

Desire

by Craig Lancaster

We crept to the edge of the cliff and stared down at Lake Travis. In this alcove, out of the churn of the speedboats and pleasure craft, the water shimmered, impossibly blue.

“Didn't you used to jump off here back when you were getting high?” Ryan said.

Edd rolled his head against his right shoulder in an ellipsis. “Yeah, man, but that's a big part of my past, big part of my past. I don't do that anymore. No more.”

I felt vertigo kicking in and shuffled backward a couple of feet.

“Scared?” Ryan asked.

“Nah, man.”

He turned back to Edd. “Jump, dude. Might be different when you're sober.”

Edd fell back parallel to me. “No way, man. I'm done with it. Done with it.”

“I'll buy you a carton of Camels.”

Edd tore off his shirt. “I'm there, dude, I'm all over it.” Whooping, he slapped me in the chest as he launched himself into the air off the cliff.

Feet first, his body sliced the water like a knife — calves, knees, thighs, torso, head, all of him pulled underwater, the surface returning to calm in his wake.

“That crazy fucker,” Ryan said.

Edd bobbed back to the top, whipping his head in parabolas to shake the water from his white-boy dreads. He shouted up to us. “Don't forget my smokes, dude. My smokes. Come on. Let's go to 7-11.”

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That we'd hooked up with Edd at all had been unlikely. Nearly half a million people in Austin, and we happened across one who'd shared a couple of AA meetings with my roommate a few years

earlier, when he was an undergrad at UT. (I suppose we increased our odds considerably by posting up in a 6th Street pool hall.)

"Where you been, man? Where you been?" Edd said to Ryan after he ambled over to us. "Been a long time."

"Edd, I live in Dallas now."

"No shit?"

"Five years now."

"No shit?"

"No shit."

"Well, man," Edd said, his eyes bouncing wildly between me and Ryan, "that's a bummer. A bummer, man."

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After dark, we headed out the Bastrop Highway to the airport. Edd said he knew how we could get up to the roof of the Hilton and watch the jets come in. I carried a six-pack of Cokes and Edd's Camels in my backpack.

The hotel lay squat on the horizon, four floors stacked in the shape of a doughnut. Once outside and atop the hotel, we clung to the edge, lest we be seen through the sunroof by lounging guests below. Edd found us a spot facing the flight path, the perfect vantage point. The wind picked up, brushing our sun-braided skin.

"I come up here sometimes and sit for hours. Hours, man," Edd said.

"It's awesome," Ryan said. He stood near the edge, hands fused to his hips.

The scream of an approaching jet shattered the peace, and light flooded the field to guide it in. I stood up to get a better view. Once the wheels were on the ground, the field went dark again.

"Awesome," I said.

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"You stayed sober this whole time?" Ryan asked.

"Yep. Yep," came the answer from Edd. "What about you, man?" Ryan looked past us. "One stumble, but otherwise, yeah."

"When was that, man? When?"

"Last year around this time."

I sat up. I didn't know this, or much of anything, about Ryan. We shared the two-bedroom place he had on Lower Greenville. We worked opposite schedules, and on days off, I spent most of my time down in Huntsville, with Elise. When she went down to Mexico, it freed me up to say yes when Ryan asked if I wanted to mess around in Austin for a weekend.

"Jesus, man. Jesus," Edd was saying. "What'd you do?"

"Called my sponsor when I got on the other side of it, got my ass back into treatment right quick."

I tugged at a corner of the roofing material. A rubber piece, cooked rigid by the sun, came off in my hand. I whipped it side-armed off the edge of the hotel.

"It fucking sucked, man," Ryan said. "Came out, started at zero. You know the drill, right? 'My name is Ryan and I've been sober twenty-eight days.' Shit, man. I'd been three years clean and I blew it. Back to square one."

Edd took a drag off his cigarette. "One day at a time. All you can do. Desire, man. Desire. You want sobriety for a day, and you go get you a day. Then you gotta want it for another day. Desire. Another day, man."

"Yeah," Ryan said. "I know. But listen. Let me ask you a question: What did it feel like today, jumping off that cliff again? Anything like before?"

Edd considered the question a while. A faint smile tugged at his mouth. "Didn't feel like nothing, man. Nothing."

"What do you mean?"

Edd mashed out his cigarette and flicked its carcass over the edge. "Man, it's like this. Used to be, I'd get loaded and climb up there and jump, and it was like I was flying, man. Flying. I went in there all kinds of crazy ways, man. On my head, on my back, on my face. I'm lucky I survived some of them, man. There's rocks down there, you know. Rocks. I never hit 'em, and I always found my way out. I was crazy, man. Crazy.

"But today, man, all I could think was, dude, this is a pretty stupid way to get a carton of smokes, man. Pretty stupid."

The field lit up again as another jet pointed its nose toward home. Edd lit a fresh cigarette, his contorting face illuminated by the match. Ryan sat in a heap, boring a thousand-yard stare through the roof.

“Yeah,” he said. “Flying, that's it exactly. That's what it feels like. That's what I miss.” Edd opened his mouth as if to speak, and then I heard him swallow his words.

I pulled my collar up against the night and shoved my hands in my pockets.

Without warning, Austin had turned cold. So, so cold.

