

the leap

by

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When the wind blows a certain way, a branch hanging from the red oak beside our driveway scrapes back and forth along the gutter outside my room. This can get very annoying at five in the morning, a time no eighteen-year-old was ever meant to experience. There's a simple solution. It wouldn't take Father or me more than a couple of minutes to grab an extension ladder and take care of the problem. We've discussed this several times.

Well, if it's *his* house and *his* rules, then it's *his* damn tree! There you have it.

Attitude. Hopelessly awake and sweltering in my non air conditioned self-exile to the attic above the garage (the one with the extension ladder), I have to admit that I could consider the costs of attitude a little more carefully at times.

A month ago, at one of my thankfully few dinner table encounters with Father, I floated the idea of getting a window A/C unit. With mocking enthusiasm for my initiative, he looked up from his *Time* magazine long enough to say, "Good idea. Why don't you go buy one?"

A challenge. Everything is a challenge. Cutting me down. Always with the pruning, like he doesn't know me from one of his damn rose bushes. I'll bet they don't like it, either.

I try not to think about it. In thirty-two ... no ... make that thirty-one days, I'll be out of here!

I did find a big old industrial standing fan at a rummage sale. Things are a little more tolerable with that going, but there's something a little funky with it. Every once in a while it trips the circuit breaker and it's obviously done it again. The breaker box is in the basement. I imagine going down there to reset it.

Instead, I focus on the rustle of wind through the trees out in the front yard. This seems to help. If I keep still ... very, very still ... I might get back to sleep. I slow my breath.

"RRRRRRRRING!"

Shattering my Zen head, the bells in the old black phone on my TV tray nightstand explode to life. This has to be some kind of nightmare. I turn to look at the ...

"RRRRRRRRING!"

... Little Ben travel alarm clock sitting next to the phone. Seven thirty? On a Sunday?

"RRRRRRRRING!"

Who the hell would ...

"RRRRRRRRING!"

Stop! Just stop!

"RRRRRRRRING!"

It's not going to stop. I shift barely enough to grab the receiver and bring it slowly to my ear.

"Who is this?" I growl, somewhere between puzzled and this-better-be-good.

From a faraway place, I hear, "Turn the phone around, dork."

I do that. It *is* good. I should have known it was Anneli. After all, she is why I have my own line out here in the first place. Father is still ticked off about my having it installed without his go-ahead—or maybe because in the heat of battle I'd hit him with, "Just some of that initiative you're always looking for, Pop." It's like when the Yippies pick up the tear gas canisters and toss them back at the cops. They really hate that.

Anneli's family moved in last year, from north of Philadelphia, somewhere. She doesn't hang out with the "A" girls—she's kinda kooky (or as she would say, trippy) for that bunch. She doesn't wear the right stuff. She doesn't say the right stuff. The "A" boys don't get her either, and that's some seriously poor thinking on their parts. One very pleasant April evening, she grabbed me from play rehearsal to go outside and watch her smoke a cigarette. I've been pinching myself ever since.

"Yes, Dear," I say to her. It's a joke with us. I was just imitating Father with it one day (to my horror), but she thought it was cute. She says that when I don't have anything clever to say, I should just say that. How this abuse makes me happy I'll never understand. Nobody gets away with that. Nobody but Anneli. Also, I've begun to notice that I don't have anything clever to say more often than I thought.

"Hot!" she says. "Beach."

I imagine her lying next to me on the beach ... then better yet, clinging to me while I hold on to the anchor chain in the cool, dark spaces under the swimming raft. This doesn't require a lot of imagination—these things last happened yesterday.

"You driving?" I ask.

"Fifteen minutes," she informs me. "Check your dirty clothes pile for change—we can stop at the 7-Eleven and get some munchies."

"I'll be ready," I tell her, and hang up. Sometimes we don't talk so much—there are just so many hours in the day.

I look across the bed. I really should take a shower before we go. It's pretty messed up and I'm guessing I look about the same. Unfortunately, the shower I use is on the other side of the house and I really don't want to run into my parents, who will be doing their Sunday *Tribune* and coffee bit by now. They'll never be able to resist getting to the bottom of something so unusual as a sighting of me before noon on a Sunday.

The phone rings again. She's already changing the plan. I'm not surprised.

"Yes, dear," I answer.

"Goodrich! I didn't know you cared."

It's not Anneli. It's Pennington. He has a first name, but he's from Lake Forest, where last names are obviously more the point. He calls me Goodrich because I look a little like the UCLA/Phoenix Suns guard, Gail Goodrich, and I shoot left-handed. We met at a camp in Iowa City, where I learned everything about how I'm never going to be a basketball star. Pennington is way out of my league, but he's taken some sort of liking to me. Maybe he just needs a pet. He seems to think I need more adventure in my life. There's always a bit a thunder rolling around the back of his voice.

"Little early, Pen, dontcha think?"

"Hey ... ever been to the quarry?" he asks.

Now, I've never been to any quarry—mostly we just have sand and gravel pits here in the land even the glaciers gave up on—but I've heard tales. I picture my broken self sliding off some subsurface ledge, vanishing into the abyss. He lets me sink for a moment.

"What quarry?" I ask, finally.

"It's in Racine. Outta sight! You gotta see it, man."

"It sounds dangerous," I tell him. Being the cautious one is not much of a role, but it's mine.

"It can be," he answers, "but I've never steered you wrong, have I, Goodrich?"

He's all sincere now. You know it's coming from a spigot he just turned on somewhere, but you just can't help believing him. He can be very convincing. He's got big plans. He wants to be a politician.

"Tell me we're not going to break in," I plead, looking for a way out.

"Nah ... it's some kind of park," he says. "Not really supervised, but the city leaves it open. There's like a million freaks running around there. And babes. So let's go, huh?"

I've made some pretty big plans of my own—but I tell him okay. What can I say? He's like the Pied Piper or something. While mulling over the shower thing again I hear the crunch of Anneli's tires on the gravel drive. She's not going to like me changing the plans. I hustle down to meet her.

It's like an oven outside already as Anneli swings out of that little, cherry red Karmann Ghia her dad bought her for graduation. I wait for her to walk over and give me a kiss or two or three, safely around the corner of the garage from prying eyes. Her still-wet, brunette hair hints of tangerine. Her lips taste of coffee and watermelon candy. In the small of her back, tiny beads of sweat are beginning to form, and I bring one to the tip of my tongue as she pulls back a couple of inches. Her eyes are chocolate cupcakes alight with candles.

"You almost ready?" she asks.

"Al...most," I tell her. She lets out a little laugh, because I don't look it. "There's a minor change in the plan," I confess, searching carefully for any signs of displeasure. The giggle is still in her eyes, but

there's a slight disconnect while she considers this. She usually comes up with the plans while I weigh in on the options. So I tell her about Pennington and the quarry and all that.

"Cool," she says. "Let's go!"

It's funny. You can go crazy anticipating her, and then there's no anticipating her.

We climb the stairs to my room, where I get ready, mindful that Mother and Father are likely monitoring from the kitchen alcove window. I'm sure Father thinks I should be doing something more productive with my time, like working a second job, but Anneli is the one thing he doesn't bug me about. That's because Mother thinks we're the cutest thing since Superman underwear and she steps in every time. He doesn't like that. Or maybe Anneli is a force he's not prepared to reckon with. That, I would understand.

A few minutes later, Pennington's entourage pulls in like one of those cast-of-thousands car rally movies, so I rush Anneli down the stairs, mostly because there's no doubt Father will dispatch Mother to find out what all this is about. When Anneli doubles back for something, Pen spots her and pulls me aside.

"You planning on bringing the old lady?" he asks. "The guys didn't bring theirs."

"I didn't know," I tell him. As Anneli glides back down the stairs, Pennington gives her the once-over. She's got on her white bikini top, and I assume the bottom is underneath her pair of very short, low-rider blue jean cut-offs, decorated with a macramé belt cinched by a double wooden ring. It's a very clever bikini. For 1969, it's actually fairly modest in parents' house mode. But there are laces on each side of the top and bottom, lending an illusion that the suit's integrity is as slippery as a tied shoelace (never double knotted), but additionally offering the option of pinching the sides vertically as circumstances allow, making for some very fundamental changes in the way the little thing flows.

Pennington turns back to me, his right eyebrow arched a little. For once, I've hit a shot over *him*. With a sideways nod, he orders to his disciples, "Let's hit it!"

"Richard?" I hear, as we start for the cars. Sure enough, Mother is standing right behind us.

"Where are you going?"

"Swimming," I tell her, in a you-don't-want-to-know-any-more sort of way. She takes a hard look at me, a questioning one at Anneli, and then a frightened one at the wild cars and wilder boys. She knows she's supposed to find out more, but not whether she really wants to. Shaking her head in resignation, she shuffles on back to make her report. I feel a little ungrateful.

A half-hour later, the dirty dozen of us have reached the far west side of Racine, cruising three abreast up the two northbound lanes of Green Bay Road in a Datsun 510 and two modified Bugs. Sharing our breakfast of orange Hostess cupcakes and a quart of Kraml chocolate milk, Anneli and I are crammed into the back seat of one of the Bugs—the one half onto the left shoulder. She's anxious just to get there and I'm just anxious about everything, so over the 8-track player's destruction of the Beach Boys' "Good Vibrations" she hollers, "Any progress on the dad front?"

Sore subject. She wouldn't usually bring it up out of the blue like this—I get that she's just looking to distract me from the quarry and the driving and my frantic search of the roadside for cops. The "dad front" is about college. Father, his brother and several of the Anderson clan before them are proud alumni of Wheaton College, and so it's darn well good enough for me, he says. Father uses worse language all the time, but never while referencing dear Alma Mater Evangelica, as if an ink stain might ruin only the whitest of shirts.

I've visited there. It's about as relevant as *Bedtime for Bonzo*. In the real world, hundreds of thousands of people are dying in a horrifyingly stupid war! Tens of thousands of those are my own American brothers! Today, tomorrow, and every day, a shipment of napalm rolls out of the Dow Chemical plant in Torrance, California, for a ten mile ride to the port of Long Beach, bound for an eight thousand miles away rendezvous in hell. People are resisting. Kids are getting their heads busted for saying enough is enough.

So much going down, and what are the immediate concerns of Wheaton College? They want me sign a pledge not to dance or play cards! Me! A *Crusader*? Not in a million years!

I'm going to U of I. I've used some of that initiative again, Pop. I've even got the financial aid lined up, thanks much to my aunt, who is now divorced from my hypocrite of a cheating uncle and is tickled pink to be my fake parent. She's even co-signed my student loans! Anything to tick off the Anderson brothers and keep her favorite nephew away from the witch hunt she got shoved into some twenty years ago. I'll work for the rest. I had all the paperwork sent to her apartment—the University doesn't even know my parents exist. Oh sure, Father can put the kibosh on the whole deal by introducing himself to the admissions folks, but I'm telling him it's this or nothing. Either way, he's out of it, and there's only one way I'm still in school. He gets an ultimatum this time. Soon, I'm telling him all this soon. I really am.

Any day, now.

"You have to tell them soon, Richard," Anneli whispers softly into my ear, as if my thoughts are lit up on my forehead like a Times Square news crawler. She *can* read my thoughts at times—I know this. She knows I know this, and I know she knows I know this. She's just looking to soothe me with the sweet sound of her voice, which works.

We pull into a half-grassy lot by the park that isn't a park. It's still early, but the heat has a couple of hundred people arriving with us. As we start walking across the flat lot I begin to sense an ominous void opening between us and some people scattered on rock formations on the other side. What I can't see are the bottoms of those formations—they just keep extending down as we approach. My stomach begins to tell me to hold up, but the excitement in Anneli's eyes won't be denied.

And then the whole scene is suddenly spread out before us in all its vertiginous glory. Our entire side is an unobstructed, sheer drop to the water. I could tell you much drop if I could get close enough to the edge again to size it up, which I can't. I turn to Pennington in shock.

He's kicking off his sandals. Twenty feet to his left, some freak walks up to the edge, turns around to face his friends, extends his arms out to his sides, and then calmly disappears.

"Oh ... my ... god!" I think. Probably out loud.

"Thirty-eight foot drop right here," Pen tells me. "Less than a ten-meter platform. Very doable."

Okay, it turns out there *is* a need in my life to know some physics. I imagine myself tumbling into a belly-flop at forty-five feet per second, give or take.

"Um ... no, thank you," I tell Pen.

"Well," he says, "you can go to the other side and work yourself up to it, but this side is as sheer under the water as above ... a lot safer, furreal."

"Furreal," I answer in a mocking tone.

"We'll see you when we get back up, then," he says, without any hint of disapproval. He's working me patiently.

"How do you get back up?" I ask him. It's a decent swim to the other side or to one of the ends. It would take some time.

Standing at the edge, ten feet away, he turns back with his devil smile.

"There's a rope to help you climb," he tells me, before taking a nonchalant little hop, and then he's gone. As much as I care about Pen, I can't possibly look down to see how it turns out.

I turn to Anneli for support. She's taking off her cut-offs, something I would never have imagined regretting seeing. I look into those determined eyes. She's gonna do it! Crap! How did I get myself into this mess? She stops to give me a quick kiss, taking hold of my hand gently.

"Come watch?" she asks.

I move with her slowly to the edge, dreading the thought of her letting go of me. I watch her take it all in. Closing her eyes, her nostrils flare slightly as she takes in the aroma of it.

"You're not scared?" I ask her.

"I've done this before," she says, her eyes still closed. "If you're going to jump, don't look down, point your toes and hold your arms straight together above your head before you hit."

"I don't really know, Anneli, if I can do . . .," and there she goes, in a swan dive, no less! I see her knife into the water, popping up more quickly than I would have expected before I have to back off the edge a couple of shaky feet.

"... this." Crap!

Two kids looking not more than about twelve years old come flying by on a dead run and disappear over the edge.

Double crap!

Utterly shamed, I move a little closer again. I'm not quite close enough to the edge to see the swimmers on our side, so there's no perspective as I look more across than down. The breeze has come up a bit, driving ripples that look for all the world like swells on an ocean thousands of feet below. Strangely, this sense of flight seems to be helping with my vertigo. I can't see the swimmers on our side, but I can hear their voices.

"Hey, show-off, do you need any help with that?" I hear Pen shout.

"You just stay over there," Anneli hollers back with a playful laugh.

I'm catching on—some sort of swimsuit failure. If nothing else, chivalry is at last able to move me back to the edge. Down there—not so far as I'd imagined—I see Anneli, a minimum of ten guys, and two what must be very impressionable twelve-year-olds, though maybe not any more impressionable than Pennington at the moment. The water looks very clear.

To my relief, the problem appears to be minor. She's smiling up at me—how am I going to let her down? I can't let her down. Or maybe I just can't let her down there with Pennington, I don't know, because I'm actually starting to think about jumping.

"Look across!" she yells up, and while my brain races to rationalize things like "There are a lot of people down there to rescue me" and "Why would I be the one in a thousand to screw this up?" my legs

are busying a mind of their own. Forces are gathering in my calves and the balls of my feet. A third sense awaits the outcome of those other two calmly, picking a spot in the water before taking a long, last look at life across the way. Not sure why at one moment over another, somebody here finds a way to push off.

About halfway down I realize with great relief that I'm still vertical and remember to stretch my arms upward. The entry is a sharp little jolt, very suddenly over for all that agonizing up top. I end up more or less in a sitting position, about ten feet down, and I can see Anneli's legs treading water about twenty feet to my left. I take a second to look around and then surface with a whoop in her direction. I don't remember ever "whooping" before. My feet sting a little. The water feels great!

"Goodrich! Way to go, man!" Pennington shouts across.

I reach Anneli.

"Way to go, man," she parrots softly into my ear.

We climb back up. Nothing to it. I can't get enough now. A couple more rounds and then we head off on our own to the other side, where it looks like there are some shady spots for more leisurely activities. By two o'clock, Pen, having inventoried every girl in the place, gets bored enough to round us up, but I take just one more jump before we go ... I don't know, maybe just to believe it was really me.

More quietly, and far more legally, we make a peaceful retreat for the Illinois border. A lake breeze has come up, cooling the interior of the little Bug in a hurry, but Anneli is pressed up against my side, her skin still radiating the sun. She smells of coconut and chili dogs at the same time, after the gang's Brat Stop invasion. I watch her stare out her window, deep in thought. I wish I knew the things she seems to know. I wonder what she gets from me at all. She's going off to Ann Arbor this fall, and there's little talk of a future for the two of us. It's not so far from Champaign that I can't get there a couple of times, but she'll find someone. How couldn't she? Why shouldn't she?

Staring out my window at a blur of horses and pasture near Wadsworth, I begin thinking about Champaign and Father and Mother. Anneli takes my hand, ever on cue. I turn to her.

"You know the planting of evergreens at the corner of our porch?" she asks. "In the bed of pea gravel?"

"Yep," I reply. Interested. Attentive.

"If things get bad with your parents tonight and it's late, you toss some of that gravel up against my window, alright?" she tells me.

Leaving her hand in mine, she turns her thoughts back to her side of the highway.

I nod, turning to mine in time to catch the last of the horses.