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The Rope Swing

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I stare out of the tenth-floor window of the Travelers Insurance Building, peering at downtown Hartford's business district. It's the end of another workday. The sidewalks are already a river of black suits and brown briefcases flowing into the underground tributaries of bars, parking garages, and bus stops. The last thing I want to do is jump into that mess after a long day of looking at sheets of numbers, sharpening pencils, filing reports, and running to Starbucks across the street, trying to remember orders for bagels and White Chocolate Mocha Frappuccinos.

It's 4:30, and I know the call is coming. I can feel it. I shuffle my phone between my hands, staring at the digital display when it lights up every few seconds. I should turn it off because I can't think of any good excuses this time. Too late. The phone starts vibrating and flashes the familiar digits, right on schedule.

"Hello?"

"Let's go to the rope swing."

"Billy, I can't today. I have to get to the bank before it closes and I wanted to hit up the gym after that. I feel like I gained at least ten pounds after all the booze we drank last weekend."

"You can go to the gym later, fat ass. Come on, let's go to the rope swing."

"But I really have to—"

"I'll see you in 45 minutes."

Click.

Unlike me and every other 23-year old college graduate I know, Billy doesn't have a job. He lives in Winfield, two miles from my apartment. He also doesn't have a computer, so every morning he wakes up around ten, fills a plastic water bottle with whiskey, and rides his bike to the public library. He spends the next few hours checking his e-mail, surfing the Internet, and doing whatever else a person like Billy does. Apparently he's also been writing a book. When I ask him what it's about he just says existence. All I've seen are some pages full of jumbled pie charts and diagrams that look crazier than any spreadsheet I've ever had to deal with. Lately I've stopped asking him about it.

Whenever Billy gets bored, which usually happens when I'm about to get out of work, he calls my cell phone to find out what we're going to do when I get out of the city. Today, at 5:00, as I'm stuck in rush hour, loosening my tie and breathing in the aroma of the landfill that separates Winfield from Hartford, the only thing on my mind is finding a dark room with a couch where I can pass out with a cold Heineken in my hand. But instead, I'm going to pick up Billy at the library and drive another fifteen minutes to the rope swing.

The rope swing is a thirty-foot nylon and polyester string attached to the top of a huge oak tree that bends perfectly over the Connecticut River. No one knows who tied the rope to the top of the tree or who would be crazy enough to do it, but it's always been there for as long as we can remember. There are six small wooden posts nailed all along the trunk, with the sixth being about twenty feet above the ground. Every kid

who grew up in our town and who's not a pussy has done it at least once.

It sounds pretty simple. When you want to swing, you grab the rope, jump off a step and hold on tight until the rope takes you in a long arc over the middle of the river. The only problem is that the tree is about fifteen feet back from the water's edge, so unless you jump from one of the higher steps and tuck your legs when you jump off, you'll probably bottom out on the hard mud and sharp roots sticking out of the bank. Also, the prospect of a twenty-foot free fall into murky, and possibly very shallow, water is pretty nerve-wracking. I usually only jump from the second step, and even that scares the shit out of me.

When I finally get off the highway and drive around to the back entrance of the library a half hour later, I see Billy riding aimlessly in circles around the parking lot. He pedals up to my car, smashing his front tire against my bumper. He opens the back hatch and throws his bike in.

"You're late again, Andrew. How come it always takes you so long to get here?"

"You're giving me shit? My air conditioning hasn't worked in a month. How would you like to sit for almost an hour in bumper-to-bumper traffic sweating your ass off?"

"I don't know. I'd probably just roll down the windows."

"I'm fucking tired, Billy."

"First of all, we haven't gone to the rope swing in years. And last week you said you were going to jump off the highest step, and then you made up another lame excuse about how you had to work overtime on some stupid project. I'm not letting that happen again."

"When are you going to realize that we're not fifteen years old anymore, man? And besides, I don't even have a bathing suit. It's going to be just you risking your life up there today. But don't worry, I'll say something nice about you at your funeral after you get impaled by a branch or bitten by a water moccasin."

"I knew you would say that, so I brought these."

Billy rummages through his backpack and pulls out his Winfield Academy lacrosse shorts. They've been his lucky shorts since sophomore year of high school when he scored his first varsity goal. I don't think he's washed them since. The maroon mesh is splattered with an entire spectrum of stains ranging from blue house paint to unidentifiable puke-colored crud.

"I'm going to get a disease if I put those on."

"Stop making more excuses. I washed them a month ago."

I don't believe him, but it doesn't matter because I'm already driving north on Route 75, away from the clusters of apartments and strip malls, towards quiet green woods and tobacco fields.

A couple miles down the road, we turn our heads to the right to look at the old red barn that serves as the headquarters for the O.J. Williams Tobacco Company. When Billy was thirteen, he stole one of the street signs on Stoner Drive, and since every kid in our town tries to steal a Stoner Drive sign at least once during their teenage years,

the cops found out almost right away. They chased Billy through two miles of woods and swamps and when their dogs sniffed him out four hours later, he was hiding in the rafters of the Williams barn. As punishment, they made him pick tobacco at the Williams farm for an entire summer. It was the hottest summer on record in Connecticut. Billy loved it.

We take a left onto a road that's nothing more than a gravel path overgrown with prickles and vines. An old green piece of metal reads *NO OUTLET*, but we know better. The trees and bushes on either side of the road open up to a dirt parking lot and a shabby Little League field that looks like it hasn't been played on for a few years. There's a faded brown and yellow wooden sign nailed on the outfield fence that's covered in the same prickles and vines. It used to say *WASHINGTON PARK* when people actually played baseball here. Everything's quiet.

Even though no one's around, I suddenly feel embarrassed in my shirt and tie. I wrestle them off as I drive towards the even more overgrown dirt path at the end of the parking lot. We brace ourselves, because this muddy twisting death trap has more potholes than a battlefield. After the first branches rake my windshield and after the first bump in the road knocks my jaw against the steering wheel, Billy cranks the radio up and presses his face against the window like a little kid on his first jungle safari.

"Billy, why don't you ever ask our other friends to drive you to the rope swing?"

"Matt and Alex are in Manhattan. Judd is back in California. Meredith broke up with me six months ago because I *lacked direction*, and Jeff and Dan are too busy destroying their souls so they can pay for plasma TVs."

"I work more hours than Jeff and Dan."

"Exactly, Andrew. You're the only one who could afford to buy an SUV after college. Anybody else's car would get *obliterated* trying to drive on this road."

The front axle of my car almost shatters as we dive headfirst into another pothole. Luckily, we make it to the rope swing without any major damage. I park my car in a patch of weeds at the edge of a clearing. Even though we're at the river, the road swings right and continues on for about fifty yards to a boring little beach that no one ever uses.

The sun is at face-level and blinds me as I step out of the car. When my eyes finally adjust, it looks like the tops of the tallest trees are on fire in the late afternoon light. Aside from the rope dangling over the water and a wooden bench overlooking the sloping bank, there aren't any major signs of humanity. Nothing's changed since the last time we were here, five years ago, both seniors in high school. Billy was still going out with Meredith Mulligan. Her tits looked great in a bathing suit.

Billy jumps out of the car, grabs the rope, climbs up to the highest step on the tree, pauses for a couple of seconds to look out over the water, and jumps. He plunges towards the ground for a few seconds until the rope becomes taut and just gets him over the bank without plowing into the ground. When his momentum carries him about fifteen feet above the water, he arches his back, lets go of the rope, and completes

a perfect back flip with barely any splash. As he swims back and gets out of the water, he mumbles something about not sticking his landing and heads right back to the tree for his next attempt.

I watch Billy climb up the steps for his second jump, and when I go to hand him the rope, I'm suddenly pissed off. I've been busting my ass all day, being bossed around like a fourth-grader just so I can pay my rent, while Billy's been sitting around drinking and playing computer games. He was a Finance and Sociology double major with a 3.7 GPA. What makes him think he can keep acting like this? How can he feel so free from what everyone else *knows* you need to do to?

"Hey Billy, have you started looking for a job yet?"

"No, not really. Why?"

"I don't know, I was down at the bars last Friday for happy hour when I ran into Abby Kingston. You remember her from high school—blonde, tight ass, her father manages a hedge fund in New York. Anyways, I was having a drink with her, talking about my job, figuring out how I could get her back to my apartment when all of a sudden my phone rang. Now normally I wouldn't take any calls in such a crucial situation, but for some reason I decided to answer the phone. Guess who it was?"

"Your mom?"

"Nope, it was my good buddy, the one and only Billy. And I was too drunk to realize that the speakerphone was on, letting everyone in the bar know exactly what you were saying."

"What did I say?"

"You went into detail about our last trip to Six Flags. You remember that time? You ate mushrooms and I got hammered and we both puked on a little girl coming off a roller coaster. Well, Abby knows all about it now. Here I was, trying to explain insurance deductibles to a girl I've been trying to fuck since tenth grade, and you made me look like the biggest asshole around."

"Come on, that was funny, and you know it."

"Abby thought it was *hilarious*. She thought it was so funny that she stood up, got another drink at the bar, and went home twenty minutes later with a fucking lawyer from New Haven."

"Aw, you're pissed because I stopped you from getting laid one time?"

"I'm just saying that people think you're a deadbeat, that you're not going anywhere, and I'm sick of having to pay the consequences."

"The fact that you spend so much time worrying about me only proves that you're less developed than me."

"Less developed?"

"It means that, spiritually, I've opened my mind to things most people never think about during their entire lives. I know what's important, and I know that it's not sweating through rush hour for thirty years."

Before I can even start to make sense of Billy's bullshit, he jumps off the step and

executes a perfect swan dive. It's my turn now. I grab the rope as it swings back over the ground and start to slowly climb the steps. I decide that I'll warm up by jumping from the third step, but when I get there, the ground and the water look a lot further away than I thought they would. I grip and re-grip the rope half a dozen times. When I look down at the water and at Billy swimming, I feel myself start to shake. I get ready and count from ten to one in my head, but nothing happens. From down below, Billy breaks the silence.

"I was thinking about what you were just talking about, Andrew."

"Yeah, and?"

"Have you ever read anything about Taoism?"

"What?"

"Taoism. It's an Eastern religion from China, sort of a cross between Buddhism and Confucianism."

"Billy, at this point, I really don't give a shit about Buddhism, or whatever it is you're—"

"Will you just listen to me for one second? I'm trying to explain something to you."

"Fine. Go ahead."

"Forget about Taoism, it makes things too complicated. I guess what I'm trying to say is that I don't make plans, and I don't worry about what's going to happen to me. Everyone is so preoccupied about the future, what they're going to do, what I'm going to do, that they can't have fun. I don't know about you, but I'm trying to have as much fun as possible every day this summer. *This*, right here, is what I'm going to do and I'm not looking beyond that. I figure, shit, someone like me, something's got to fall into place eventually and when that time comes, I'll be ready. But you need to be ready too, Andrew, because when my destiny comes, I'm not leaving you to be a prisoner in some office building. I'm taking you with me."

Billy's decided to stop swimming for a while. He climbs up the bank, still dripping brown river water and muck, and goes over to my car. He feels around in his backpack for a minute until he finds a couple cigarette papers and a small bag of pot. Even though a quarter mile of thick woods separates us from the closest signs of civilization, I still get a little nervous watching Billy roll his joint on the bench.

"Can you do that a little faster? Cops come down here and mess with kids all the time. They'd fuck us over even worse if we got caught."

"Now you're just being ridiculous, Andrew. If anyone decides to drive their car down here, which is very unlikely, we'd be able to hear them in plenty of time to drop our shit in the river. Plus, haven't you looked around *at all* since you got here? This is a place where people come to party because they know they'll never get caught."

He's right. Old beer bottles, pieces of cardboard, used condoms and cigarette butts are scattered all over the clearing. I don't know why I thought it was clean when we got out of the car. Some of the bottles have been here for so long that only their necks poke

out of the ground like some new species of brown and green flower. A few yards away, underneath two gigantic white birches, someone's dug a circular fire pit that's about three or four feet wide and a foot deep. The logs and broken pieces of glass look like pretty recent additions to the heaps of trash. People probably come here to get fucked up every night.

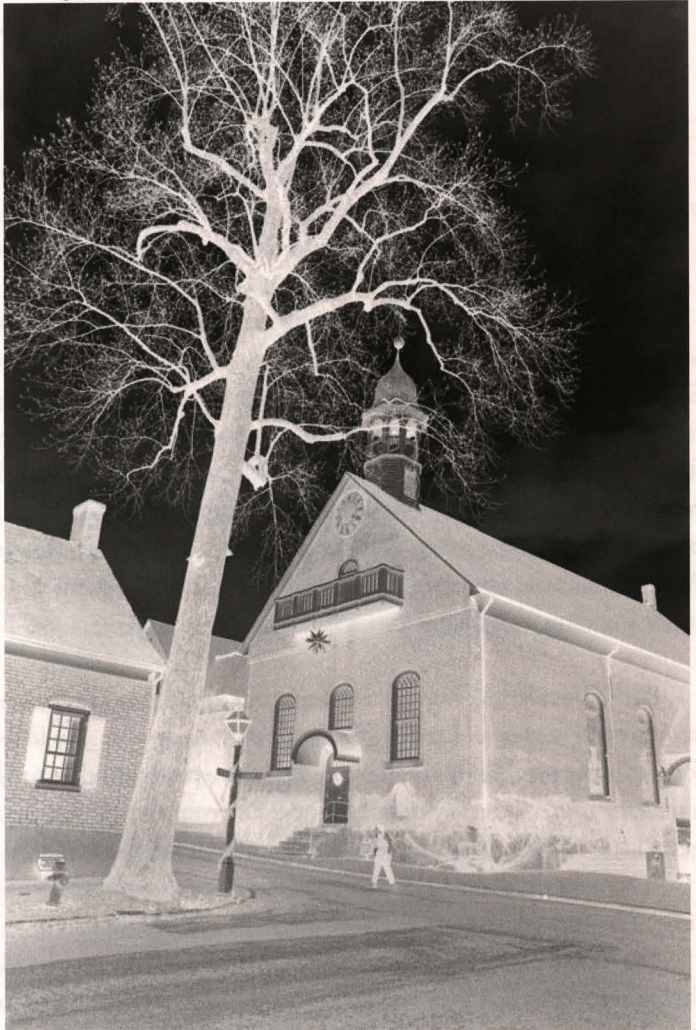
Billy is already puffing away at his joint. After his second long drag, he stops, holds his creation up in front of his face and rotates it between his fingers, inspecting it for any imperfections. Apparently he's satisfied with his work because he takes an even longer drag and nods approvingly. He blows out a thick cloud of smoke and holds the joint out towards me.

"Andrew, take a hit, man—it won't kill you."

"It's not that I don't want to, I just don't think I can. They randomly drug test us at work, and weed stays in your system longer than anything. You know that. You did go to college."

"Listen, if you only take one or two hits, you'll be clean by tomorrow. I know how this stuff works, and come on, I'm offering you free pot and we're at the rope swing. That's got to count for something."

I know I shouldn't smoke, but for some reason I don't want Billy to think I'm still paranoid about cops coming. I grab the joint



Matthew Lonnguest—

Salem Infrared

from him and press it to my lips, telling myself not to suck in too hard. Of course, I do, and as I'm bent over coughing and trying not to puke up a lung, Billy sits on the bench, feet in the air, cracking up. I can't talk, so I just lift up my middle finger and keep

spluttering.

All of a sudden he stops laughing. Instead of his normal stupid grin, he actually looks serious.

“Come on, don’t get pissed just because I flipped you off. You know I’m only kidding.”

“No, shhhh! Listen.”

Now I hear it, too. A car is coming down the road, fast, and it’s almost here. Without speaking, Billy and I sprint behind the birches and lay on the ground, dead leaves and other shit plastering our bare chests and legs. The only sounds I can hear are the blasting of my heart, the car, and the soft crackling of the joint as Billy inhales.

“Are you fucking nuts? Throw that shit in the water!”

“No way. I paid forty dollars for this bag, and I intend to make the most out of my investment.”

I’m too scared to ask Billy how the hell he managed to scrape together forty bucks to buy a bag of pot when he can’t even afford to throw me five for gas. He’s on all fours, eyes focused on the road, lips pressed around the joint, waiting for whatever’s coming down the road. I’m debating whether I should jump in the river or make a dash through the trees when the police come to arrest us.

When I see the source of the noise a few seconds later, my heart slows down a little and I turn towards Len, confused. He looks back and shrugs his shoulders as a white BMW roars by the clearing, not even slowing down when it just barely misses ramming the backside of my car. It continues down the road to the dead end beach. Following right behind the BMW is a small Acura coupe that pauses when my car comes into its line of sight. But apparently the BMW is more important, because after a few seconds the Acura speeds up until we can’t see either car any more.

“Let’s follow them!”

“No way! I’m not—”

But he’s down the dirt road, back bent, darting from tree to tree. I want to say fuck it, I’m not running, but since we’ve been acting like 12-year olds all afternoon, I follow him for a few yards. He signals for me to drop down on the ground. We crawl through ticks and poison ivy until we’re peering over the little hill that overlooks the beach. The two cars are parked by the water’s edge forty feet away.

“Did you just see that?”

“See what?”

“The guy next to the Beemer.”

From where I’m crouching, a stump blocks my view. I move to my right, behind Billy, and we see the driver of the Acura, a bald man, bent over with his arms on the roof of the BMW. Inside, a woman with long blonde hair smiles. She’s petting a little white dog, the yappy and annoying kind that you’d want to punt across a room if you got the chance.

“He just did it again!”

“Billy, what the hell are you talking about? Hurry up on that joint, man, I’m not trying to get fucked if that guy turns out to be an undercover cop.”

“You need to relax sometimes. Look! That guy just stuck his head into the car and made out with that woman.”

“Yeah, he’s trying to get some ass. Something you apparently know nothing about. You could learn a thing or two from him.”

As I’m talking to Billy, the man walks around the front of the BMW and opens the passenger door. He looks around for a second and gets in the car. The woman rolls up her window. They’re tinted, but we have a pretty good idea what’s going on inside.

“But do you see what I’m saying though?”

“No, I *really* don’t.”

“Well, first of all, they both have to be like 50 years old.”

“Old people need love too, Billy. Your parents are probably doing the same thing now that they’ve managed to get you out of the house after 22 years of torture.”

“But do you ever really see married old people making out at sketchy spots like this? My parents don’t even like to hug in public, they definitely don’t take different cars when they go somewhere to take a walk, and I’m almost positive they never drive down dirt roads where kids hang out to drink, fuck, and jump out of trees.”

“So, they’re just single and out on a date. They probably went to dinner or something and decided to stop here for a romantic walk along the beautiful brown mosquito-infested waters of the Connecticut River.”

Nothing is happening, we can’t see in the car. I look at my phone. It’s 6:47 and I’ve had enough of pretending I’m in middle school. I’m about to tell Billy that it’s time to leave, but he isn’t done yet.

“Come on. Look at her car. That’s a brand new BMW *and* she’s got a two thousand-dollar shih tzu on her lap. She’s blatantly a trophy wife, probably married to a doctor or lawyer, someone who works all the time, someone so wrapped up in their career or their secretary that they never see their wife, not even for dinner. She met this guy at her tennis or golf club. Shit, he could be her racquetball instructor or something.”

“What makes you say that?”

“For starters he drives an Acura SRV. I mean, it’s nice, but it’s not exactly a family sedan or a minivan and it’s about thirty thousand dollars less than her car.”

“I’m impressed, Billy. You know a lot more about cars and dogs than I ever imagined.”

Whenever Billy is about to make some profound statement, he pauses, scrunches his nose up and cocks his neck to the side like a retarded pigeon. Still staring at the car, he throws his extinguished joint on the ground and enlightens me:

“While you were busy being a slave to the corporate machine today, I read a famous French novel in the library. It’s about this princess who marries an old nobleman, even though she’s the most beautiful woman in the king’s court. He’s actually a decent guy, but she really wants to get with this badass duke who wins sword battles and is appar-

ently the hottest guy in France because every queen and duchess in the court tries to fuck him. All of these women are really corrupt, too. None of them even like their husbands; they just use them for money and power and so they all have lovers on the side who they have all these scandalous affairs with, and then—”

“What’s your point, Voltaire?”

“My point is that the women in this book are greedy and self-centered, but the pleasure and gossip that they get from their secret lives is what really drives them. The one thing that sets the princess apart from everyone else is her virtue. She refuses to even look at the duke even after her husband dies because of her sense of commitment. Eventually she just shuts herself up in a monastery and then withers away for a few depressing years until she dies alone and before her time.”

“So she got screwed over for not being a slut? That sucks.”

“Yeah, but it happened in pretty much every other aspect of her life. She never cheated, lied, or disobeyed her mother or her husband. Basically she never let herself have any fun, like those two people over there fucking in the BMW.”

Billy gets up, brushes himself off and starts walking back down the dirt road towards the rope swing. I follow, surprisingly interested in what he’s been talking about.

“So Billy, you’re saying that we shouldn’t ever get married because it’ll all end up as one miserable, adulterous experience. You’re also telling me that true, honest love possibly leading to intimacy and marriage is impossible.”

“Wrong, Andrew. It’s much simpler than that. We’ll just have to never grow up.”

Standing on the sixth step, I look down at the setting sun reflecting off the water. Instead of the adrenaline rush that I got an hour ago, I only feel a sort of numb, depressing ache because I know that in a year, this place will be all but forgotten. In twenty years, my only source of enjoyment will come from sneaking around with other men’s trophy wives.

But all my thoughts about the future disappear as I look down at Billy splashing around in the water, seriously trying to have a conversation with a giant blue heron standing a few yards away on the bank. I leap off the step, tucking in my legs and letting out my loudest Tarzan impression. The heron, thinking I’m nuts, zooms away toward a quieter part of the river. Billy can’t stop laughing.

I eat dinner with my parents every Wednesday night. When I walk through the door, I can smell roasted chicken simmering in the oven. My mother’s already set out the silverware and freshened up the table with a vase of red and white tulips from the garden. The three of us sit down to dinner in almost complete silence. I pull out a magazine and pretend to read it while I eat, but I’m actually listening to my parents. My father says fifty-seven words and my mother says forty-eight in twenty minutes. Both of their comments are about things that happened to them at work today.

After dinner my mother goes down to the basement to fold some laundry and to watch reruns of *Friends* and *Seinfeld*. My father, still wearing his white shirt and blue tie, does the dishes and plops on the couch in the living room. He clicks the remote until he

finds the Yankees game he's been looking for. They stay like this for a couple of hours until my father falls asleep on the couch and my mother carries the load of laundry upstairs and closes the bedroom door.

I sit in the kitchen wondering if either of them has ever driven down a dirt road with someone I don't know. I hope one of them has. —Chris Vola

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—Matthew Lonnguest