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## Jesse

**Thursday Morning**

**June 23, 2016**

The plane's wheels touched the ground, the wing flaps went up, and Jesse felt his chest surge forward and his anxiety release.

"Welcome to Sacramento," the flight attendant said.

Jesse switched his phone off airplane mode. He went to the *Danielle* text string.

*Jesse: Landed. Love you.*

He then scrolled down to find Rob's text string.

*Jesse: Landed. Give me about 15 minutes. I'll be outside arrivals.*

Three dots appeared after his message turned blue.

*Rob: Got it dude. See you in a bit.*

Jesse smiled. For most of the last twenty years, meeting his friends for this trip was a highlight of the summer, sometimes the year. It had always been a time when they regressed to their teenage years of eating and drinking too much, and now it was clear that they had aged too much not to feel the effects.

Jesse didn't need this weekend. He thought he closed this chapter of his life. Yet, here he was, joining his friends one last time to send off one of their own. This time, he was attending out of obligation, and Danielle reminded him that he would not get another chance.

He exited into the terminal, the intimacy of his thoughts now overwhelmed by the stimuli of fellow travelers. Jesse was looking out, gaining his bearings, when he felt a buzz in his hand.

Danielle: *Love you too. Have fun... as much as you can. I'll be thinking of you.*

He smiled. It had taken time, but she could sense what he was thinking even over the distance between Orange County and Sacramento. As he boarded the tram to the main terminal, he thumbed his reply.

Jesse: *Yeah. Part of me just wants to fly back.*

Danielle: *I get that, but you'll be glad you went*

Jesse: *Hope so.*

Danielle: *Give a hug to Tracey*

Jesse: *Will do... will text/call you later.*

Danielle: *OK. I'm here*

For a while, his marriage to Danielle was touch-and-go, the result of her career ambition, being a stay-at-home dad to twin girls, and unexpectedly defying several gender conventions and

traditions regarding matrimony and parenting. It took years of therapy and a commitment to each other and the marriage, but he had complete trust in her and her advice.

Another buzz. It was Rob.

Rob: *Close?*

Jesse: *At the Red Rabbit.*

Jesse passed under the public art display that hung over the escalators in the main terminal. With his large canvas duffel slung over his shoulder, he bypassed the baggage claim and went straight through the sliding doors. He looked to his left and found Rob's huge black Ford F-350 pulling up to the curb. Rob's presence in the world was never subtle, and before Jesse had a moment to take in the cool morning air, Rob parked, pulled his six foot four, 320-pound frame out of the cab, and raced around the hood like he used to go after running backs as a linebacker at USC. He was wearing jeans, a local-brewery T-shirt, boots, and a camouflage USC ball cap, which always made Jesse smile. Who needs camouflage in the heart of Los Angeles? Rob embraced Jesse with a bear hug that caused Jesse to inhale.

"Jesse! So friggin' great to see you, dude!"

"Wish it was under better circumstances."

"C'mon, man, it's the trip!" Rob said, slapping Jesse's shoulder and smiling. "Yeah, we have something else to do this time, but c'mon, it's number seventeen and counting."

"Seventeen?"

"Sixteen or seventeen." The number didn't matter to Rob, just the fact that his best friend was here.

"Jim would know," Jesse said.

Rob turned contemplative. His dark beard had more than its share of silver flecks, providing him even more gravitas. “Yeah, he would,” Rob said, then his moderated enthusiasm returned. “Let’s get your bag in the truck. Everyone’s meeting at Jim’s, and then we’ll be on our way.”

Jesse used the truck’s running rails to climb in. He was always the smallest of their tight group of five. In high school, they all played football, except Jesse. Rob was the surefire professional-football prospect. Paul was the most popular, David worked the hardest, and Jim was involved in everything. Jesse wasn’t an archetype who socialized with this group. He was the small Mexican kid who ran cross country. But their friendship stretched back to elementary school, grew stronger in high school and had endured into adulthood because of this trip. Their shared experiences had stripped away the superficiality of their adolescence and forged a bond stronger than any relationship outside of marriage.

“How’s Leslie?” asked Jesse as Rob pulled onto Interstate 5 toward Sacramento. Rob’s smile came back bigger than ever.

“She’s great. Last week, she shot even par at Lakeridge.”

“I saw on Facebook. She looks awesome. Who knew an ex-linebacker would produce a golf prodigy!”

“I wouldn’t say *prodigy*,” Rob said, trying to hide his pride. “But she’s pretty damn good for thirteen.”

“Well, you’ve put a lot of cash into that talent.”

“Tell me about it. And my pocketbook’s feeling it too. Leslie loves golf. It’s all she ever talks about, and if it keeps her attention away from boys, I’ll take it.”

Leslie had arrived when Rob needed her most. Faced with the realities of professional football, Rob had given in to some of his more self-destructive impulses. Leslie settled him, gave him a purpose, and drove him toward peace of mind.

For the past few years, Rob had been a private investigator in Reno, three hours northeast of Sacramento. The Wild West of northern Nevada better suited his personality, and his dollars stretched further. He could own a house, afford his truck (and the gas), and provide private golf instruction for Leslie.

“Less than four years until I have to deal with boys, and I’m not looking forward to it,” Jesse said. He had nine-year-old twin girls, Nicole and Jennifer. “I just hope we can keep them in activities until they’re, say, thirty.”

“The struggle is real,” said Rob. “She’s starting to get looks that make me want to go over and pound on those assholes.”

“Well, boys only need to see you, and I don’t think they’ll try anything.”

“They don’t care, man. Once they’re alone, they only think about one thing. I mean, we all know that. What did we talk about in high school if it wasn’t sports or girls?”

“Food.”

“There’s that. But man, the next ten years are going to be tough.”

“Credit-card theory,” Jesse said. “You pay for boys early when they break stuff and have energy for days. Girls, you pay later...like now...with interest.”

Rob smiled. “That’s good.” Rob switched back to the topic at hand. “If your girls can take up running like you, then they’ll be too tired to think about anything else.”

Jesse ran cross-country in high school but rarely strapped on the sneakers after graduation. That changed when he and Danielle received a double-wide running stroller at the girls' baby shower. Jesse figured it would be a good way to exercise and give the twins some fresh air. Soon afterward, running became a morning ritual, burning off the anxiety he felt for not working as a casualty of the Great Recession. Even when the girls outgrew the stroller, he continued to run. He enjoyed the discipline that came with being an avid runner, and it helped him keep on top of managing a household, schedules, budgets, and the girls' activities while Danielle was killing herself at her law firm.

Rob slapped the steering wheel. "This is going to be a good trip."

"It's certainly going to be different," said Jesse. He pulled off his hat and ran his fingers through the same full, jet-black hair he had when he was eighteen. "I just feel weird about it."

"Jim wanted this," Rob said.

"We know who wanted this," Jesse corrected and looked out the window.

"That's true, but remember, he's acting on behalf of Jim and Tracey."

"Sometimes, I think he takes being 'Jim's best friend' to the extreme. You knew he was going to find a way to prolong the inevitable. I'm surprised he hasn't moved back up here yet."

"He's trying. I think he was meeting someone this week about a position at a new hotel, which is why he's already here."

David was a hotel executive manager working at a top resort. His career had taken him from Sacramento to San Diego, then

Honolulu, and now Huntington Beach. He had worked hard for it, a poor Filipino kid without the advantage many of his buddies had. While he enjoyed his job, he was ready to move back to Sacramento and explore new opportunities closer to his mom. In the past year, he felt a greater urgency, but he was still waiting for the right opportunity. David was one of Jesse's best friends, but sometimes his love of the dramatic was annoying.

"Regardless of how you feel right now, I think this trip's going to be good for you," Rob said. "For all of us."

"That's what Danielle said. I know I'm being an ass. I just don't want us wallowing in sentiment."

"C'mon, that's what this trip's all about. Always has been. You've got to lean into it and embrace it. You can't *dee-viate* from it."

They both chuckled. Elongating the *dee* had become an inside joke borne on one of their trips. These repeated jokes were part of what made this trip special for all of them.

"What's the over-under on the number of people who'll stop Paul this weekend and ask about the upcoming football season?" asked Rob.

Paul anchored the sports segment on the evening news for KARC-TV in Sacramento, but he was better known for his time at ESPN and *SportsCenter*. Over the years, they got a jolt of pride and excitement when Paul appeared on a *SportsCenter* commercial or in a clip of a movie playing himself. After some drama back in Bristol, Connecticut, he decided on a change and came back home. To anyone who asked, he was moving back to be closer to his parents, who weren't as mobile and independent as they used to be.

Only eighteen months removed from his national profile, Paul was still recognized anywhere they went, whether it was a restaurant or an airport. While his lack of anonymity was annoying, he took it in stride and predicted scores, gave the odds for a stranger's teams, and smiled through the unintended attention. It became a game for his friends to see how many people would approach him.

"I'd lay the over-under at four and a half for the weekend," said Rob. He turned the corner into Jim's neighborhood, and they saw Paul and David next to Paul's SUV. They turned their heads and smiled. David waved his arms as though Rob hadn't been to this spot hundreds of times before. After Rob parked, David trotted over and embraced Rob. Paul and Jesse opted for the "bro hug."

"You showed up," said David.

"Wouldn't miss it for the world," said Rob.

"Couldn't miss it for the world," Jesse said.

"Well, it's good you're here," said David.

"Have you knocked on the door yet?" Rob asked.

"We couldn't go in without you," said Paul. "We've only been here a few minutes."

Jesse and Rob nodded. In years past, the approach to the house would be loud and immature, but this trip wasn't typical. David took a deep breath, signaling everyone to get ready for the next awkward minutes. This visit wasn't going to be like the countless times they had come by for drinks, parties, and cook-outs.

David knocked on the door.



Rob felt his throat tighten. Jesse wanted to be somewhere else and nowhere else at the same time. Paul stood in the back, almost not wanting to be seen.

Tracey opened the door, a smile across her face. They all knew her well enough to realize she was putting on her best front. Underneath her carefully chosen outfit and bouncy blond hair was a woman struggling as much as they were.

“Hey, Tracey,” said David and moved in for a big hug. She stood in place in the foyer as each of them came in, embraced her, expressed a small salutation, then stood by the couch.

Tracey exhaled. “I’m so glad you’re doing this. I’ll go get Jim.”

She disappeared down the hall, and the friends just stood there, not knowing what to say. Jesse looked over to the end table and saw Jim and Tracey’s official wedding-party photo. Jesse was a bit rounder back then, before his running regimen had sculpted angles out of curves. Paul looked his same photogenic self with perfect hair and teeth, as did David, though he now shaved his head, conceding the fight. Rob had steadily hefted weight onto his huge frame. Tracey somehow looked the same even while Jim’s waistline had increased and his face had grown fuller. At least Jim had shaved off that goatee.

“How was your flight?” Paul asked Jesse to break the tension.

“A flight. I hate it when larger people see I’m a small guy sitting on the aisle, take the middle seat, then push their elbows into my space. I used a couple free Southwest drink coupons for a morning beer.”

They nodded. They’d been there, judged, or envied others for having those drink coupons. Tracey returned with a small metal

box and a well-worn notebook. Each of them took a moment to breathe.

“Who wants to take these?” asked Tracey.

“I’ll take the ashes,” said Rob. He stared at the small sealed box, amazed that it contained the man he used to tackle, slap around, and call a dear friend.

David received the notebook and handled it like a piece of valuable memorabilia. He smiled with disbelief that it was still intact. Jim’s journal had accompanied them on almost all their trips, and it encapsulated all the abuse they had heaped on each other over the years. The cover was stained with white splotches and circles where drinks and food had rested, spilled, and aged. The notebook spiral was bent in every way.

The cover read “Lake Trip Log.” They had all seen this cover, but none of them had ever opened it or read a word. They knew Jim’s thoughts and recollections on each of their previous trips were recorded in there. They had laughed at him when he brought the fresh notebook on the first trip and said he wanted to start a journal about college. He never wrote about those aspirations but instead focused on that first trip. The journal joined Jim and the friends for every subsequent trip, an unofficial member of the group. The group knew that Jim’s remains were really in this notebook, the vessel for which they would remember him and their friendship.

“Are you sure you don’t want to join us?” asked David. “You’re most welcome.”

“I appreciate that, I truly do,” said Tracey. “But this is your time to say goodbye. Besides, Willie and I have our half of the ashes to spread.”

Willie came out with one of his Harry Potter books under his arm. He made his way to his mom's side and looked at all of them, his resemblance to his dad maturing each day.

"Where?" Jesse asked.

"We're going to the coast," Tracey said. "Half Moon Bay, where Jim proposed to me."

"Of course," said David with a nod, his eyes watering in acknowledgement of these friends gathered in this room. Paul saved David from the indignity of breaking down by shifting focus to Willie.

"Hey, buddy, how are you doing?" Paul said.

"Good," Willie said. He smiled large, and Paul gave him a fist bump to reinforce Willie's inclusion as a junior member of their group. Rob followed, as did Jesse. David recovered and bumped fists with Willie before blowing it up. When they were done, Tracey pulled Willie close with a smile.

"Jim really loved you guys," Tracey said, almost cracking, which caused everyone's throats to tighten. She tried to say something else but stopped.

"He had incriminating evidence against us," said Paul, breaking the tension again. "Especially that guy." Paul pointed to David. "But seriously, a great man, and we're so much better because of him. We thank you for sharing him with us."

"We loved him too," said Jesse, breaking down a bit. He chastised himself for almost losing control like that.

Tracey wiped her eyes and fanned her face. "Let's not relive the memorial. That was too hard the first time. I just wanted to express how much I loved you too."

She gestured with her arms wide for a group hug. The friends gathered around her and Willie as she squeezed David and Jesse. Paul joined the embrace, and Rob enveloped them all with his huge arms. Willie must have felt suffocated and warm at the same time.

“You know this is how we ended our trip every year,” said David.

“No, it wasn’t,” said Paul.

“Burrrip,” belched Rob. “That’s how we ended the trip. I hated it when Jim did that.”

They sniffed back a giggle.

“Okay, you guys get out of here,” Tracey said. She wiped her eyes and cheeks. “You don’t want to spend the weekend talking to me. Go relive those silly trips and remember Jim!”

Paul went in for a final hug, followed by Rob, Jesse, and finally David. As Paul, Jesse, and Rob started their way out the door, David bent down to talk to Willie.

“Bye, little man,” David said to his seven-year-old godson. “In about fifteen years, you can come along with us. This year, though, it’s probably good that you stay with your mom.”

As Jesse exited through the front door, he heard Tracey say, “David?”

Jesse continued out of the house and toward Rob’s truck, giving David and Tracey some privacy. Jesse understood that David occupied another level of kinship with Jim and his family, almost an honorary uncle. As Jesse approached Rob’s truck, Paul was loading his ESPN duffle bag into the back.

“How much ESPN swag do you have?” Jesse asked.

“Less than I used to. When I moved back, I got rid of a lot of the polos and random stuff. But I kept the stuff I’d actually use.”

“I have some charities in Reno that would have used anything from the great Paul Buckley. All you’d need to do is sign and send,” Rob said. He pulled out the large ice chest with all their food and carried it from Paul’s car to the truck.

“Believe me, they weren’t that exciting,” Paul said. “Beer cozies, ratty T-shirts, golf balls, sweaty hats. How about I sign some photos and good stuff and send them? Besides, how about all your football buddies?”

“Those were tapped long ago,” Rob said, who then looked up at the house. “Will he just hurry up?”

On cue, David came out, followed by Willie and Tracey, who stood in the shade of their maple tree. It was already getting warm in the Valley. Paul and Jesse got into the back seats of the cab while David rode shotgun with Rob. Everyone made sure to send a final wave to Tracey as the truck turned the corner and disappeared.

“Okay, let’s go! The weekend awaits!” Paul said.

“Well, that wasn’t too bad,” David said.

“It was easier than the memorial,” Rob said.

“Rob, you don’t count. You gave the eulogy and barely held it together,” said Paul. “For all your Trump crap, you’re a true bleeding heart.”

“Let’s not get into that,” said Jesse. “Let’s not ruin the trip within the first five minutes.”

“That’s right,” said David. “A moratorium on politics. Plus, isn’t anyone else interested to see what’s in the Lake Trip Log?”

“Yes, let’s do that,” said Jesse.

David mock-cleared his throat and began: “1995! It started off as just something to record his hopes and dreams for life after high school, and this is what we got. Well, here you go, he says it right here.”

*Why am I writing this? Mom said it would be good for me to put down memories in a book so I can look back at this summer when I’m old and remember the good ol’ days. I really don’t get why, but after this epic weekend, I thought, why not? So here’s my recollection of the fun my friends and I had this past weekend.*

*I guess I’ll start from the very beginning, when I first brought up the idea. We were all hanging out at Pete’s. I started delivering pizzas there when David was promoted to waiter, and this was our summer gathering spot to fill ourselves with garlic knots, pizza, and sandwiches with our employee discount.*

“Those knots were awesome,” Rob said, licking his lips.

“Shut up,” Paul said. “Let him continue.”