

Over The Rim

Mike Abbott wrestled a gray sweat shirt over his head as the heavy doors of Crater Lake Lodge banged shut behind him. Before he even stepped off the curb into the foggy parking lot, he could hear the whines and plaintive yips coming from the back of his dad's rusty Suburban. Had the puppy been doing that all night, or did it just hear him coming?

He felt terrible leaving the poor thing all alone in its crate, but the lodge didn't allow pets. Besides, his empathy was quickly overridden by how pissed he was at his dad for getting him a puppy in the first place. He hadn't wanted a dog, or this trip. Buying a puppy to make everything better, like Mike was seven instead of seventeen, was just the final indicator of how messed up his dad had become since the accident. His dad had always been solid, like an immovable rock. Now, that rock was shaken, split, crushed to gravel that shifted beneath Mike's feet. They weren't a family anymore. They were just two men living in the same house making the worst of a bad situation.

Mike dug the truck's keys from his jeans' pocket, opened the passenger door, and grabbed the flashlight from the glove box. After releasing and leashing the dog, he was hauled to a bush and stood, his arms crossed against the cold, as the pup's steady stream pattered loudly against the dry ground.

Fog pooled in the crater, seeming almost solid, like whipped cream served up in a giant's bowl. Far below and unseen, Crater Lake and Wizard Island nestled in quiet puffiness. The drive in yesterday, full of Southeastern Oregon's piercing sky and jagged lava cliffs had, overnight, been shrouded by a gentle veil of fantasy.

Not wanting to go back to the room, to his dad's quiet stoicism, Mike let the dog pull him along the park's asphalt viewing path. A white sign rose out of the fog ahead of them and he shone the dim flashlight on it. The crisp, black lettering read:

**Keep animals leashed at all times.
Pets have been known to vanish over the rim.**

Mike was contemplating the oddness of that message when the puppy jerked the nylon leash right out of his hand and shot off into the mist.

"Shit!" Mike said, stumbling through the dark after it, highly aware that the low stone wall to his right was the only thing between the path and a very long drop to the end of his life. The flashlight, batteries waning, was useless, so he followed the sound of the dog crashing through the brush, barking, perhaps chasing some elusive, park-savvy rodent. Five minutes later, Mike came to an overlook and found the puppy pawing at a chipmunk's hole that tunneled right under the wall.

"Bad dog, Jack!" he scolded as he fumbled on the ground for the leash.

But the puppy ignored him, lifting its head suddenly, cocking it to one side, and looking fixedly over the wall.

Mike felt the rough nylon leash against his fingers, felt it slip away as the puppy sprang, leaping over the rim and vanishing into the fog.

Stunned, Mike braced himself against the sounds of the fall: rocks tumbling, brush cracking, the horrible yelps of a four-month-old puppy plunging to its death. Instead, he heard absolutely nothing.

He waited, his mind struggling to reason. Maybe the dog's leash had caught on something and Jack was dangling just over the edge silently strangling as he stood doing nothing.

He got down on his knees and reached over the wall. His hands scraping against vertical rock that crumbled at his touch but made no sound. He groped along the cliff's edge, but felt nothing resembling a leash or a puppy. He called Jack over and over, hoping to hear a responding bark or whimper from a ledge somewhere below. Still, there was nothing.

That was when the truth began to sink in. Jack was gone. A moment ago, he had been a living, vibrant thing. And now he wasn't. It seemed impossible that existence could turn on a dime like that, but it had happened before. With his mom. And now with Jack.

Mike clutched the low wall he was leaning against, an uncontrollable rage rising up in him against the National Park Service. What kind of idiots let innocent people and animals walk along a 4,000-foot-deep caldera with only a three-foot-high wall between them and certain death? Oh, but they had warned him. There had been that sign rising out of the fog like some heartless oracle. Fuck that! You couldn't just sign away your responsibility. Someone was going to pay. He was going to go wake up the lodge manager right now, and bring him out here, and they would do something. They would get Jack back.

Mike pushed against the wall for leverage and started to rise.

Rocks gave way under his hands, a whole section of the wall folding gently outward under the pressure of his weight.

He couldn't right himself. Couldn't counteract the loss of balance quickly enough. Halfway to a stand, Mike Abbott pitched forward, headfirst and soundlessly, into the fog.

A few minutes later a warm glow began in the east as the sun rose and the mists slowly dispelled to the raucous chatter of high-desert songbirds.

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He opened his eyes but the world remained black. A breeze blew against his face and the ground poked him sharply. He saw a faint glow in the distance. He stood up and stumbled toward it. His legs got tangled in his robes and he fell painfully to his knees onto stone. It hurt so badly he lay

curled up for a few minutes cursing and gasping for breath. It gave him time to wonder why he was wearing robes.