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## Optimal View

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Optimal View  
By: Andy Penk

“Now that’s a view if I’ve ever seen one.” Donny adored the valley below from his position upon the smooth cliff ledge. He took in the array of colors that Mother Nature had craftily blended together, mixing different shades of greens, oranges, reds, yellows, and a calm purple sky to paint a picture of serenity. He breathed in the air and held it in for a moment. Then he let it go.

“Let’s camp here for the night, Chuck,” Donny decided, mesmerized by the scenery unfolding around him.

“Donny, I think we should keep moving. This cliff doesn’t seem too stable,” Chuck grumbled as he started back towards the trail.

“Chuck, you don’t know a thing about stability. Besides, it’ll take us years before we reach a spot with a view like this.” Donny set his pack down from his back upon the ledge. He knelt down and unzipped the pack, reaching his hand into it, scrounging for a bag of trail mix.

Chuck moodily turned around and threw his pack carelessly to the ground across from where Donny knelt. He stood still, glaring at Donny, watching him pull the bag of trail mix from his pack. Without looking up, Donny quipped, “If you’re just going to stand there all pissy, you can at least make yourself useful and gather some firewood.”

“Fine, I’ll be back in a bit.” Chuck turned and had disappeared amidst the leaves within a few moments. Donny opened his bag of trail mix and began to munch, while the crackling of branches faded into the distance. Soon after, there was silence. An occasional gust of wind was the only sound. Within the peace of it all, Donny lost himself in his thoughts.

*I hate to see him so damn broken. He’s a lost boy living the life of a man. I hope this outing does him some good. He needs to get his mind off of things. After everything that happened with Nathan and Julianne... I can’t imagine what he’s going through. I hope he knows how much I love him.*

The call of an eagle overhead stole Donny from his reflection. Soaring in the purple sky, the eagle looked as majestic as ever. Donny dropped a nut, that clung to his scruffy, greying beard. *Life is beautiful.*

.....

Brandon Charles “Chuck” Sullivan walked among the trees with desperation. He stood so small in comparison to their towering stature. He angrily grasped their branches, dislocated them, and dropped them. He wandered about, breaking trees until fatigue took hold of him.

He collapsed, falling onto his knees. The weakness of his muscles demanded him to rest. Chuck attempted to regain his composure, attempting to get back on his feet, but his knees met the dirt again. There was a chill in the breeze that pained his lungs. *Breathe in. Breathe out. Breathe in. Breathe out...* He took it slow, yet it still hurt. He began to rub his hands together, trying to warm them. It was no use. He had left his gloves in his pack.

His hands eventually settled, clasped together as though they were frozen. Around him, he heard a sudden rustling of leaves. Within a moment they were floating about in the air. The trees began to bend from their upright positions into unnatural curvatures. Branches that he had snapped off of the trees flew by his head, consistently, nearly missing him. Though facing much resistance, his eyelids eventually fell, putting an end to the fatigue induced madness around him.

“What are you doin’ there on the ground?” a familiar voice called him back to life.

Chuck opened his eyes to see a young boy standing before him with unkempt blonde hair, a Seahawks jersey, and worn jeans. The chaos of the woods seemed to have settled, and a sense of naturalness regained precedence. A rush of memories overtook Chuck. Looking into the boy’s green eyes, he began to cry.

“Dad, why are you crying?” the boy looked tenderly at his father. The boy misconstrued his father’s tears as sorrow instead of joy as they poured from his eyes.

“Nathan... how?” Chuck, choking on his words, questioned his son.

“How what, dad?” he asked curiously of his father.

“How... how are... how are you here?”

“Why wouldn’t I be here, dad?”

“The fire... you...” the tears poured with more intensity, overpowering his words.

“Don’t be silly, dad. I’ll always be here.” He smiled joyfully at his father. Through his tears, Chuck stared at his son’s face, not understanding how his son was with him, but not caring. After a moment of silent eye contact, Nathan enthusiastically suggested, “Let’s play tag!” He quickly turned and bolted off into the woods, shouting, “You’re it!” as he ran.

Chuck hurriedly threw himself from the ground and dashed after his son. His legs were weak and were struggling to carry him. “Stop! Come back!” he barked, his lungs struggling to breathe even more as he sprinted after his son.

Nathan did not look back and did not slow down.

Chuck was on the verge of breaking as he chased after the epicenter of his life’s greatest joy and greatest guilt. His vision began to narrow, focusing solely on Nathan’s small, figure, furthering itself from him. The leaves and branches rustled and crackled as they sprinted upon them, but those sounds faded from Chuck’s mind as well. His mind is consumed by the words he could say to his son.

*Please come back! I’m sorry for everything. I promise I’ll make it up to you. We can move to a new apartment in Seattle. I’ll buy you that Batman action figure that you said you wanted. I’ll buy you whatever you want! I’ll find you a new Mommy. She’ll be perfect for our family. We can start over. It’ll be better this time. I promise. I’ll make sure your mother never hurts you again. Please come back!*

The ground suddenly disappeared below him. Chuck fell several feet down into a ditch. A loud snap resonated as his leg smashed against a jagged rock. “Shit!” he cried. Pain shot throughout his body. He looked down to see his pant leg soaked in blood. He clutched the blood-soaked pant leg, trying to apply as much pressure as possible to slow the bleeding. He had left his bandages in his pack.

After a minute, it occurred to him that Nathan was no longer in sight. He threw his body forward. Removing his hands from his leg, he dug his fingers into the hard earth, and attempted to drag his body out of the ditch in order to continue chasing his son. His body was too weak to move. He laid flat on his stomach in the dirt, with blood steadily leaking from his leg. He mumbled to himself, “Shit... shit... shit... please come back... I’m sorry I let you down...”

Nightfall was steadily approaching, and Chuck laid helpless and alone in the woods. He hoped Nathan would come back one more time, so he could see his beautiful face again — that face that reminded him so much of his mother. It was such an appealing thought, yet it sincerely haunted him. But it was the only thing he wanted.

Chuck suddenly shrieked out into the cold night air, “Kill me already! Kill me! Just let me die!” Looking up to the stars, he expressed his spite to God. “You killed my son! You killed my family!” He cried. And then there was silence, that was eventually followed by the sound of steadily approaching footsteps and an intense rainfall.

“Chuck! Thank God,” Chuck heard Donny call to from above the ditch, “Are you alright?”

“He was here, Donny.”

“Who was here?”

“Nathan.”

“You know he wasn’t, Chuck.”

“But he was.”

“He wasn’t.”

Chuck let the sound of rainfall fill the space between them, while Donny hoisted him up from the ground.

“Let’s get you back to our packs, and I’ll bandage you up.”

They walked on together, Donny holding Chuck up, and Chuck desperately hoisting his guilt.