FOREVER ENDS ON FRIDAY

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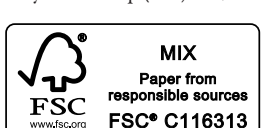
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To all those no longer with us, who are still with us

I hope the leaving is joyful—and I hope never to return.

—Frida Kahlo

Facts

In 1785, French chemist Antoine Lavoisier discovers that matter can neither be created nor destroyed.

Fifty-five years later, German physician Julius Robert Mayer concludes the same is true of energy.

Sixty more years later, Albert Einstein gives us $E=mc^2$.

Which means mass and energy are exchangeable, and therefore, the total amount of mass and energy in the Universe is constant.

There will always be the same amount of energy and matter.

I say this because if matter doesn't die, if energy can't die, then no one really dies.

Five years.

Five thousand.

Five billion.

You will still be here.

So, before they close their eyes for the last time, when they promise you—

I'll always be with you, I'm everywhere you are.

They will.

They are.

101

When tragedy strikes—and no, I don't mean the barbarism of watching someone pour milk *before* cereal, or laboring to make that last square of toilet paper, the one superglued to the cardboard, be enough.

I mean, *actual* tragedy.

Like, when no one wants to tell you your parents are dead.

Like, when your stupid brain can't decide which outfit—if the dress, the suit you chose, is what they'd want to wear forever.

Like, when your best friend really needs you, but you're gone, baby, gone.

See, actual tragedy monsters your heart.

Actual tragedy saws you in half.

Before and After.

Like cheesy weight-loss commercials where on one side you're chubby, bald, bad posture, bacne—and then you swallow a magic capsule and *voilà!*, you're eighteen-pack abs, more hair than five woolly mammoths, and astonishingly clear skin.

Look, they're saying, this is you then, but this is you now.

That's tragedy: a hard pill you swallow that changes everything.

And one day, you look in the mirror, and a stranger is there where you used to be.

You'll interrogate yourself endlessly.

If only you'd done this slower, that faster.

Now you know the true cost of a split second.

You never stop paying.

This is what no one tells you—

100

—the worst day of your life begins like any other.

The sun shows up before you want.

You left the fan on all night, your throat's scratchy, nose itchy.

You claw sleep from your eyes.

Press your feet into carpet, curl your toes.

The kitchen tile's freezing.

It's June in Ohio so it's eighty degrees, or thirty-five inches of rain, or snowflakes.

You rifle through cabinets, the pantry. Pillage two Pop-Tarts, eat them raw.

You dash back upstairs, bang on the bathroom door, yell at your sister for hogging the hot water.

Dad materializes in the hallway, says if you want he'll boil

water on the stove, pour it over your head, *same as a shower*, he claims.

Only with third-degree burns, you fire back.

His laugh's a breathy hiss, like a snake gasping.

You cannonball into your parents' bed, pillows scattering in your wake, but Mom doesn't look away from her book, says your breath stinks even though you're nowhere near her nose. So you logroll over to her, blow all that hot pastiness into her face, and she pushes your head away, says *boy, if you don't quit*, but she's trying not to laugh, and your lips aim for her cheek but she bobs and you glance her eyebrow.

The bathroom door bursts open, your sister shouts *happy now?* from the hallway, then slams her bedroom door shut.

So yeah.

A day you couldn't pick out of a lineup.

A day like most before it.

Except on June eighth, at 11:43 in the morning, your life, your entire world, snaps in two. Forevermore, there is only before 11:43 and after 11:43.

No one tells you this. That your life is always a few shitty seconds from absolute devastation. From irredeemable destruction.

Because in the end, all it takes is twelve seconds, and two otherwise innocent, seemingly disconnected things merge to obliterate my life.

1. Dad continued his I-suck-at-technology ways.

2. My best friend wished my parents a happy anniversary.

23 MONTHS AFTER THE FUNERAL

also known as now

99

Everyone shows up to a Hills party—cool for people-watching, not cool for personal space. Tonight's party-thrower is among the more popular kids at Elytown High, meaning you gotta walk sideways to get anywhere.

"Umm, what the hell are they playing?" Autumn asks.

I shrug. "Trap-rock-bluegrass?"

"Mmm, I'm thinking alternative-emo-backpack rap."

Autumn and I slot music three ways: good, listenable, kill the DJ.

"Listenable," she says.

And I agree. Besides, expecting good music at a Hills party is like swimming in Scotland thinking you'll spot the Loch Ness Monster.

Autumn's brow slides up. "Beer?"

"I'm good," I tell her. "Gonna check out the pool."

She squeezes my hand and I'm not sure if this means *be right back* or *see you later*. She picks her way toward the keg until a couple of girls stop her to chat.

I dispense a week's worth of *hey, what up*s in the ninety seconds it takes to reach the sliding patio panels.

This view dropkicks my jaw, every time.

Standing here, the lake gobbling the horizon, black waves colliding like monster trucks, you could convince me we're at the edge of the world.

I nearly forget I'm not alone.

My chest vibrates. I pinch my phone from my shirt pocket.

I've ignored her last three calls.

"Hey, you're already at the party," Whit says, like an accusation.

"Yeah, I told you I—"

She cuts me off. "When were you gonna tell me?"

For a moment, I pretend that what follows is good, happy.

When were you gonna tell me you're really taking pride in your lawn-mowing?

When were you gonna tell me you can actually sing?

But this isn't that. This is the setup to an ongoing series I call *What's Wrong with Jamal*, starring Jamal Anderson as himself and costarring Everyone Else.

She asks again, so I bite. "Tell you *what*, Whit?"

"You're skipping class again? Really? I thought we . . ."

I hold the phone away from my ear until she stops talking. "I'm not skipping," I say into the receiver.

"Then how come Mrs. Sweat wants a meeting Monday?"

"Okay, I got to school the other day and I didn't feel well and . . ."

Whit sighs. "Dammit, Jamal. This is serious."

How long before she says *your future*?

"This is your future we're talking . . ."

Kids dot the lawn like pushpins. Kids in the infinity pool guzzle from red Solos, play flip-cup on the edge. This pool's a mood ring, the cool cerulean water now purpling.

When Whit finishes outlining my current path toward oblivion, I tell her:

I'm sorry.

It won't happen again.

Not to worry.

"They *will* remove you from my custody, Jamal. Is that what you want?"

This is the part where I reaffirm my commitment, where she questions if she's failing me. "I want to stay where I am," I tell her. And I mean it.

"We gotta figure this out," Whit says.

This being me.

But before I can reply, Autumn's tugging on my arm.

"I gotta go," I tell Whit, ending the call. "What's going o—" But I don't finish.

I follow Autumn's eyes across the patio just before the detonation.

His laughter trips a blast of memories, each a land mine that

shrapnels through me. That goofy grin, slumped shoulders, his knees bent like he can hide his Goliath ass.

"Maybe the Universe wants you to make good," Autumn says, in a way that makes the Universe sound like some benevolent god, or at the very least, your *I'm just trying to help* mom.

Except that's not the Universe I know.

And it's definitely not the Universe that knows me.

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Nutshelled: last time I spoke to Quincy Barrantes, I was an asshole.

I own it.

And okay, sure, we've had conversations since then, like:

'Scuse me.

Nooope.

Yeah, *lots* of those exchanges.

But mostly, I take minor precautions to ensure our paths don't intersect. Like when I flung my bike into prickly shrubs, then dived in after it. And yeah, Q ended up walking the opposite direction, but whatever.

In the interest of zero unhealthy confrontations, avoidance is the best policy.

Which, trust me, Q also appreciates; only thing he hates more

than me is confrontation. Q, a magnet for bullies—how many times had I stepped in front of him? Taken blows meant for him?

"You gotta stand up for yourself, otherwise this is how it's always gonna be, Q. You wanna spend your life a human punching bag?"

But he'd push out a silly smile—I couldn't tell if he was oblivious or really that good inside. "I'd rather spread love, you know? Imagine if that's how everyone responded? With love? You'd rather live in that world, right?"

"But we don't," I'd answer, impatience boiling.

"Gotta start somewhere, right?"

To be honest, that's one of the things that irritated me most—how he'd add *right* at the end of something you wanted to disagree with.

I debate whether I should go say something.

Hey, man, some party, huh?

Hey, man, how 'bout those nachos?

Hey, man, how's life these last two years?

But when I look back, Q's gone.

And then Autumn's all—"Oh snap, my soooong!"—as she drags me to the epicenter of the human ocean.

I finally spy him leaning against the far wall, a human kickstand.

I push through the crowd, but I'm too late, kid's already Houdini'd.

* * *

Autumn sets her drink down, guides her *Mighty Moat* T-shirt up and off. Unbuttons her shorts, nudges them down her hips.

And, well—

I try not to stare, but her canary-yellow two-piece is accentuating all of her accentuations, complementing her dark-brown skin like it was commissioned for her.

"You're getting in the water, J. Even if I have to harpoon your ass."

But I'm steady shaking my head. "Don't think I'm swimming tonight."

She points to my legs. "You're wearing trunks under your jeans, J."

"Yeah. Just like to be prepared for . . . different . . . scenarios."

"Like swimming?"

"I suppose swimming's a scenario, yeah."

She leads me poolward. She dives in, swims ten yards beneath the water, a black-and-yellow blur, before breaking surface, her body seesawing in the slanting-sloping waves.

"It feels great," she promises.

"Hold up. Something's happening," I say.

Everyone's rushing to the far end of the pool. Autumn's long strokes get her there ahead of me.

Most of the kids outside have formed a huddle.

Someone asks, What's your name?

"Quincy," he answers. " You can just call me Q."

I stand on tiptoes. Q's front and center, beaming.

Which is odd. Dude avoided attention like you avoid

skunks—wide berth.

Everyone's chanting: "Q! Q! Q!" And Q gulps three cups back-to-back-to-back, each empty falling at his feet. Everyone's clapping, high-fiving, egging him on. He downs another with ease, swipes the foam from his mouth, and tosses his head back in a laughing howl.

"Q's a beast," somebody shouts.

A new chant starts: "In the pool! In the pool! In the pool!"

Q takes a tentative step forward, his posture wobbly.

"In the pool! In the pool! In the pool!"

He's at the edge now, staring into the deep end. He rocks his arms back and forth, like he's building momentum for an Olympic dive, bends at the waist like there's treasure at the bottom and he means to find it.

"In the pool! In the pool!"

But then someone yells: "Q! No! No, Q!"

The chanting stops; everyone pivoting to see the culprit.

"Booooo," a few kids shout. "You killing the vibe, man!"

And they're looking at me. I'm the vibe killer.

"We're not gonna let him drown," someone says hella casually, the way you'd say *we're not gonna let him eat another taco*.

I hustle around, grab Q's arm. "Hey, man, maybe sit this one out?"

And no, I'm not expecting gratitude—it's not like I saved his life; he might've been fine in the pool—but I'm definitely not prepared for rage.

I've never seen Q angry—not like this—not even when he should've been.

"Oh snap, we've got a Jauncy sighting, guys," someone yells from the back of the yard.

A shiver moves down my spine. When's the last time someone shouted Jauncy? When's the last time someone *said* Jauncy?

And now a few more kids are yelling it.

The party host suddenly materializes beside us. "Guys, ohmigod, you gotta do a Jauncy at my party. Seriously, we need a Jauncy reunion!"

And now a new chant. "Jauncy, Jauncy, Jauncy . . ."

I ignore them, turn back to Q. "You're okay?"

But Q's boiling. "Yo, why'd you do that, man?"

"Why I'd do *what*?"

"That." His voice cracks the slightest. His eyes are pink and watery, but it doesn't mean tears; he could have beer in his eyes. Or sweat.

The Jauncy fervor's dying rapidly behind us.

Which, good.

Jauncy's the last thing I want to revive.

"Serious? C'mon, bro, you were dizzy. You could've cracked your head on the pool floor."

"That was mine."

"What was yours, Q?"

"Quincy."

"What?"

"Friends call me Q," he says. "Call me Quincy."

And as he walks away, I'm a civil war: brain proud he's standing up for himself. Heart wanting to run after him, ask *what the hell's wrong with you?*

Pool at my back, I look out at the lake, all that water dyed in denim moonlight.

"Harpoon readied, our world-class marine biologist zeroes in on her target," a voice narrates behind me. I turn around and I can't help but laugh. Autumn, floating in the middle of the pool, arms posed as if aiming a speargun.

I shake my head. "I don't think marine biologists use deadly weapons. Especially on animals."

"Yeah, well." She raises her arms, her right eye squinting as if peering through a scope. "This is a peaceful harpoon, designed to politely subdue, so we can tag and track water life."

"Ah. A *peaceful* harpoon. Those must be hard to find."

She shrugs. "I just hope it's strong enough. Jamals are a particularly hairy species, you see."

"Oh, really," I say, cracking up. I ball up my shirt, toss it into the grass.

"Keep it steady now," Autumn calls out. "Steady. Steady. Fire!"

Her arms recoil, and I wait a beat, then clutch my chest.

"You're right, no pain," I say, grinning. "In fact, this spear kinda tickles."

Because why worry about your former friend when your

person is right in front of you?

"Get over here," Autumn says, tugging her pretend rope.

And I fall in.