



The Suicide Machine

(A Christmas Story)

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(a Christmas story)

An old man sat with his thick hand stroking the arm of his chair. His thin hair stood out from his head on its own directive, his skin was wrinkled and loose on his body, his movements were slow, and his body made noises every time he moved. But through the tired flesh his eyes peered clearly and intently out to the four children around him.

The abundant fleece of snow covering the mountains could be seen through the large windows in front of him, spread down the hillside and over the top of the neighboring peaks. The children's parents, and the parents' parents, were skiing and would not return for the rest of the afternoon. Logs burned in an immense, brick fireplace to his left, more as decoration than utility, and Christmas ornaments hung from the ceiling, the walls, and the large spruce tree in the corner. Presents were piled under the tree, wrapped in red, green, silver, flowers, cartoon characters, and tiny Santa Clauses.

One strong, withered hand clutched a glass of eggnog, and a bottle of whiskey stood on a nearby table.

"There's a Christmas story I've never told you children," the old man said, as he leaned forward and squinted his eyes at them. "It's my favorite story, one that reminds me why we gather here like this every winter."

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A young man in his early twenties put one large bag of marijuana, one large bag of hashish, and one small bag of marijuana inside a small backpack, slid a silver flask into the

pocket of his jacket, and pushed a pair of dark sunglasses over his stern, gray eyes. The sun was large and bright as it began its ascent over the eastern peak, reflected harshly off the clean, powdery snow outside. He took the backpack and walked out to a beaten four wheel drive, entered the driver's door, and set the pack on the back seat.

"Jason," said Pete, another young man who entered the passenger side of the truck, "this new run is going to be so killer. New boards, new boots, new run, we are going to heaven today."

Jason engaged the first gear and pushed on the throttle. "Heaven. This run's gonna rock so hard heaven could never compare. Straight up rush from hell and nobody but the two of us to grab it and ride it as raw as Cilla's sushi." They pulled out onto the main road, and Jason put more pressure on the accelerator. "You got the wine, right?"

"Two bottles, wrapped and waiting in my bag."

When they reached the heliport the sun had nearly gotten half of itself over the peak and it burned fiercely. A tall man in large sunglasses and a flight suit met them as they parked.

"Good morning," he said with a grin. "Are you ready to go up?"

"All we need to do is get loaded and take off, Heath," answered Jason as he hopped from the truck.

As Jason and Pete took their packs from the back seat, Heath retrieved their boards from the back hatch and led them to a polished, black helicopter. The equipment was stowed, everyone was seated, and the blades turned. Heath maneuvered the helicopter slowly away from the landing pad and into the open sky. The pad and the truck fell behind them faster, and the swirls of snow from the rotary blades settled into a soft dust below them. Jason opened his backpack and removed the large bags of marijuana and hashish. He jumped

into the front seat next to Heath and tossed the bags into the pilot's lap.

"Alright," said Heath, as he examined the bags in his lap. "Can always count on you."

"No, no," said Jason, "we can always count on you. Our chariot of excitement. Should we spark one?"

"By all means," said Heath. "As they say, don't fly unless you want to get high."

"Pete," Jason turned his head toward the back.

"Already skinning one," said Pete. "A big, fat, welcome to the day baby."

Heath inhaled the final puff of smoke, tossed the remainder of the joint out, then dove the helicopter down, pulling up at the last moment to blow on the hillside with his blades. He swung out in an arc away from the land and tilted them all in their seats. Jason grabbed a handle next to his seat and looked back to Pete.

"Hold on, Methuselah, I think our pilot's stoned again." Jason gripped the handle tighter as Heath responded with a more severe arc, causing him to slide in his seat. "Yeah, yeah, here we go."

The helicopter carried them up the mountain to a peak where the entire sun was now visible, and Heath steadied it near the ground.

"Okay, the taxi has landed, boys," said Heath. "Have fun and I'll see you soon."

"A nip before the cold," said Jason. He pulled the flask from his pocket and passed it to Pete.

"Thank you, thank you," said Pete, took a swallow then handed the flask back to Jason, who took his drink with a nod before redepositing the container in his pocket. Pete and Jason zipped their jackets, tightened their packs, clipped into their boards, and jumped to the mountain below. Heath pulled away,

and they surfed down the slope through the miniature blizzard the helicopter made to say goodbye.

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Pete flew from a cliff, grabbed his board and pulled a flip over the exposed rocks below, then landed smoothly. Jason followed, added a twist to his flip, and landed in Pete's tracks. They skidded to a stop near some more rocks and dismounted their boards.

"Time for lunch?" asked Pete, as he removed his pack and jacket.

"Indeed," said Jason, "the perfect spot for lunch."

Their jackets became cushions on the rocks, and Pete took the bottles of wine from his pack. They looked down the untouched snow over the valley and drank their wine. The sun lit everything, prominent in the day, reflected off their sunglasses and bottles. Once finished, Pete slid the empty bottles back in his pack, then the two friends redonned their jackets, clipped into their boards, and continued to carve a path down the mountain.

Boards stacked outside, Jason and Pete entered the ski lodge and walked upstairs to the bar. Vacationers and locals mixed around the fireplaces, drinks in hand, and talked merrily amidst the poppy music that radiated from the speakers around the room. A thin woman with green eyes and a heavy gray sweater jumped on Jason with her arms around his neck and kissed him.

"Just in time," she said and kissed his mouth then his neck. "Everyone's here, and your drinks are on the table."

"You're so warm, Cilla," said Jason. He grabbed her butt, pulled her up, and returned her kiss.

"Just for you," she replied.

The group of friends toasted the evening, ate supper, talked loudly, sang obnoxiously, and danced recklessly. Pricilla rubbed

her cheek against Jason's as they danced and wrapped her arms around his body.

"I'm pissed at you," Pricilla whispered into his ear.

"What?" asked Jason. "I've been boarding all day. How could I have done anything wrong?"

"Heath told us about your trip up to the peak. You know I hate it when you get him stoned when you're flying."

"Aw, that's nothing. He was getting stoned the whole time he flew for the Navy."

"Not with you in the seat beside him. And you and Pete had a liquid lunch again, didn't you?"

"Just one bottle of wine."

"One for you and one for Pete?"

"Well, we made it here fine. It was a great day."

"I love you," said Pricilla. "You know that, don't you? I really, really do love you."

"I love you too," said Jason, took her face in his hands and kissed her on the mouth.

"Do you?" she asked.

"You know I love you."

"You're going to kill yourself. I can't stand the way you play. Do you have any idea what it's going to be like for me when I have to go to your funeral?"

"I love you," said Jason and kissed her again.

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Jason woke up to the tasteless ring of his phone.

"Get up and have some breakfast," said Pete through the speaker. "I have a surprise for you today."

"What is it?" asked Jason.

"Oh, my god, you're going to love this," said Pete.

"So what is it?" asked Jason.

"An experiment."

"What kind of experiment?"

"You'll see. Trust me, you're going to be making loads of special ingredient when you see these beauties."

Breakfast was an orange and a bowl of cereal with raisins. It was followed by a beer in front of the window, watching for Pete to drive up. Jason's eyes squinted as he looked for his sunglasses. He looked around him, searched through the living room, checked his bedroom, then finally found them on the kitchen table. Just as he settled back in front of the window Pete walked in the door.

"Get your gloves and let's go," said Pete.

"Have a beer," responded Jason.

"Take 'em with us. We gotta get going. This is way too cool to wait."

They parked alongside two other vehicles and joined the two women and three men who awaited their arrival. Heath rushed to meet them.

"Merry Christmas, men," he said. "Did you tell him yet?" Heath asked Pete.

"Nope," said Pete. "Couldn't spoil this surprise. Just told him how orgasmic it's going to be."

"Do I get to know now?" asked Jason.

"You get to see now," said Heath. "C'mon." He led them to the other people and two large, black contraptions. "Stealth, huh."

"Hanggliders?" said Jason.

"No, no, no," said Heath. "Experimental stealth gliders from the Navy."

"How'd you get them?" asked Jason.

"You know," shrugged Heath, "it's Christmas."

"Yeah, cool," said Jason. "So what's different about them?"

"Sleek ass design, fast as hell, agile," said Heath. "They're nicknamed the devil's wings."

"Alright," said Jason, "rockin'. I'm ready."

"Tell him," said Pete. "Tell him about the special thing."

"The special thing," said Heath, "is what makes it so Christmas." He pointed to a level on the glider. "You're going to think this baby's a rocket to start, but when you pull this level just watch the world disappear."

Jason and Pete strapped on their helmets and attached themselves to the gliders. With a couple steps they jumped from the cliff and dove down before making an ascent. The gliders flew faster than any civilian models they'd ever encountered, and their reactions had to be fast and tight to avoid crashing.

They zoomed into the sky, took the valley. Jason veered to the right, dipped and skimmed the tree line. Pete swung left, cut back and teased a rocky ledge. Both grabbed the air and went up. They swooped, they played, they hollered with adrenaline. Trees and rocks passed faster than they could follow, the ledge they jumped from shrunk behind them. They circled back and jetted over the heads of their friends. As the ledge disappeared in the opposite direction, Pete and Jason again turned toward their original heading.

Heath waved to them as they passed overhead. Pete looked to Jason and signaled. Simultaneously they pulled their levers and watched the landscape change from a frenzy to a blur. They flew so fast their screams of excitement were useless. Pete rushed forward as Jason curved left.

Jason came back around, brought his glider parallel to Pete's, and signaled.

Pete nodded in response.

They dove together and pulled up fast. Their gliders moved in unison, the noses reached upward, passed the axis, pulled them upside down, pointed down, then the tip of Pete's glider caught the back of Jason's.

A heavy rip and a sharp snap separated the gliders, and

they plummeted down, crashed through the trees and rocks below.

The gliders broke, their bodies bounced.

Snow covered the valley beautifully.

Blood covered the rocks around them.

Jason moved his right arm. His left arm didn't respond. He felt his head. His helmet was gone, but it had lasted long enough to save his life. He pulled his hand in front of his face and rubbed the blood between his fingers.

Cautiously, he tried to push himself up but fell back to the ground. He looked around the rocks, saw Pete, crawled with one hand to his friend.

Pete's helmet tilted to the side, cracked. His neck was limp, his torso punctured by a rod from the glider. Jason touched Pete, and Pete's body shifted. His head tilted farther and touched his back.

Jason removed the helmet and cradled Pete's head in his good arm. Smoothed the hair out of his eyes. "Fate is a fickle fiend." Jason kissed Pete on the top of his head. "You win, my friend. You win."

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The old man finished his eggnog and looked over to the table with his clean, gray eyes.

"Grandpa, Grandpa Hesseman," said one of the children. "What happened? What happened to Jason?"

"Jason? Well, children, he grew up, married the woman he loved, had children, became a grandfather, then a great-grandfather, and gathered his family every year to celebrate Christmas."

A thin, beautiful, old woman with happy, green eyes walked in the door with a plastic container in her arm. She walked over to the old man and kissed the scar on his head. The old man began to stand, but she put another kiss on his mouth and a

hand on his shoulder.

"I'll get it for you," she said and took his glass to the table. She spooned a ladle full of eggnog into the glass, added two ounces of whiskey, and returned to him. "And the neighbor made some cookies for you children." She opened the plastic container and passed the cookies to the children. "The kids will be back soon, then we can have dinner." She sat on her husband's lap and rested her head against his neck. "So what have you been doing?"

"Telling the children a Christmas story."

"You're so sweet. I love you."

"I love you too, Cilla."

THE END

