

## Jonah

Jonah gazed into the blackened void of the massive, purple water slide tunnel. At the foot of the slide's exit lies a large catch pool with a lifeguard standing shin-deep in the middle. Normally, the guard wouldn't allow anyone to enter the catch pool from the stairs used to exit, but Jonah was the exception. He dipped into the water, but did not disturb it. He passed the guard and stood dead center in front of the tunnel, almost entering. Distant voices could be heard bouncing through the tunnel, shadowed by fading reverb. The tunnel seemed to inch towards him, its blinding darkness encompassing his peripheral like a venom consuming blood.

Jonah found himself inside the tunnel, the bright innocence of the rest of the park retracting from reality and the hole of the tunnel shrinking like a magnifying glass drifting away. He looked back at the never ending darkness. The screaming grew louder. A faint yellow reflection painted the wet wall of the slide where the corner bended towards the exit, and a moment later a massive tube holding a family of four rushed into view. Their skeletons were bloodied and soaked, water spewing from their jaws like fountains. Jonah didn't flinch as they passed through him. He turned to see four ordinary people—a father, a mother, a young son, and an even younger daughter—exit the tube once the lifeguard moved it to the stairs. Their smiles popped with laughter, the children ready to go again and the parents trying to keep up with them. He grimaced at the son with haunting eyes before shifting his focus to the parents, of who significantly lightened his stare into an envious brow movement.

The lifeguard changed the slide light to green. Jonah peered once more into the tunnel, only to this time hear not an excited scream but an agonized wail. Fearful squints populated his face before he closed his eyes and rapidly sunk into the catch pool's drain. He was then shot out of one of the jets in the park's leisure pool, propping up in its center. The pool was extremely

crowded, with dozens of children and adults besetting Jonah, their splashes and movement obscuring his view. He looked in several directions in a panic. The room seemed to get louder and louder; all he could hear was the children laughing. He began to phase through everyone in order to find the pool's exit, each person's body heat making Jonah tense up more and more, once again closing his eyes.

He reached the side step to get out and found himself, despite his form, completely out of breath and needing to "lay down" on the concrete. As soon as he opened his eyes, he shut them again when realizing that the setting sun's glimmer was piercing through the windows and landing on his face. He blocked the light with his hand and sat up. The rays coming through the window painted a beautiful, crisp scene with every particle of dust slowly floating through the air like snow flurries under a street lamp on a peaceful winter night.

Jonah would always be outside during the winter. His parents would take him and him alone to sled, build snow forts, have snowball battles, or just let him lay down in the snow, cushioning him perfectly. He would watch the snowflakes trickle down across the neighborhood from the comfort and warmth of his bedroom window, the smell of cookies diluting the air and the sound of his father listening to the latest message on their home phone from the school letting them know that all classes are cancelled tomorrow.

Inside the park, there is only heat. The water turns to vapor from the temperature, lifting the chemicals into the air at all times. Despite these constant conditions, Jonah remains cold, uncomfortably so; the dichotomy yields intense anguish of which he knows not the solution.

Having collected himself after escaping the pool's chaos, Jonah got up to float to the window, putting his arm down to stare outside. The trees blew gently in the wind, their leaves a warm assortment of yellow, red, orange, and brown. In between their stems he could see sun rays

shooting through the intense foliage and a lone squirrel scouring for nuts in the middle of the serenity. Jonah's expression of awe quickly faded when he shifted his attention to the parking lot where clusters of children were running and playing as their parents and grandparents packed everything into their caravans. They laughed as streams of water endlessly discharged out of their bloodied skulls from all openings.

Jonah turned his head to look at the ground, closing his eyes for a moment. He went into the middle of the park and used the water vapor to float up to the ceiling. The guests were all leaving—the park was closing for the night. Jonah has watched the park close countless times. The guests take way longer to leave than they realistically should and the staff has to clean up the facility after them before they can go home. Once they're gone, he's alone for hours upon hours. He's gone through innumerable escape attempts: following the pumps to some other facility, moving with the unpredictable rain, following the water vapor into the sky, all in vain. Nothing was constant enough. The pumps are an unnavigable maze that always leads back into the park somehow, the rain is too erratic to follow with the drops evaporating before he can get anywhere, and the vapor is just as random as the rain once it gets outdoors. He needed something solid, unmoving, but that was hard to get down here.

With the last of the staff exiting the building, Jonah watched from one of the party room windows as several lifeguards talked and laughed and playfully pushed each other in the parking lot. A couple others had busted out their longboards to ride on. The park manager pulled up next to them in his jet black car and waved goodbye a moment later. Their bloody jaws smiled as water poured out. Jonah closed his eyes tight and leaned his head down a bit. He heard wailing growing louder around him, but lifted his head anyway. He opened his eyes and saw the

lifeguards hugging. They were normal. They had skin. They had coats. They were warm. They were happy. Jonah smiled.

That was when the first flurry struck the window. Another. A larger one. They melted on the glass. The outdoor world started bustling with them. The lifeguards waved goodbye and ran to their cars. It started coming down heavier. The asphalt turned white. Jonah floated to the doors at high velocity. Locked tight. Same with the windows. The cars drove away. The roof windows were closed. The parking lot lights shut off. He was still in the park. He began to let out evanescent tears, of no use to him, or anyone for that matter. They weren't real.

Through the pitch darkness shone two lights through the window. Jonah furrowed his brow and squinted. The lights got closer and closer until he saw the car turn into a parking spot. The park manager pushed open the door and rushed to the side entrance of the building. He unlocked the door and temporarily disabled the alarm before running into the office. Just before the side door closed, Jonah squeezed outside and into the snow. He began to move about freely, looking towards the night sky with his arms raised up. He moved to the middle of the lot and laid down in the snow.

The park manager relocked the side entrance and jogged back to his car. He opened the door and was about to get in, but stopped but for a moment to look to the center of the parking lot. Silent. Vacant. He looked down for a moment before getting in his seat and driving off.