

A couple of the boys giggled nervously.

"I was just wondering," Ben protested. "I didn't mean anything by it." He was yelling now.

"Ben, you boys go on back downstairs." His father walked toward them and then to the basement door, as if he were ready to escort them out of the room if they didn't comply.

Ben, Chris, and Freddy walked down the stairs to the basement.

“Dude,” Chris said.

“Fuck, man,” Freddy said, once again flipping his bangs to the side. “Your brother’s gonna kick your ass.”

“Screw him, he’s such a…” His voice hitched as he held back the reflex to cry.

“Yeah, but shit.”

Ben could feel tears welling up again. He hated his brother for making him look bad in front of his friends. Freddy and Chris didn’t have older brothers, so they had no clue what it was like.

The radio played a commercial, so he shut it off.

The three boys stood around the table for a minute, then Freddy said he was going home. Chris agreed and they both put their coats on. Relieved that he couldn’t be embarrassed in front of them again, Ben let them out the rear basement door leading to the back yard. The wind hadn’t picked up yet, but the snow was steady with quarter-sized flakes accumulating on the back patio and picnic table—at least three inches now.

“Your hair’s gonna get wet,” Chris said, chiding Freddy.

“So’s your fat ass.”

All three boys laughed hard. The laughter died quickly in the snowy back yard, and the boys went on their way.

Ben had followed his friends out the door and stopped on the patio, letting the snow fall on him. The cold air felt good, calming. The one spot light on the back of the house lit the falling snow, and Ben watched his two friends enter and exit the light.

“Later,” Ben said.

They walked around the corner and were gone. Ben watched the illuminated snow. He tried to focus on just one snowflake at a time as it entered the beam of light, fall slowly, and then disappeared into the shadows. He did this for several minutes. Each snowflake seemed to be falling at precisely the same speed, but not in a perfectly straight line, as if the flakes were rocking back and forth on their way to the ground.

He heard some cars start in the front of the house, echoes of people talking, and heard his mother yell, "Be careful!" Then silence again.

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When Ben and Tim were kids growing up, their father assigned them each a specific spot in the living room on Christmas morning where they'd find their presents stacked high and wrapped in colored paper, sometimes with bows, always with way too much Scotch Tape. It used to drive them crazy, because they couldn't open the gifts fast enough. Tim's had been on the couch where he now sat next to his mother, who'd sat down after Tim. She'd given him some space, electing to make herself comfortable on the opposite end of the couch nearer to the Christmas tree.

Their dad sat quietly with his leg crossed, rocking in his chair, holding his beer and possibly dozing off. At times like this, it was always their mother who did the talking. It wasn't that his father didn't care, but it seemed to Tim that long ago his father had gotten good with the fact his mother was much better at maintaining the calm. She now sat forward, elbows on her knees, lost in some thought.

"Mr. Green wouldn't even let me see Jason tonight," Tim said. "I got to the room, but he said 'family only.'"

“His boy is dying,” Tim’s father said, eyes still closed. “Remember, Timmy. This...this tragedy makes us all look at things. Mr. Green, he’s protecting his family. I’d do the same.”

“His boy is already gone.”

“Exactly.”

When Tim had received the call from Jason’s mother, he’d experienced a moment of uncertainty. Who was calling? He’d imagined, between the moment of not knowing and knowing, that the call came from far away. He’d attributed its faintness to distance and circumstance. This person must be in a remote place, he thought, in a place he’d only ever dreamed about. He thought maybe she was alone in a house (because she lived alone) sitting in a wooden rocking chair next to a metal-framed queen size bed, upstairs in an otherwise empty bedroom. An open window let in a dying summery breeze, causing a torn beige window shade to tap against the pane.

*I wonder what she looks like*, he thought. As he played this out in his mind for that infinitesimal moment, it was real.

“Are you okay, Tim?” his mother said.

“Yeah,” he said, opening his eyes. He hadn’t realized he’d closed them, and the light from the Christmas tree startled him. He wondered for no reason he could understand if Ben would be coming back upstairs soon.

“Sorry,” Tim said. “For yelling at Bennie.”

“Ben’s struggling with this, too,” his mother said. “You’re both going to need to find out what’s next.”

“What do you mean?”



“Jason may not live another day, Timmy.”

“I know.”

“But you have to.”

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Ben walked back inside the basement, turned off the lights, and climbed the stairs to the first floor. There he found his family in the living room: mother, father, and brother, with the Christmas tree providing the only light. Tim sat on the same couch as his mother, staring straight ahead, and taking an occasional sip from his beer. Their father was in his leather rocker, beer in hand, facing the tree, rocking back and forth in a steady rhythm. Though Ben felt soothed by this scene, he stood halfway in the room and hallway, unsure what to do next.

“Bennie, please come sit next to me.” His mother, who sat next to Tim on the couch, motioned him over.

“Mom,” he said, frustrated.

“Come here now,” she said pleasantly.

“Mom,” Ben said again, shoulders slumped forward as he walked toward her.

“Look at me, Ben,” she said when he reached her. She stood up, her eyes meeting his, her hands holding each of Ben’s shoulders. “I love you,” she said, and before Ben knew it, he was sitting on an ottoman facing her as she sat next to Tim on the sofa. He looked down. “Look at me, Ben,” she said again, and he complied.

“I pray for you every day at church,” she said, leaning toward him.

“Mom, I know that.”

“Let me talk,” she said. “I pray for all of us, Timmy and Daddy too. This thing with Jason is horrible. I can hardly bear to think how I’d feel if...” She reached for Tim’s knee without looking at him, and touched Ben’s hand and then his hair. “Were you out in the snow?”

“I was out talking to Chris and Freddy before they left,” Ben said. He eyed his brother who seemed a million miles away.

His mother rubbed her hands together, trying to dry them. “You’re going to catch a cold,” she said. Her Christmas sweater reflected the lights from the tree as if they were part of the same arrangement. “Come sit next to me, and take this blanket.”

As she wrapped it around his shoulders, he instinctively pulled away despite how good the soft fleece felt. He settled back in and stared at the tree. He remembered Christmas mornings as being the most fun he ever had with his brother, who then was to Ben the person he wanted most to become—even at a young age—confident, funny, smart. He snuck a look at Tim, whose head was on the couch resting on a pillow, eyes closed. He looked like he wasn’t breathing.

*I could say something, Ben thought. I could tell him I’m sorry about Jason.* But the feeling—the weight growing across everything inside him—continued to wend its way in and around his vital organs. He wondered if this is what it was like just before you died. His gaze drifted slowly, looking past the tree to the window and outside where the snow fell steadily, faster than before. He thought about having to say goodbye.

“Are you okay, sweetie?” Ben’s mother said to him, putting a hand on his knee. “You’re crying.”

Ben looked past his mother over to Tim, who'd opened his eyes. He and his brother kept looking at each other. How long had Tim been watching him? They each held the gaze for what seemed like forever. Tim's anger appeared to be gone, though what was there was, at first, too hard for Ben to decipher. Then he recognized his brother's look. *Breathe, Timmy*, Ben thought. *It's okay to breathe now.*