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The Instinct of Climbing a Fence

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Sometimes Jacob Arthur still gets afraid of the dark. He climbs into his parents’ bed. He sprawls like a Labrador might, taking up just enough space to be annoying. Sometimes he burrows into the blankets, between his sleeping parents, lifting his mother’s arm, his toes cold as they pass over his father’s bare calf on his way to a vacant pillow. He hibernates against them. Their own little cub.

One evening in May, Jacob’s mother kept him away from the newspaper and the television. She bribed him with a Lego set, one of the trinkets she kept in the linen closet behind fitted sheets. Jacob knew she kept toys like this on hand. In case of an emergency. Maybe an unexpected
birthday party, a broken arm, a failed math exam. At first, Jacob did not know why she gave him a new set, but he tore open the cardboard packaging and dumped the interlocking bricks out of the box. He did not take out the folded instruction manual, which would have shown him how to make a spaceship.

Earlier that day, Jacob heard the phone ring as he reached into the cupboards for a bag of pretzels. He heard his mother gasp. She held the phone to her ear with one hand, put the other over her mouth. She looked around the kitchen. Jacob knew that she checked if he was nearby. He knew something was wrong. He watched his mother, and noticed that she did not cry. Something was wrong, but she was not going to cry about it in front of him.

She asked the neighbor if she thought the boys read the warnings, if they knew how dangerous bears could be. Jacob heard that much. She said maybe they did not read very well. Jacob read well. Jacob had made a smooth transition into chapter books. He liked biographies: athletes, politicians, sometimes scientists. Jacob listened to her while sorting the Legos into little piles based on shape and color before starting on the fort he planned to build. Jacob heard his mother ask why anyone deliberately did
dangerous things.

When she hung up the phone, Jacob’s mother left the kitchen. She closed the door to her bedroom to speak in a low voice to Jacob’s father. Jacob could not hear what she said, and he did not try to listen.

Jacob’s father said the kids were stupid. He pulled off his tie. He sat on the bed. She stood in front of him, looking out the window, then moved to pull down the blinds. She asked him how to tell Jacob. Should she show him articles or let him watch the news? He said he didn’t know the answers to all of her questions. He said the kids were stupid. He said those boys tried to act tougher than they were, older than they were. He expected her to cry. Other kids might tell him about the blood, about the shots. When she sat down on the bed next to her husband her hand became a vise on his wrist; she leaned her head on his shoulder. Mothers know all about possibilities. They know all about whose child it could have been.

“Will he have nightmares?” she said.

He said, “I don’t know. Maybe. Probably.”
She said, “Do you think Jacob would do that?”
“I hope not,” he said.
She pointed out that he would not have done it even if they dared him because the fence was so high. She caught herself wanting Jacob to be afraid.

When his mother walked into his room, Jacob set aside the fort: four terraced walls of colored bricks stacked on a base plate. When she told him, tousling his hair, he covered his face with the collar of his shirt. She read somewhere to describe death concretely. There was an accident at the zoo last night. Bjorn died.

Jacob knew his friends had wanted to get into the zoo. Mikey and Duddy and Bjorn. Mikey’s older brother Valon was thirteen and he said he had snuck into the zoo after it closed once. Valon said he was going to get back in there one day to pet one of the lions. Jacob laughed and told him that people are not really supposed to pet lions. Duddy said he saw a man pet a lion on TV. It was then that Valon told them they probably did not have the guts to even climb the fence. Mikey brought it up a few days later. He said they should find a way in there, to show Valon. Duddy
said there was no way he was petting a lion. But he liked the idea of free cotton candy. Jacob did not even want to go, but he knew they were going. Listening to his mother tell the story, Jacob thought maybe he should have told someone. Jacob worried.

When his mother left the room, Jacob broke apart the fort. He put all of the pieces into the bucket where he kept all of his other Legos, then shook it. It made a lot of noise—so many tiny pieces crashing around.

The eleven-acre zoo closed hours before the three boys entered. Mikey reminded them his brother had visited after hours before. Duddy wondered if Valon even told the truth. He pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose as he often did, and tried to hide his worry and his doubt. Bjorn laughed.

They climbed the fence. It was ten feet high. It took the boys a few minutes to clamber over the railing, shimmying up the posts then sliding down the other side.

They walked past the kangaroos and the ostriches, pressing pennies into coin machines, pounding on the latched screens where in the daytime mothers ordered cotton candy and soft-serve
ice cream. Maybe they felt safe locked in, as if no one could come to disturb an expansive game of hide and seek. Not one car might speed pass if they threw a ball too far. They could not be prevented from having fun. They could not hear their mothers calling about bedtime and school tomorrow and washing their hands.

They planned on simply walking around to see the seals, but then one of them remembered the moat surrounding the polar bears. Mikey kept thinking about his brave brother Valon—he had to tell him he was not afraid of breaking any rules.

The moat was ten feet wide. The boys knew how to climb fences. They knew how to jump high. They threw their clothes off the same way they threw them on the concrete at the community pool next to sour licorice and beverages with flimsy plastic lids. Two pairs of shorts, size 10 and 10x. A blue tee shirt that read Jingle Bells, All Girls Smell, a discarded gray hoodie with sticky Swedish fish in the pocket.

When Bjorn climbed over the fence, Mikey squeezed through the bars, angling his shoulders, craning his neck around. If he could get in he could get out.

Bjorn walked quietly over to the moat and slipped in. He
said the water was warm. He said it was not deep at all. It was two feet or so. Just like taking a bath. He said the bears were asleep up in their little cave, but his voice echoed through its walls.

Duddy watched Mikey and he watched Bjorn. Duddy said his stomach hurt. He said maybe it wasn’t a good idea, even though he had already thrown his clothes across to the other side. He stood outside the fence like a normal spectator at the zoo, as if he could have had a map in hand or a little bag of popcorn. Yet he stood there in his underwear, boxers with schools of fish on them, his scrawny white legs exposed, baby fat still padding his torso.

Duddy watched. He also screamed the loudest. Later he told his mom he just wanted to go home.

Mikey and Bjorn played. They submerged their heads in water. Their bodies dripped. They splashed each other’s faces. Forearms cut through the water to create ripples, waves. It was not wide enough to really race across, not deep enough to dive.

Bjorn was the tallest of the three, the biggest.

He threw Mikey’s shorts to the far side of the moat. People said this is what woke up the bears, but others suspected the boys’ laughter, the taunting that likely sounded like a game of capture
the flag or Marco Polo.

One of the bears ambled down the rocky cliff of its enclosure and stared at Bjorn. Bjorn was quiet, still. Mikey froze. Duddy put his hand over his mouth.

Both bears suddenly stood feet away from the moat. Mikey stood closer to the west bank, nearer the fence, nearer Duddy. A bear lunged at Bjorn, and he screamed. Mikey scrambled out of the moat, trying to get back through the bars as Duddy yelled, shaking, sobbing, standing in his boxer shorts. In one swipe, Bjorn was unconscious. The bear dragged his body over the rocks and up into the den.

When police officers and rescue workers arrived, they did not see Bjorn: just a tug of war consisting of his remains. Blood on white coats. His tiny rib cage ripped open. They found nothing left of his legs at all.

They shot both bears. A twelve-gauge shotgun and a .38 caliber rifle.

The police, the mayor, and Bjorn's mother: they all walked through that den the way they may have surveyed a crime scene. Even investigators are not really used to that sort of thing.
After Jacob's mother left his room, he thought about Bjorn. They traded baseball cards and took swimming lessons together. Bjorn was bigger than him, and seemed older than the other boys. This was because Bjorn could always do brave things. The zoo did not seem dangerous.

Jacob found out later that Duddy and Mikey saw it all happen. He never asked them about it.

The boys found three approaches to handling the dare. First, Mikey acted tough. He came up with the dare, which is something his mother knew much later. He came up with it, so he did not have to do it. He could just watch. When he came home and confessed, his mother sat down and wept. She clutched the son she wanted to slap. He sent his friend into the bears' den. His face burned red. His cheeks felt hot. His body quivered. Mikey carried the scene with him for the rest of his life. Especially the nine-foot bear, tussling with limp arms, mauling an unconscious body.

Mikey would not so much as walk past Prospect Park
after that, even after renovations rendered it nearly unrecognizable. Eighteen million dollars worth. Planned before the attack. Convenient after it happened. They tore down the enclosure, the cave. Pavement covers the moat.

Mikey asked the same questions again and again. Did Bjorn’s Mom see his body? Why did I say that dare? He wanted to sit on his mother’s lap. He wanted her to rock him in the rocking chair. She began singing him to sleep again at night.

Duddy took a second approach, backing out of the dare, offering reasonable excuses like My mom wouldn’t like it, or Come on guys, let’s check out the flamingoes. His parents still lectured him for standing there and watching it all happen.

No one told him he did the right thing by not going in.

They did tell him he should be glad he was not hurt. But they reminded him that two bears took a twelve-gauge shotgun and a .38 caliber rifle because he did not have the courage to stop his friends. And Bjorn died. They told him he might have prevented it. Duddy felt guilt, though so many others never found him to blame. They told him to be grateful for his life. He heard
screaming in his sleep continually. He wept and wept and washed his hands. He licked his lips raw with anxiety. He pulled nearly all of his eyelashes out.

Bjorn obviously took the third approach. He jumped right in.

Jacob cried. Because Bjorn did not even have legs anymore. Because he needed to go to the funeral. He wasn’t sure what he was supposed to say when he passed Bjorn’s body in that large box with its lid shut. He felt kind of sure Bjorn would not really like all of those roses on the top of it. He saw Duddy and Mikey there, but did not say anything to them. They both kept their heads down.

Jacob wanted to take Bjorn’s baseball cards back to his apartment but he didn’t tell his mother he still had them. He did not want to see Bjorn’s little sister or his dog.

Many people had nightmares. Those two boys. And all the boys in their classroom. And all the girls in their classroom. And the kindergarteners, and the sixth graders. The brothers and sisters and
grandparents and babysitters. Bjorn left them behind. And he left a
lonely puppy, an unfinished reading log, lost action figures.
Mothers talked about whom to blame. Foolish boys who
climb fences. Security guards. Whoever built the enclosure.
They talked about other mothers who were not watching.

Jacob was not afraid of heights. He climbed lampposts, he
stood on roofs. He climbed over fences to retrieve balls; he stood
on the railings of balconies. Jacob was not afraid of falling.
However, when summer came, Jacob did not swim. He simply
refused. While other children practiced blowing bubbles in
the shallow end or circling around the pool with kickboards and
foam noodles, Jacob stood at the gate to the pool and refused to
go in. He said swimming made him sick. He said swimming was
not any fun.
He never called Mikey or Duddy after that day. Jacob said
they were not good friends. Jacob said good friends do not let re­
ally bad things happen. When Jacob’s mother asked him what he
meant sometimes he yelled. His face became red.
Months passed and Jacob made new friends, but for a while, he
played alone in his room. He had quite the Lego collection. He built a series of forts, each one with higher walls than the last. The first few forts had windows and doors, but Jacob soon eliminated entryways from his designs. For a while he put his creations on his bed, which gave him an excuse not to sleep in it.

But Jacob Arthur said he did not have nightmares.