

## **Anywhere But Here**

Jason sat alone on the park bench, watching his little brother, Robby, play with the other neighborhood kids in the sandbox. He would be seated next to his girlfriend, Lisa, but she, like everything that had made him happy, was of the past. He watched Robby with envy, longing for an innocence far gone. He would give anything to not care about the world around him, to disappear into the sandbox until the sun faded away, when his mother would call out for him to come home. His life had begun to slide downhill since he graduated high school last summer, and it had reached a point where there seemed to be no escape. As he took one last drag from his cigarette and flicked it across the lawn, he thought about how much he'll miss Robby

“Come on, Robby, it's time to go,” he called out.

Robby didn't hear his older brother, as he was deeply focused on the hole he was digging. Jason sighed, slightly annoyed.

“Robby, come on. Let's go,” he repeated.

Robby's head shot up as his concentration was broken. He looked over to his older brother, who was waiting for him on the park bench. He dropped his shovel and said goodbye to his friends and ran excitedly towards his older brother.

“Now where are we going?” he implored.

“How do you feel about some ice cream, little man?”

Robby's eyes widened. “Yeah! Ice cream!” he shouted, hopping up and down.

“All right, all right, calm down. Let's get us some ice cream.”

Jason took Robby's hand as they left the park. Robby hopped along, excited over the prospect of eating with his big brother. The streets were filled with more people than usual due to the beautiful spring weather. Jason made sure to keep his brother as close as possible.

"What's your favorite ice cream?" Jason asked.

Without hesitation, Robby blurted out, "Chocolate," licked his lips, and gave a huge smile.

"Oh, chocolate's good. I would've pegged you as more of a Superman guy myself, but chocolate's a good call." He looked down at Robby, whose mind was clearly already in the ice cream parlor. He started to smile before a slight wave of guilt came over him.

They arrived at the ice cream parlor, which was expectedly filled with people. Jason had to hold Robby back from cutting in line. Robby could hardly contain his excitement. He climbed all over Jason, pleading for ice cream.

"You're going to have to wait. There's a lot of people here. You have to act like a big boy and wait."

"But I want my ice cream now!" Robby demanded.

"Well I'm sorry, but we have to wait."

Robby stomped his feet, huffing and puffing. Jason sighed, regretting his decision to get ice cream. After several more minutes of whining, the two brothers arrived at the counter. The teenage girl behind the counter smiled and chuckled when she saw Robby leaping for joy.

"What can I get for you, little guy?"

"Chocolate! Chocolate! Chocolate!" he shouted.

"I think he wants chocolate," Jason remarked.

The girl scooped a ball of chocolate ice cream onto a cone and handed it to Robby, who excitedly accepted it. Jason ordered a hot fudge sundae, and after paying, found an empty booth for them to sit in. Robby assaulted the cone, catching as much ice cream on his face as he did in his mouth. Jason picked at his sundae as he watched his little brother make a mess of himself. Another wave of guilt came over him as he set his spoon down.

“Don’t ever get involved with girls, Robby. They’re bad news.”

Robby stopped for a brief moment to speak. “Girls are yucky,” he declared, before continuing to devour his ice cream cone.

“Yucky, yeah,” he paused. “And stay away from drugs and alcohol. They’re no good. You won’t understand now, but you will someday. I can’t always be there to protect you.”

Robby didn’t respond. He remained intent on finishing his ice cream cone.

“And don’t ever forget to smile. Don’t let anyone take that away from you, ever.” He felt his eyes begin to well up.

Robby paused from eating his cone. “I always smile. Mommy says smiling makes the whole world brighter.”

Jason’s throat began to swell. Fighting back tears, he picked up his spoon again and continued working on his sundae. Robby finished his cone and sat there in rare stillness, watching his older brother with awe. Jason spooned the ice cream into his mouth in a daze, his mind far, far away. His concentration was broken momentarily as Robby spoke up.

“Jay, when is daddy coming back home?”



Marylyn Harper, Jason and Robby's mother, sat alone at the kitchen table, staring at the coffee cup before her, which she clasped with both hands. She lifted her left hand to her forehead, rested her head on it, and closed her eyes. She remained in that position even when Jason and Robby returned from their outing, despite Robby calling out for her repeatedly as he ran into the kitchen. Jason grabbed a hold of him before he reached his silent mother at the table.

"How 'bout you go wash up and play with your toys," he suggested. "I'll come play with you in a few minutes."

Robby obediently agreed and proceeded into the bathroom. Once Robby had left the room, Jason turned to his mother, who was once again staring into the coffee cup which she clasped with both hands. She still did not look up. Jason walked over to the table and sat down in the chair across from her. He looked through her momentarily before speaking.

"Robby's asking about dad again."

Of all the things he could have said, he apparently chose the wrong one. A chemical reaction went off in her head. She lifted and slammed the cup onto the table, sending cold coffee out onto her hands and the tabletop. She sent a venomous look at Jason, causing him to instinctively jerk back in his chair.

"What do you want me to do? What the *fuck* do you want me to do," she snapped.

"Jesus Christ, keep it down. Robby can hear you."

"Don't you *fucking* tell me what to do."

“All right, forget it, forget I said anything. I don’t need this shit. You need fucking help.” He stood up from his chair and turned to walk towards Robby’s room. In response, his mother flew back and shot out of her chair in a single fluid motion.

“Don’t you turn your back on me,” she shouted. “Don’t you dare walk out of this room. Don’t you fucking be like *him*.”

He turned towards her with his eyes squinted in anger and spoke through his clenched teeth. “And you fucking wonder why he left.”

Just as quickly as he regretted his words, his mother’s arm shot through the air, her hand landing flatly across his cheek, sending a loud cracking sound throughout the house, whose very foundation seemed to have been shaken. With his head still slightly cocked to the side from the impact, he noticed Robby down the hallway, standing halfway outside of his bedroom door, watching with a slight look of fear on his face. Jason returned his surprised gaze towards his mother and lifted his hand to his cheek, feeling its warmth. His mother was breathing heavily, and her eyes began to tear up. Neither of them spoke. Both of them could still hear the sound echoing throughout the house.

After several moments of silence, Jason spoke. With his hand still pressed to his cheek, he turned his gaze from his mother to Robby down the hallway.

“Robby, do you want to go play with Sam,” he asked, slightly quivering with bewilderment. Robby nodded hesitantly without speaking. “Okay, let’s go then.”

Jason turned and walked down the hallway towards Robby.

“I’m sorry,” his mom shouted, tears running down her cheek. Jason took Robby by the hand and walked towards the front door. “I’m sorry! Jason, I’m sorry,” she repeated, walking slowly towards him. He opened the door and closed it softly behind him. She stopped there in the hallway, and staring at the front door, burst into tears.



Mrs. Ruiz answered the door with her usual beaming smile.

“Why, hello there,” she said, giving them each a look with her radiant glow. Her smile faltered slightly when she noticed one of Jason’s cheeks was redder than the other, but she caught herself in time to avoid any awkwardness. “Sammy, Robby’s here to play,” she called out, turning her head into the house. “Come on in, you two.”

Robby ran down the hallway when he saw Sam come out of his room. The two of them beamed and began chatting excitedly. Sam gloated about his new superhero action figure as he led Robby back to his room. Mrs. Ruiz watched the two of them proudly until they were out of sight, then, still smiling, turned back to Jason.

“Would it be all right if he stays the night?” Jason inquired. “My mom, uh,” he paused. “She’s not feeling too great. I can give you money for food and stuff.”

“Oh, Jason, don’t be silly. I would love to have Robby over for the night, and I’m sure Sammy would too. Really, it’s not a problem. I know how things—” she stumbled. “Don’t worry about it.”

Jason offered a slight smile. “Thanks, I really appreciate it. I’ll be by tomorrow afternoon for him. See you then.” He turned and walked out the door.

“Bye, Jason,” she replied. Her smile began to fade slightly as a pained look washed across her face. She quickly regained composure and stretched her smile wider.



Jason decided to take a long walk through the neighborhood, something he hadn’t done in years. He noted all the childhood landmarks: the house of his first crush, Samantha Nixon, the recently vacated house of his childhood best friend, Chris Wheeler, the curb near which he had his first fight, the tree under which he had his first kiss. He stopped for a moment and took a long drag on his cigarette, then tossed it into the empty street.

His cell phone began to vibrate in his pocket. He fished it out and looked at the screen; it was his grandmother. He silenced the phone and slipped it back into his pocket. A moment later, the phone vibrated once and stopped. He already knew what the voicemail said. His mother had hysterically run back to her mother, just as any child would, regardless of age. He wished he could do the same.

With an empty house all to himself, he turned the corner and headed back home. A block away from his house, he passed Lisa’s house. Her car was in the driveway. He discreetly glanced into the large bay window in the front, hoping to catch a glimpse of her. He had no such luck. He looked down at the ground as he kept a steady pace towards home.



Jason stood for a moment just inside the front door to the empty house. The living room was dimly lit by the setting sun. He went into his room and sat down at his desk. He flicked the desk lamp on and opened a drawer. Inside, looking out at him, was a picture frame. He pulled it out and held it in his hand. The picture was taken four years ago, at Robbie's first birthday. He looked at his parents standing on either side of him, and Robbie seated in front of him in his high chair. Everyone was smiling. He held the picture for several minutes, staring into it. He shook his head, setting the picture back into the drawer.

He opened another drawer, pulled out a notebook, and set it on top of the desk. He flipped through the pages and settled on the first blank page. After a few minutes of staring at the blank page, he flipped back to the previous page. It was dated two months ago. He read back his angered, hopeless, sorrowful scrawling, detailing his and Lisa's breakup. There were faint lines of blood crossing the page. Jason unbuttoned his sleeve and pulled it back, revealing faded scars down his wrist. He ran his finger along them, as if he were reading them like Braille, trying to decode where the hell he went wrong. He rolled his sleeve back down and buttoned it up. With a deep sigh, he turned back another page. It was dated three months ago. He read back his entry about his father leaving. There was no blood on that page.

He turned forward to the blank page and began to write. After a few sentences, he tore the sheet out of his notebook, folded it, and shoved it into an

envelope. He got up from his desk and walked over to the closet. He opened the door and dug out a large, empty duffel bag. He proceeded to open his dresser drawers and pull out several articles of clothing, stuffing them into the bag. Returning to his desk, he grabbed his notebook and the picture from inside the drawer and tossed them on top of the clothes in the bag. He pulled out a fresh piece of paper from the open drawer and scribbled down a list of other essentials that he would need. Once he finished packing, he zipped the bag up, tossed it back in the closet, and plopped down onto the bed. Like so many nights before, he lay there with his hands clasped behind his head, thinking about anything and everything. As his mind began to slow down, he drifted off into sleep.

The next day, Jason stumbled out of bed and into the kitchen. It was two in the afternoon. He poured himself a bowl cereal and sat at the kitchen table, spooning heap after heap of cereal into his mouth. Halfway through finishing his breakfast, he heard a key enter the back door, followed by the rattling of the door handle. He looked up just as his mother entered the house. His eyes met hers and he immediately turned his attention back down to his cereal. She set her purse down on the floor below the sink and filled a glass with water. She stood there staring out of the window above the sink as she sipped from the cup. Jason continued to slowly spoon his cereal into his mouth. The room was silent, except for the occasional sound of crunching and gulping. Still staring out of the window, his mother spoke in a calm, unaffected voice.

“Did you get your grandma’s message?”

“No,” he replied, flatly.

She glanced over at him. “You know, it’s really warm outside today.”

He looked down at his long sleeves. "I know."

The silence returned once Jason finished his cereal. He didn't move from the table.

"I didn't mean to hit you. I'm sorry."

"I know."

"This is not easy for me, Jason. I really have a lot on my plate, and it's not easy."

"I know."

"God dammit, Jason!" she snapped, slamming the empty cup down onto the counter. After a deep breath, she quickly regained her composure. "It's all right," she whispered to herself. "Is Robby still at the Ruiz's house? Did he sleep over?"

"Yeah. I should probably go pick him up."

Jason stood up, carrying his bowl to the sink where his mother stood. He set it inside and turned towards his room. Before he could take a step, his mother wrapped her arms around him. He made a slight attempt to break free, then begrudgingly surrendered. He closed his eyes. Neither of them spoke.



Jason spent the rest of the afternoon sitting in the park alone. He read a book and sketched a few pictures in his sketch pad. He returned home as the sun began to set. His mother and Robby were watching TV in the living room when he entered the house. He joined them, sitting in his father's empty recliner. An hour later, his mother put Robby to sleep and returned to the living

room. They sat there together and watched TV for a few more hours in silence, which was broken up with an occasional laugh. As midnight drew closer, his mother stood up from the couch and stretched, yawning.

“I better hit the hay. I’ve got work tomorrow afternoon,” she announced, sleepily.

“All right,” he replied, as his heart began to race faster. “I’m pretty beat too.”

Jason stood up and his mother stepped closer to him, pulling him into another embrace. This time, he didn’t resist at all. She felt his heart pounding in his chest.

“Are you all right?”

He paused, and then shook his head on her shoulder. “I’m good.”

She pulled away slightly and kissed his forehead.

“Everything will be okay. You know, everything just works out somehow.”

“I know.”

She backed away and went into the bathroom. Jason turned and walked into his room, shutting the door behind him. He returned once again to his desk, snapped on the light, and pulled out a blank piece of paper from his desk drawer. He sat there for a half hour, staring at the blank page, combing his brain for advice to give to his little brother. He tried to remember all the advice his father had given him, but he drew a complete blank. In a moment of clarity, he put his pen to the page and he scribbled out the best advice he could give:

Your big brother, who loves you more than himself, is a selfish coward,

much like your father. If you do anything in life, do this: don't become one of us.

He signed and dated his name, folded it, and slipped it into an envelope. On the front of the envelope, he wrote, *Robby, Age 16*. He figured someone old enough to handle a thirty-five hundred pound steel death trap can handle the truth about his family. He sealed the envelope and set it on top of the envelope he had placed there last night, which he had since written *Mom* on the front of. The letter inside that envelope read:

You were right; I am just like him. I'm just a scared little child without anyone to run to. If I continue to live like this, I wouldn't be alive much longer. I had to do this. I had to go. Where? Anywhere but here.

He signed it, *Love always, Jason Robert Harper*. Robert was his father's name, and it had become forever a piece of him.

He stared across the room at his bed, which was dimly illuminated by the light from his desk lamp. On top sat a duffel bag filled with everything he thought he'd need to etch out a new existence elsewhere. He began to tremble as the reality of his situation set in.

He closed his eyes and traveled back to Robby's first birthday, and how his whole family, including himself, beamed with joy. Even Robby, who was incapable of understanding the spectacle around him, seemed to share the warm glow that everyone carried on their face. More surprising was his father,

who was in rare form that day. It was the only time Jason could remember seeing his father kiss his mother.

He opened his eyes, and all the streamers, all the balloons, all the laughter was gone. He was alone again in his dimly lit room, staring once again at his duffel bag sitting alone on the bed. He sluggishly hoisted himself out his chair and lumbered towards his bag. He lifted it up and hoisted it over his shoulder. He grabbed the two letters and clicked his desk lamp off. Blinded by the darkness, he felt his way out of his room and down the hallway. The moonlight filtered into the living room through the curtains, providing enough light to guide him out of the house. He walked towards the front door and set his bag down with a quiet sigh. He turned back and crept towards the hallway, stopping at the door to his mother's bedroom, which was cracked open slightly. He stood at the door for a moment, staring into the darkness through the crack, listening to the sound of his heart beating heavily in his chest. After a few moments, he turned around and walked away towards Robby's room.

Jason crept into Robby's room slowly through the open door. Robby was fast asleep in his twin bed, tucked in tightly beneath the sheets. Jason moved towards the toy box across from his bed, and, making sure the lid was secure, sat down gently on top. Like every day he had taken him to the park, he sat there watching him with envy. He thought about all the hopes and dreams he had as a child, how much he longed to be a grownup. He shook his head at such a foolish thought. At an age where the world was waiting to be conquered by him, Jason wanted nothing more than to be a kid again.

He stood up from the toy chest and walked over to Robby's bed. As he stood there, hovering over Robby, watching him sleep peacefully, his heart

began to beat faster, his throat began to swell, and his eyes began to tear up. He closed his eyes, and a single teardrop fell, landing on Robby's cheek. Robby began to rustle beneath the covers, and without waking, flipped over and lay on his other side. The movement caused Jason to snap back to attention. He opened his eyes and looked down at his little brother one last time.

“Goodbye, Robby. I'm so, so sorry,” he whispered.

With that, he slowly backed out of the room. Now in the hallway, he allowed himself to cry more freely. He sniffled and wiped his eyes with his free hand, his other hand still holding on to the two letters. He walked into the kitchen and placed them on the table. He paused for a brief moment and another tear fell onto the top letter, addressed to his mom. He wiped his face once more before turning and heading back down the hallway.

At the front door, he lifted his bag back over his shoulder. He slowly turned the door handle, pulling the door open enough to slip out, and stepped onto the front porch. He gently pulled the door close and breathed a heavy sigh. Without turning back, he walked down the walkway, onto the sidewalk, into the darkness.