

NOW AND THEN

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WHEN THE ONLY thing standing between you and freedom is a wall of fallen rock, you dig. So that's exactly what Martin did. Dressed in jeans and a long-sleeved cotton shirt, spelunking helmet strapped to his head and gloves on, he scraped and clawed at the rubble. Sweat dripped down his cheeks.

He was flanked by his friends Cynthia and Ethan, who were likewise decked out in caving attire and working equally hard to clear the tunnel.

Behind them—Paul, their guide, and Gina, Martin's sister. They were not any help, though. Paul had had his legs crushed when a stalactite fell during the earthquake, and Gina, who was not only Martin's sister but also Paul's girlfriend, was doing her best to tend to him.

"Everything's going to be fine," Cynthia said.

Martin wasn't so sure. After all, they were more than fifty feet from the cave's entrance. Only God knew how

many pounds of debris they would have to clear to escape.

And to think: Just last week, he had considered calling off the trip.

Ethan had almost choked on his beer when Martin told him. “You’re yankin’ my chain, right?”

They were sitting in a bar on Myrtle Avenue called Gunshot Pop’s. They’d taken a table near the bathrooms. The floors were sticky from spilled beer. Nineties rock, almost too loud to talk over, blasted out of speakers that seemed to be everywhere. The place was a dive. But at less than a block from the First South bank where they both worked, it was also convenient.

Martin loosened his tie just enough to open the top button on his shirt. “I’m serious. I’m starting to have some reservations.”

“Reservations? What do you mean *reservations*? You mean you’re starting to wuss out, is that what you mean?”

“I wouldn’t call it that.”

Ethan rolled his eyes. “What would you call it?”

Martin shrugged. When Ethan realized he wasn’t going to answer, he added, “Well, fuck me, when did this start to happen?”

“Last night. Before I went to sleep. I just kept thinking about—”

There was a squeal of metal on metal. It was the sound of the Men’s door opening. Martin stopped talking. He watched the hall that led to the restrooms until he saw a

man in a plaid shirt appear. He noticed Martin looking at him and nodded. Martin nodded back. Then, once he was gone, Martin continued. “I just kept thinking about all the things that could go wrong.”

“Nothing’s going to go wrong, not with Paul down there.”

Ethan was probably right. Paul had been exploring caves all over the Southeast since he was a boy. He knew his way in and around their twisting caverns. He knew their histories and how they had formed. He knew the tunnels that were safe and where to step. Paul even had the gear and a van big enough for the five of them.

“Look,” Ethan continued, “Cynthia hasn’t been back to Atlanta in—what?—five years?”

“Not since graduation.”

“Exactly. And, finally, after all this time, she’s coming back to see you.”

“She’s coming back to see her family,” Martin corrected.

Andy rocked his head from side to side as if to acknowledge the difference, but also to point out that it was inconsequential. “Okay, but she’s going to see you, too. And you said she’s looking forward to this.”

Martin took a sip of his beer and glanced across the bar. He remembered, at graduation, Cynthia had said they would be “friends forever.”

“Friends forever,” Martin had repeated, as she hugged him goodbye. But, secretly, he didn’t want her to leave.

Pursuing a career in acting can be risky business, he had told her on several occasions; and he repeated the warning one last time before she'd gotten in her beat-up VW (Martin had his doubts that it could make it across the country) and driven to LA.

"Don't worry about me," Cynthia had said. "You'll be seeing me on the big screen in less than two years. Promise."

Martin had smiled weakly and said he hoped she was right.

"You can always come with me, you know."

"I wish I could. But, no, I think I'd be better off staying here. I've got a good job waiting for me at the bank on Monday."

"You sure that's what you want to do?"

"I'm not as brave as you are," Martin said. Acting was fun while he was in college. But it couldn't last forever (even if he secretly wanted it to). He needed the security of a steady paycheck.

Then she kissed him on the cheek. "Promise you'll call."

"Every day."

"You better."

But every day quickly became once a week, then once a month. When they did speak, she would tell him about the auditions and the bit parts she had gotten here or there. Her first major break had come when she was cast for a Wheaties commercial. And, a year and a half after

that, her career was officially launched when she landed a supporting role in the summer blockbuster *Tomorrow Night*.

Martin had said he was thrilled, but jealous would have been more accurate.

Ethan snapped his fingers in front of Martin's face. "Hey! Martin! What are you fuckin' thinking about?"

Martin shook his head. "Nothing. I was just . . . I don't know."

"Dammit, don't fuck with me. Are you backing out or not?"

"No. No, I'm not."

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Cynthia worked a large rock loose and pushed it out of the way. As she did, small stones and gravel poured in, filling the space the rock had occupied. "This isn't going to work."

"You got a better idea?" Martin said. "Just keep digging!"

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Martin met Cynthia at the airport with a hug, and she followed it with a string of clichés. It was so good to see him. He was a sight for sore eyes. Had he gotten more handsome, or was it just her imagination? On and on she

went until Martin interrupted her.

“That’s enough,” he said. “It’s good to see you, too.” Then he took her carry-on and led her toward the main terminal.

She was prettier than he remembered. She was even prettier than she was on film. She had long, blond hair and eyes so big and blue that they looked like they had been painted on. She was perfectly built, perfectly proportioned, with perfect teeth and a perfect smile. Japanimation characters would have been envious, Martin thought; God knew the people in the airport were.

They pointed and whispered on the escalator and the moving sidewalk.

“Isn’t that . . .”

“Wasn’t she . . .”

Then, at the baggage carousel, a teenage boy asked for her autograph.

She would be delighted, she said, and Martin felt small. Now more than ever, he wished he had gone with her to LA. Who could’ve guessed she’d actually make it?

NOW

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PAUL'S VAN WAS old, and it looked it. The shocks had worn to almost nothing. Cynthia said she was just glad there was enough room to spread out.

“Hey, and don't go forgettin' the radio,” Paul added, just before they left. “The radio still works, so we got tunes. And no matter what anybody tells you, I'd take tunes over shocks any old day.”

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The drive was slow going along the winding mountain roads. Twice they had to stop because Gina said the shaking and the bumping were making her sick.

“Hell, not again,” Ethan said the second time.

But Paul pulled to the side of the road, and Gina threw open the passenger door. She made puking noises, but nothing came. Paul reached over and grabbed her hair to keep it out of her face.

Ethan hopped out of the sliding door in the back.

“Where are you going?” Paul asked.

Ethan looked from Gina to the expansive wilderness on the other side of the guardrail. “Going to get some fresh air.”

Cynthia, who was sitting next to Martin, closed the script she was reading and asked him if Gina would be okay.

“She’ll be fine. She gets motion sickness real easily.”

But Cynthia still looked worried.

“She’s a nurse. Almost, anyway,” Martin added, as if that would set Cynthia’s mind at ease. “If it was anything serious, she’d let us know.”

Cynthia nodded her understanding, and then Ethan looked over his shoulder, told Gina to hurry up and vomit. “I mean, if you’re going to puke, go ahead and do it already.”

Gina lifted her head from her hands. “Shut up,” she said, with nausea swimming behind her eyes. “I don’t want to if I don’t have to.”

“Then let’s keep driving until you do.”

“Hey,” Paul said, “you’ve got no business talking to her like that.”

“She’s wasting everybody’s time. If she has to puke,

fine. Otherwise, I'm sayin' we should just keep on trucking."

Paul climbed out of the van and went around to where Ethan was. "Sit your butt back in that seat and close your mouth."

"You threatening me, you hippie fuck?"

Martin could tell where this was going, and it was nowhere good. But before he could intervene, Ethan had also called Paul a longhaired crybaby.

With one solid shove, Paul knocked Ethan off his feet. "Who's the crybaby now?" he said, as Ethan grunted and rolled to his knees. Blood dripped from the corner of his mouth. His eyelid twitched in a way Martin knew meant trouble.

As soon as Ethan was back on his feet, Martin grabbed him around the arms. "Let it go, all right? Gina's my sister; and if she says that she's feeling sick, then I'm sure that she is."

Ethan didn't say anything. But, after a moment, Martin could feel him relax. He let go. "You all right, sis?"

Gina nodded, and then, finally, vomited onto the pavement.

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Nobody understood why Martin had taken such a shine to Ethan. He was obnoxious, Gina had once said. Others called him a prick.

At first, employees at the bank thought it was because Ethan was the new guy. He was from out of town, they'd said, and he didn't have any friends.

"He's probably lonely."

"He's probably unhappy."

"Martin's such a good guy for going out of his way like that."

"I know I couldn't do it."

But the truth went much deeper than that. Martin admired Ethan for his honesty and loyalty. And even more than that, he admired the way he stood up for himself. "Nobody steps on me," he'd told Martin once. "You let 'em step on you one time, and they'll step on you for the rest of your life. I should know, Ma stepped on me for years."

"What'd you do?"

"I took care of it. I told her I wasn't going to take her crap, and I didn't."

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Paul parked the van at the Dark Moon campground halfway up Misery Rock. The cave's entrance, he said, was still a mile away.

"Can't you get any closer?" Gina asked.

"Afraid not," Paul said, as everyone climbed out of the van. Then, explaining that there were no trails leading to the cave, he guided them into the woods.

“How’d you find it, then?” Cynthia said. She had a flashlight tucked into her front pocket and, like everyone else, was dressed in an old pair of jeans and a long-sleeved shirt. She had the spelunking helmet Paul had given her tucked under one arm.

“You’d be surprised what you can find in these woods if you spend a little time wandering around.”

After that, they walked in silence until Paul stopped at a creek and slipped off his backpack. “At first I thought it was just a through cave,” he said, explaining that a through cave follows a stream’s course from entrance to exit. “Only it turned out to be much more.”

Martin looked around for the cave’s entrance. He expected it to be marked by a large opening in the rock. When he didn’t see one, he was certain they had some more walking to do.

Then Paul reminded them not to do anything he didn’t tell them to. “Because, remember, you end up on a fake floor and no tellin’ how far you’ll drop.”

“Yakety, yakety, yak,” Ethan said. “We got it. We’re not stupid. Let’s go.”

Paul took a deep breath, trying not to get angry. “Martin, you want to go first?”

“I guess so,” Martin said and strapped on his helmet. “Where are we going?”

Paul pointed to a small hole along the bank of the creek. “In there.”

“Funny.”

“I’m serious.”

Martin shook his head. “I can’t fit in there.”

“Sure you can,” Paul said. “It’s a little tight at first, but it opens up.”

“Yeah, but, well, I—”

“I’ll do it,” Ethan interrupted.

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Everyone put on the kneepads and gloves Paul had provided. Then Paul checked Ethan’s helmet to make sure it was tight. “All right, you’re good. Turn on your headlamp and get going. We’ll follow you in.”

Ethan went headfirst into the tunnel. It twisted around and then down. The twilight zone disappeared quickly. If it weren’t for the headlamp, Ethan would have been in complete blackness.

He dragged his body along the slimy earth until the tunnel spilled into a large cavern. There, he grabbed hold of two rocks above the tunnel so that he could pull his body the rest of the way out without falling and scaled down the five feet of rock between him and the floor.

Once safely on the ground, he turned on his flashlight and spun slowly around. The two lights dueled for Ethan’s attention as they drifted over the curved rock walls to the massive stalactites hanging from the ceiling.

He felt like he’d crawled into the rib cage of a

decaying corpse—all yellow-and-white bone, cracked
with rotted black flesh still clinging to it.

NOW

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THE QUAKE ONLY lasted a few seconds. But in those seconds, everything changed. They were knocked from their feet as rocks and rubble crashed down around them. Stalactites fell. The tunnel behind them collapsed. Cynthia rolled into a ball, and Gina screamed. Paul slid backward toward a wall, wide-eyed and trying to get his mind around what was happening.

Then another stalactite—just over Paul’s head—cracked and gave. It missed his nose by inches, crushing his legs instead. He screamed and continued screaming even after the quake had stopped.

Gina cautiously made her way over to him, moving fast but not running, afraid that the ground might shift again. She put her hands on his cheeks. “Paul!”

“Get this fucking thing off me!”

Martin was back on his feet—so was everyone else—and staring in disbelief at Paul’s situation. At its thickest point, the stalactite was wider than four men. Only Paul’s right foot poked out from underneath it. His left leg was entirely flattened.

Martin ushered Ethan over to help, and they tried uselessly to lift the stalactite at its tip. “It won’t move,” Martin said. Paul swore through grinding teeth. “Cynthia. Gina. Help us lift this thing.”

But even with the four of them, the tip of the stalactite only came a couple of inches off the ground. When it dropped, Paul screamed again.

“This isn’t working.”

“We’ve got to do something,” Gina said. Her bottom lip trembled like she might cry.

“Is there another way out?” Cynthia asked.

Paul spastically shook his head, did his best to say, “Not . . . that I . . . I’ve seen.”

“Well, this sucks,” Ethan said.

Then Gina did start to cry. She placed her hands on Paul’s cheeks, told him she loved him.

Cynthia glanced over at the rubble-filled tunnel. “I guess we better start digging.”

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Like most quakes of its size, the one that nearly killed

Paul was an isolated incident. It would also likely be the last major quake to hit the East Coast for another hundred years. But these facts provided little comfort to the five cavers, especially after the light on Ethan's helmet went dead.

"Piece of shit!" Ethan said.

He threw his helmet on the ground while Gina worked the backpack off Paul's shoulders, found the first aid kit inside. Sniffing to restrain further tears, she wrapped the Ace bandages he'd brought around the visible part of his thigh. "That should slow the bleeding."

"If we're gonna get out of here, we're going to have to do it another way," Ethan said. "Digging through this rubble's getting us nowhere. Hell, we'd do better diggin' through a horse's pile looking for gold."

Then, through raspy, heavy breathing, Paul told everyone but Cynthia to turn off their headlamps.

"Why?" Martin asked.

"The batteries . . . won't last . . . if used too much. . . . Use one . . . at a time," he said.

Martin and Gina did as they were told while Cynthia used her headlamp to scan the space they were in. The light crossed over the large opening where Paul had said they'd be headed next, but Cynthia didn't seem interested in that.

"What are you doing?" Ethan asked.

Her light rippled over a small hole along the west wall. "Where's that go?"

“Don’t . . . know,” Paul said.

Cynthia turned her attention to Ethan and Martin. “We have to try to find another way out. It’s like you said, Ethan. Digging’s not going to cut it. We’re probably a quarter of a mile from the entrance, and, for all we know, the entire passage is sealed off.”

“But Paul said there isn’t one,” Gina said.

“He said he doesn’t know. But he’s never been there.” Cynthia pointed toward the opening she’d seen. “I think we have to try.”



Martin dug through Paul’s backpack to inventory the supplies he’d brought. He found a compass, tongue depressors with reflective tape stuck to both ends to use as trail markers, five peanut butter and jelly sandwiches (now smashed), and several small bottles of water. He swung the backpack over his shoulders. With Paul’s permission, he also gave Ethan Paul’s helmet. They would need the headlamp more than he would.

Gina had insisted on staying with Paul so that she could look after him. Just before the others left, she met with them by the west wall and quietly said, “He doesn’t have more than a couple of days.”

Martin hugged her and said everything would be okay. He didn’t bother to point out that if they didn’t find a way out soon, none of them had much longer than that.

Then he, Ethan, and Cynthia disappeared into the narrow opening Cynthia had found.

THEN

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I LOVE YOU.

Martin had said that to Cynthia a thousand times in his dreams. And every day, before she'd left for California, he had wanted to say it for real. But the timing never seemed right—and even when it was, he still told himself it wasn't.

The closest he ever came to telling her was the night he said, "There's something we need to talk about."

They were lying on the roof of his mother's house, looking at the stars. She had been curled up silently with her head on his shoulder for half an hour. "What is it?"

"Well, it's just, I . . ."

She pushed herself up with one hand so that she could look at Martin directly. "Would you relax," she said, with

a smile. “You can tell me anything. You’re my best friend.”

“I know, but . . .” He trailed off again.

“Come on, Martin. You’ve listened to me talk about Jeff all night. It’s your turn.”

Jeff was Cynthia’s ex. They had dated for six months. And when things ended, they didn’t end well.

Jeff had told her that he had been seeing another woman for a month. She was low maintenance and wasn’t looking for a commitment. (Cynthia translated that into easy and expendable, which hurt her even more.)

“Well,” Martin said, “what if I knew someone who really likes you?”

“That’s sweet, but I don’t think I’m going to be dating anybody for a while. Not after Jeff.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. There’s no point, you know? We’re graduating in spring, and then I’ll be off to California. Why bother?” Then she laid back down, put her head back on Martin’s shoulder, and, after another minute of quietly watching the stars, said, “But, just for fun, who is it, anyway?”

Martin stammered until Gina shouted from the window: “Dinner’s ready!”

NOW

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MARTIN PUSHED THE backpack in front of him as they slid between two pieces of flat rock. The air was colder here, the rocks slightly damp.

After crawling a slow forty feet, they found themselves at the edge of a deep chasm. There was no way around it and nothing on the other side but a wall of earth. They would have to go down.

“What’s this shit?” Ethan said.

Martin pulled his flashlight from his pocket and shined it over the side. He hoped that, with Cynthia’s headlamp, they would be able to see the bottom.

They couldn’t.

“Maybe we should go back,” Martin said.

“And wait to die?” Ethan said.

“We might have missed something.” They had been

weaving through tunnels for an hour and a half. Maybe there had been a passage they hadn't seen.

But Cynthia shook her head. "We didn't." They had traveled from west to south, and she had been watching for forks, however small, the whole time. "We have to go down."

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Paul was taking short, deep breaths. The lightheadedness that had set in about twenty minutes back was getting worse.

"Stop breathing like that or you'll pass out."

He hoped Gina was right. If he lost consciousness, he wouldn't feel the pain anymore.

But she grabbed a water bottle—the only one they had been left with—and pressed it to his lips. She told him to take several deep gulps and then said, "Slow your breathing down."

He did, and she sighed with relief. She was afraid if he passed out or fell asleep he wouldn't wake up.

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Cynthia harnessed her flashlight in her pocket and turned on her headlamp. She led the men into the chasm, carefully searching out places to hold on to and other places to put her feet.

“How are you doing?” Martin asked, still lying on the flat rock. “Is it safe?”

Cynthia nodded but refused to take her eyes off the wall in front of her.

“Bet you wish you had a stunt double here, now, don’t ya?” Ethan said.

“I’m doing all right.”

“You’ll want one later.”

Martin hit him in the arm. “Can we focus on getting out of here?”

Ethan’s lips curled distastefully. “Sure.” Then, after turning on his headlamp, as well, he pulled himself into the chasm.

THEN

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MARTIN AND CYNTHIA walked back up the tilted roof and crawled in through the attic window. Then, they stepped around Christmas decorations and boxes of miscellaneous junk as they made their way down to the kitchen.

Most of the house was decorated with artifacts from the fifties that Martin's mom, Janice, had found at yard sales and antique shops. Everything was bright. Everything clashed. That was how she liked it.

Times were simpler then, she said, and she had no interest in bringing the complexities of the present into her own little universe.

Dinner was baked chicken and limp green beans. Janice poured the drinks and passed the food and asked how everyone's day was.

Gina shrugged. She was a freshman in high school and never had much to say at the dinner table. She thought her mom was a psycho, her brother a geek. What could either of them know about teenage boys?

“And, Martin?”

“Got an ‘A’ on my math test,” he said, through a mouth full of food.

“That’s wonderful.” Then Janice smiled, and Martin—like he sometimes did—wondered what his father would’ve said if he’d still been around.

But Martin’s dad hadn’t been around for years. He had run out on the family after he found out Janice was pregnant with Gina. One was too many for him, and two was more than he could handle. Except for some pictures in a photo album and one Martin kept on his dresser, that was all that he knew about his father.

“And acting class? How was that?”

Martin and Cynthia glanced at each other. “All right, I suppose,” he said, and Cynthia agreed. That, however, was hardly accurate.

“Mr. Campbell, I don’t even know why you come to this class,” Professor Baker had said in his fake British accent. “Your monologue was terrible. You’re a disgrace to the art. I sincerely hope, for your sake and the world’s, that, once this class is over, you leave the acting to those of us with talent.”

Martin shrunk in his seat while students giggled around him.

The teacher's gaze shot upward so that he was looking at the whole class. "What are you laughing at? Do you think any of you are more talented than Mr. Campbell? I have been in theatre houses all across this country. I have seen talent. Trust me when I say there is none in this room.

"Except for Ms. Cudrow. Ms. Cudrow, would you stand up, please?"

Cynthia did as the teacher asked, her hands fidgeting on top of each other from embarrassment.

"That is talent," he said. "She has poise, beauty, skill. She is what every actor should strive to be.

"Now, everyone, go home. And, for Heaven's sake, try not to give me a headache on Monday."

NOW

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CYNTHIA WAS THE slowest to descend into the chasm. She was also the most careful. Ethan quickly searched out the crevices where he could put his hands and feet, moving in a way that, to Martin, seemed alarmingly careless. “Catch me if you can,” he dared Cynthia, once he’d overtaken her.

Then his fingers wrapped around a loose rock, and it fell. He scrambled for something to hold on to as the rock tumbled into the blackness below them. There was a soft thud when it hit bottom, and Martin told him to be more careful.

Ethan hollered like a cowboy. “What a rush!”

“You’re going to get yourself killed.”

“Not today.”

Then there was another sound—a faint, high-pitched

rustle.

“What’s that?” Cynthia asked.

“Don’t know,” Martin said. “Sounds like—”

“Bats,” Ethan said.

And it was. They came roaring up the chasm like a squeaking tornado. Everyone screamed. Martin closed his eyes and pulled himself as close to the wall of rock as he could. As the bats screeched past him, he felt their wings slap violently against his back. Then he heard Cynthia scream and, even though the bats were not yet gone, opened his eyes.

Cynthia had lost her hold. She was sliding quickly down into the darkness. Jagged rocks punched at her face and ripped her jacket. She flexed her hands, desperately trying to grab anything that would stop her fall. The one thing she could get ahold of was Ethan. She clawed at his shirt, his pants—knocked the flashlight out of his pocket—until, her fingers locked around his ankle, pulling his foot off its perch, but also stopping her descent.

“What the hell!” Ethan shouted, as the last of the bats made its way past them, and his whole body jerked, shifted, twisted, trying to rebalance for the new weight so that he didn’t fall, as well.

Cynthia didn’t respond. She held tight, took several deep breaths.

“If you don’t get off me, I’m going to fall, too!”

Then, after another moment, she said, “All right, just

give me a second.” She reached out to the wall of rock in front of her, one hand searching for purchase.

“I’m serious,” Ethan said. “Hurry this up!”

Then, just as she thought she found what she was looking for, just as her fingers were working her way into the crevice and she was shifting her weight away from Ethan’s leg, his other foot slipped. Ethan managed to hold on, get his foot back onto the rock where it had been. But the sudden movement was enough for Cynthia, who was searching for a place to put her own foot, to lose her grip on him and once again start sliding into the darkness.

This time, though, there was nothing to stop her.