The End of the Line

“Are there any songs that remind you of me?”

It immediately becomes my favorite question anyone’s ever asked me. The truck rolls forward, Tastee Freez coming into sight, my Moe’s bag still warm in my lap. Almost home.

“Actually, I do. ‘All Your Favorite Bands’ by Dawes,” I say, looking at Jeff and grinning.

His faces opens up into a smile. A medal from graduation last week hangs from his mirror and reflects in the sun, casting his face in a gold light. “I haven’t heard that one,” he says, handing me his phone. I turn off Lord Huron, his favorite band, and bring up the song.

After the first verse, I say, “this is the part that really does it.”

From the car speaker, Dawes sings about hoping life without a chaperone is good, a car that runs forever, and hoping all their friend’s favorite bands stay together. We sit in silence, listening, smiling. Content. As the song comes to a close, the nostalgia of the acoustic guitar fades into a subtle silence as the verse that, for me, embodies Jeff Daniel Tupper, repeats for one final time. Dawes hopes others can see the person their friend always was to them.

Jeff pulls his truck onto the dirt road that leads into his farm, kicking up a cloud of dust behind us, letting the earth know we’ve arrived.

“Why that song?” he asks, turning to me.

“I don’t know, I just always felt like the Jeff you show me isn’t the same Jeff the rest of the world sees. You kind of have a reputation.”

His grin gets a little wider. “I kind of earned it, though.” Jeff is a bit of a player, and some people act like that makes him a misogynist. He’s never cheated, never done anything to hurt one of these girls, and has always been honest about his intentions. But he’s a big dude with muscles who gets with a lot of girls. People have an assumption about him, and even though I know that
in his heart he’s one of the kindest people I’ve ever met, a lot of people don’t look past the surface. People who have never talked to him try to tell me who my best friend is. As if they could ever know better than me.

“Don’t hate the player. Hate the game. And the other players. And the field,” I say. He laughs, and I join him. In the field on our right, cows mill about, eating grass. Jeff’s grandfather, who was my father’s boss, waves at me. The laughs feel realer here. Easier, too. “And that’s a fair point about you kind of earning it, but maybe not all of it. It just gets exhausting hearing people talk about your best friend like they know him better than you do. I want everyone to see the person you are to me.” The truck crawls to a stop in his parking spot. My dulled, golden ’03 Accord sits beside us, the passenger side torn apart with “racing stripes” I gave it the morning of the C of C interview weekend. I tried to park in a compact spot, but a car next to me was over the line and I didn’t realize it. Trying not to hit them, I scraped off the golden paint to leave a dirty brown stain on the wall of the garage. “And I really do hope all your favorite bands stay together.”

He laughs as our feet sink into the dewy grass and Atticus, his black lab, lopes over to say hello. He smells my Moe’s bag. “That’s the nicest thing you can say to someone.”

I slouch over the bathroom counter, staring into a puddle of my own vomit as I wipe my mouth. My throat burns as the smell of acid and old meat fills my nose. The taste of waste settles on my tongue. I wait for the ragged breathing and gagging to slow and look up. The man in the mirror isn’t someone I’m familiar with. The unnatural white lights make the grey in his face look decayed. He wears a suit with a crooked collar, an undone tie sagging around his neck. His clean
white shirt makes his skin look dirty. I turn from my broken reflection and pick up my glasses. There’s a knock at the door.

“B, it’s time to go.”

“I’ll be out in a minute.” My father and I both hear the shake in my voice. Neither of us address it. It’s not like he doesn’t know what’s wrong. We both know exactly what’s wrong, and neither of us can make it right. I close a shaky hand around the doorknob, looking at my hollow reflection for a final time. When I look at him, I feel nothing but pain.

“The end of the line, huh?” With my other hand, I turn off the angry lights. “Fuck you,” I say to the gray man, knowing he’s still there even if I can’t see him. I wonder if he sees me.

“I am . . . inevitable.”

We’re both silent, watching Thanos in his moment of triumph. He snaps. Nothing.

A CGI-constructed face contorts as it realizes all is lost. Robert Downey Jr. fills the screen, his presence holding Jeff and I in awe, as it did the seven other times we’d watched this movie.

“And I . . . am . . . Iron Man.” Robert snaps, and the false world goes white. I turn to my right, and Jeff’s face is just as white in the darkness of the playroom. A tear shines on his face.

“Hey, I have a question,” I say, not needing to look at the screen to know what’s happening. Iron Man’s dead.

“Shoot,” Jeff says, wiping the solitary tear from his face. I know he’d rather I not mention it. Normally I’d make fun of him, but then he might not answer my question.

“We’ve joked about us being Superman and Batman, but that’s not quite right. What super duo are we?”
Jeff smiles, and it makes me smile. “You’d be my sidekick. Something like Batman and Robin, except you’re not actually helpful. I fix stuff, and you just kinda watch.”

“Fuck you,” I say, laughing, and punch him in the arm. He raises a fist, and I back down, knowing he wasn’t actually going to hit me.

“Ok, Green Giant, no need to remind me you’re big and strong,” I say. “I surrender.”

“That’s what I thought.” He settles back into his spot on the couch. “Probably Bucky and Cap, with the whole ‘I’m with you to the end of the line’ thing.”

“That’s actually kind of sweet. Softie.”

“Fuck you. I hate you.”

“Wow. Maybe we’re actually Toxic Man and Repression Kid, the Boy Basket Case.”

We both laugh. A few minutes later, we’re playing Brawlhalla. A match ends and I turn to him. “I really am with you to the end of the line, you know,” I say.

“I know. You’re my brother.”

“Damn right. Speaking of, where’s the other brother?”

Jeff picks up his phone. “He just texted. He’s coming in.”

The door to the playroom opens.

“YO! I brought the carts.”

“Zihao!” We yell in unison. He just got back from his yearly China trip. We haven’t all been together in months. If Jeff and I are Bucky and Cap, Zi’s Falcon.

“Drop your pens and grab a controller, me and Bailey have to get you back in shape before we go online.”

“Yes, Sensei,” Zi and I say, laughing as Jeff hits a pen. I take in the moment. I’m with them. To the end of the line.
The sky is cloudless. The world outside is bright.

On the car ride there, I look at the sun shining down on Summerville. I’m in my dad’s truck, and all I’m thinking about is taking road trips to Jeff’s river house while we scream sing AJR songs. It’s the worst car ride of my life, and I just want it to be longer. Dad and I have been silent the entire ride.

“Are you doing OK?” It’s like he can’t think of anything else to ask, as if he doesn’t already know the answer. I actually laugh at him, but it’s a brittle, hollow, glass laugh.

“Am I OK? I’m never going to be OK. But I have to hold it together. Bubba asked me to speak, so I’ll speak.”

“Bailey, Bubba’s been my friend since high school. I worked for his dad. I slept over at the same house you have all these years. If you can’t do this, I’ll talk to him.”

The first time Jeff and I got high, he told me that if he died before me, he wanted me to give the eulogy. He thought I’d do a better job than his dad because I wanted to be a writer. I always told him that wasn’t the type of writing I wanted to do, but he always said it had to be me. “What am I supposed to do?” My voice cracks. I collapse into myself, putting my head in my hands to keep my tears out of sight. I wait for the tears to stop. I sit up straight and look ahead, eyes on the road.

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It is dark and cold. I look around me and see nothing but an expanse of black ink hiding the world. I look up and see a light, very dim but persistent and strong. I go to it. The surface of the water breaks, and I emerge, gasping for air. From the dock above me, I hear a voice.

“GERONIMO!” I see Jeff fall through the air, hitting the water and disappearing into the murky river. As he swims to the surface, I climb the ladder onto the dock, cutting my hand on the rusted metal as I ascend.

“MotherFUCKER!” I yell, putting the cut in my mouth to suck the blood away. I go up the ramp from the bottom level to the top of the dock and find Zi sitting at the top, drinking a Smirnoff Ice.

“You good? What happened?” He’s the only one of us that’s dry. He still refuses to let Jeff teach him how to swim, despite Jeff’s insistence that his years on swim team essentially make him Aquaman. On the table beside him sit two dab pens and a few spent bottles and cans from our day at Jeff’s river house. We started drinking when we were out on the boat.

“It stings, but I’m fine. That fucking ladder is a death trap.” I walk to the fence of the upper part of the dock and tear off a paper towel by the sink where they prep fish for dinner and press it to my hand. I lean against the post beside the open area we use to jump.

Zi grins at me, a light in his eyes. “I can pour some of my drink in it to clean it out.”

I smile back and look up from the paper towel, slowly reddening, the white disappearing.

“If you poor a Smirnoff ICE into my hand, I’m going to kill you.”

“You wouldn’t kill your brother, would you?” He says, the same smile still lighting up his face, his eyes mostly hidden behind a mop of black hair.
“See, you’re the only one who doesn’t actually have siblings. Threatening to kill them is pretty standard.” I walk to the river house to clean the wound, a small shack on the water, leaving a trail of drips as I go.

I’m standing, staring straight ahead, my dad’s hand on my shoulder. Normally, that sort of rare show of affection from him would make me feel stronger. Right now, it barely even registers.

The church looms over me, the cross never failing to remind me that it’s something you nail people to. I was raised Catholic, but years of being kicked out of CCD for asking questions turned me away from it.

*The world is black and white.*

“But, Mr. Greg, I read a lot of stories where things seem pretty gray. Isn’t that true about real life too?”

*Go in the hallway.*

*Gay people go to Hell.*

“But, Mr. Greg, my uncle’s sister, she’s not my aunt because he’s my uncle by marriage, my uncle’s sister is gay and she’s really nice, is she going to Hell?”

*Go wait in the hallway.*

*Heaven is a city in the sky that you’ll all go to after you die if you follow God’s rules.*

“But, Mr. Greg, why can’t I see it?”

*Hallway.*

*People who commit suicide don’t go to Heaven. They go to Hell.*
“But, Mr. Greg, don’t they need God’s help most of all?”

_Get out._

That’s when I learned that there’s nothing up there. No matter how many times I hear the stories, no matter how many people tell me they just have faith, no matter how many people claim to have seen it during a near death experience, I just can’t believe it. Jeff is gone. The only place we go when we die is the ground.

My dad’s grip tightens on my shoulder for a moment, giving what is supposed to be a comforting squeeze. I walk forward, stepping into the church and the sea of black as people dressed in night graze, all of us shrouded in sniffles and tears. I see Zi, and my legs lock.

He walks over to me, dark eyes looking even darker than normal. We look at each other, and I see his eyes swollen from tears. Seeing him like that starts my own tears flowing, and I start speaking before I know what I’m saying

“Zi, I’m so sorry. I could’ve saved him, I—I’m just so sorry,” I say, tears cutting down my face and my legs unlocking. I feel my knees go weak, ready to collapse. Zi hugs me, catching me. I put my arms around him and let him hold me up.

“It’s not your fault.”

We’re standing in the field that we have so often watched cows graze in, listening to the sky explode in neighborhoods around us. It’s the Fourth of July, and it’s been a week since Bubba sold the cows. A grey mist layers itself over the field, creating a chill on my bare arms. Three empty bottles lay on the field in front of us, and we each hold another one.

“OK,” I say, then chug the rest of my drink, “Zi and I spent, like, 200 dollars on fireworks. Let’s get to the light show.”
I set up my bottle and place a few bottle rockets in it.

I turn to Jeff, presenting the lighter with a bow and a flourish: “Happy late birthday, sir. Would you like to do the honors?”

I’m putting on a show. In truth, things have been getting pretty dark recently. I don’t talk about it. No one needs to hear me whine. I’ll get through it. It’s not that big a deal. I simply do not have problems serious enough to justify the thoughts I’ve been having.

Jeff takes the lighter. Protest from Zi: “Yo, we paid for it. Why is he doing the fun part?”

Jeff doesn’t even turn around as he bends to light the fireworks. “My field, my rules.” As he says the second part, so do Zi and I. We laugh. No one notices that mine is a little quieter.

As Zi and Jeff watch the sky shatter and my money burns, I can’t keep it up anymore. I drop into the grass below me, my head going into my hands. What have I become? I don’t know who I am anymore. I want to be a writer, but my parents are pushing me into engineering. I blew my knee out during track season and had to quit running. A girl I used to date started spreading rumors about me. My grandparents won’t talk to me because I don’t believe in the God they do. My dad is angry at me because he thinks my dreams are a waste of my intelligence. I’m scared because I don’t believe in myself enough to go through with it. The walls are crashing in on me and I just can’t hold them up anymore.

Jeff turns around, then Zi does too.

“Hey, hey, are you ok? What’s wrong?” Zi was closer, he got to me first.

Jeff arrives, just behind them.

I literally suck it up, wipe my eyes and look up at my friends.
“That, Zi, is the problem. I don’t know what’s wrong. Or maybe it’s that I don’t know which thing is the most wrong. Or how to fix it.”

Jeff holds out his hand. I take it, and he pulls me up.

“We’ll figure it out. To the end of the line, remember?”

I smile, meaning it for the first time in a while. “To the end of the line.”

I sit on a couch in the corner of the room with Zi. My dad left to find Bubba a few minutes ago. I haven’t seen either of them since. Zi and I aren’t speaking much. He’s there. That’s all I need. I can still feel the streaks of water on my cheeks. I look up and freeze as my sleeve makes contact with my face.

Lisa.

Jeff’s mother and I make eye contact.

*She drove him away, made him feel alone.*

*She’s a mother grieving her son.*

*She doesn’t deserve to stand over the grave of the boy she broke.*

*She deserves to say goodbye to the son she’ll never see grow up.*

I think all of this, knowing she may blame me as much as I blame her, as much as I blame me. Neither of us says a word. She breaks eye contact with me, her gaze falling to the floor of the church. Jeff’s stepfather guides her away, and I see her shoulders begin to shake. Jeff died days ago. Lisa lost him months ago.

“You got it?” Jeff peers over the chair at me as we go down the stairs, his normally flowing shaggy hair now greasy under the lights of his mother’s stairway. I’ve been staying with
him a lot recently. Any time I need someone to talk to, he tells me to drive to whichever house he’s staying at. Sometimes we play videogames, sometimes we talk. Sometimes he even reads my writing. He’s been pushing me to do what I want to do. He understands what it’s like to feel trapped. He’s more than my friend. He’s my brother. He brought me back.

“I got it. I’m not that scrawny,” I say, adjusting my grip as I move backwards down the stairs. We’re bringing his recliner from his bedroom at Lisa’s down to the truck. It’s the last thing he has to pack before we’re ready to bring it all to the farm.

He just couldn’t take living with her anymore. The constant arguing, the belittling. She’s never said it out loud, but I don’t think she ever looked at Jeff without seeing Bubba. I know she loves him, but he looks just like the man she hurt. And that hurts her. I know that makes her a bad mother. I’ve never been sure if it makes her a bad person.

As we load the chair into the truck, we hear gravel crunching behind us. We turn to see Lisa’s red Honda rolling up the driveway.

“Shit.” Jeff adjusts his stance. I look at him, trying to decide if he’s getting ready to run or fight. Trying to figure out if he knows which one he’s preparing for himself. He didn’t tell her what he was doing. He knew what it would lead to. We were supposed to be gone before she got home.

“What are you two doing?” she asks, looking past us at the packed truck. One of her hands is balled into a fist. Her knuckles are white.

“Hey Mom. What are you doing back here early?” I’ve never heard him call it home. The farm is home.

“Client cancelled on seeing my last house of the day. What are you doing? You aren’t supposed to go back to his house until next week.”
I look at his face. He opens his mouth, and I know a lie is coming. Then he stops. Swallows. Stands up straight. He’s the biggest guy I know, and seeing him scared is more than a little surreal.

“I’m leaving. I’m going to stay with Dad full time now.”

I watch her eyes widen. She flies into a blind rage, shoving past him and moving to the truck to try and start pulling his stuff back out of it. He moves to stop her, grabbing her arm and pulling it back.

I listen as a mother calls her son a failure. A loser. A fuck-up. A moron. Jeff winces with each insult. He picks her up, and puts her down away from the truck. I run to get in the passenger seat. As we pull out, she’s still yelling. Idiot. Coward. Failure.

As we drive away, Jeff’s eyes shine with tears unshed. In the rearview mirror, Lisa stands over dirty sheets strewn in the yard. Her arms hang at her sides. Slowly, she turns and trudges into her house. No one’s home.

I’m surrounded by Tuppers. Some I know, some I’ve never met, and many I’ve forgotten. Their family literally built Summerville. Most of the main roads were made by their family, and a few are named after them. Some of them still act like their name makes them better than the rest in Summerville. They don’t seem to realize that at this point most of the town’s population hasn’t been here for more than a couple generations and has no fucking clue about any Tupper that doesn’t end in -ware.

They all offer their condolences to me. Cousins, aunts, uncles, great uncles, second cousins, -in laws of all kinds. Faces flood my mind, names fall out of it, all that remains constant
is the steady stream of black suits. One of them, Bubba’s brother, stumbles to me near the end of the rush and puts a heavy hand on my shoulder.

“Hey, Jimmy.” I mutter. I can smell the alcohol before he even opens his mouth.

“Hey, Billy.” I don’t correct him. “I’m sho sorry about your loss. Was a good kid. Real good kid.” He pauses, looking past me. I’m still on the couch. There’s nothing behind me but a wall.

“Yeah, Jimmy. He was. The best.” I don’t try to make eye contact. I can’t even see his eyes behind the sunglasses.

“You dad around? Haven’t talked to Scott in years.” It’s as if he’s forgotten about Jeff. As if he wants to. He disgusts me. I understand why he drank, and wish I had. I disgust me.

“Went to find your brother.”

“Thanks. Good kid. Real good kid.”

I don’t know if he means me or Jeff. As he stumbles away into the black, the smell of alcohol lingers in my nose.

“You need to stop. You’re standing in the parking lot of the place I work at, and I can still smell the alcohol coming off of you more than the beer I’m covered in.” An hour into my shift at the restaurant I work at, a keg of White Zombie exploded on me. “Not only did you drive yourself here, like this, but you drove our friends here. You drove my sister here.” My sister and I have always been close and often shared friend groups. I’ve never been bothered by it, but Jeff crossed a line. It takes everything in my power not to yell at him.

“I’m fine. I drive like this all the time,” he mumbles at the asphalt.
I open my mouth to scream, and I stop myself, pulling my pointed finger rather than pushing it forward into his face. I know he’s struggling. I see it, I hear it, and I smell it, but I no longer know what to do. Bubba’s been pushing him to go into the same business he runs. Jeff doesn’t know how to say no. Every Tupper has done it for generations. He hasn’t talked to his mom in weeks. The first girl I ever saw him actually care about just dumped him. A friend from school died of an aneurysm. In the past six months, he’s been fighting against a future that seems inevitable, he lost his relationship with his mom, lost his first real relationship, and lost a friend. He’s drowning, and he doesn’t know how to ask for a rope.

“You can’t keep going like this. You know that.”

“I’ve been ‘going like this’ for months, and nothing’s happened. You know that.”

“What are you trying to prove? Do you want to die?!” I scream.

We both stop, unsure what else to say as our breath clouds in front of us. We’re both wearing short sleeves in the cold. We both know his answer, but neither of us want to say it. Tears well in our eyes. We’ve never cried in front of each other before.

I’m sitting in a pew for the first time since I was a kid, feeling fake in my suit and tie, a mannequin trying to be human. Jeff wouldn’t have wanted this. He wasn’t religious and I don’t even need one hand to count the amount of times I’ve seen him in a collared shirt, much less a full suit. It isn’t what he would have wanted, and I’m part of it.

The priest is droning on about better places and God’s plan. I’ve heard it all before, and it’s bullshit every time. Jeff is gone. In a couple hours, he’ll be rotting underground for the rest of time. He’s gone. The thing in the casket isn’t him. The story of silver cities the priest is
spinning isn’t him. I look at Zi. I look at Bubba. I look at my hands. This is him. We are him.
The important parts, I think.

I look up, and the priest is done. I swallow nothing, and somehow it makes my throat feel drier. My turn. I get up shaking and feel a hand on my shoulder. It’s my dad again. Tears shine in his eyes. It helps me stand a little taller.

I walk to the podium.

My bed is buzzing, pulling me out of a dream of flying. It’s one I have often. Soon, it was going to become a dream about falling.

I blindly reach to my right, my hand bouncing until it lands on my phone. I lift it and turn to it, the light closing my eyes again as soon as I open them. Jeff’s face screams at me from the screen, my hand buzzing as I look at him. Above his contact name, Juulius Seizure, it says the time. 2:30 in the morning. In middle school, Jeff had a Juul he used to hit anytime we were driving somewhere in the truck. It’s something I’ll never stop making fun of him for. Then, when he took the SAT in high school, he decided to take some of his Adderall he used to use for his ADHD. He didn’t check the label on the bottle, and he had a seizure at school. He was fine, and I’ve rarely seen him laugh harder than when I called him Juulius Seizure the next day. Seeing that name pop up still makes me smile any time he calls.

I have to open the restaurant tomorrow. He calls me at times like these a lot to ask me random nerd questions: which DC and Marvel characters do I think he could hook up with, who would beat who in a fight, have I watched the new episode of show A or B. They’re fun conversations, but I can’t tonight. If he needs me, he’ll send a text or leave a message; I need to sleep. I got in a fight with my dad today about college. He thinks I need to focus on something
that I can make money in, like engineering, but I want to get an English degree and write comics. He doesn’t love that plan. We fought. We yelled. I secluded myself to my room. I didn’t get to my homework until late and I’m exhausted. If he doesn’t send me anything else, I’ll call him in the morning.

I go back to sleep, sinking back into the peace of oblivion.

That night, Jeff climbed the silo on his farm, something I’ve watched him do several times. This time, he threw himself from the top of it into the weeds below it. If I had answered the phone, I might have stopped him. I might have saved him. I was supposed to be the Bucky to his Cap, but I couldn’t just answer the fucking phone. When he got to the end of the line, I wasn’t there.

I’m standing at the podium, and memories of my dad waking me up that morning are flooding my mind. Guilt leaks from my brain and washes over every bone in my body, weighing me down. I look at the casket to my left and wonder how much longer I’ll be able to stand.

I turn to the crowd. I look at Bubba. I’ve never seen him cry before.

I look at my dad. The only other time I’ve seen him cry is when my grandpa died.

I look at Zi. He nods. He tries to smile. It’s enough.

I start to speak. The words flow out of me. I didn’t prepare for this, how could I? Nothing can prepare you for this. I don’t talk about my struggle with guilt because this isn’t about me. It’s about all the people in front of me. Eventually I feel I’ve said enough. I do what I can to finish in a way that honors my friend.

“Jeff used to say we were like Bucky and Cap. A lot of people looked at he and I, him being the big bulky farm boy, me being the kind of scrawny AP student, and wondered how it
worked. I can’t really explain it completely, but part of it was that we were both huge nerds. We were Bucky and Cap. That means we were going to be with each other to the end of the line. Jeff might not be here,” I say, the tears starting, putting a finger in the air and making a circle, “but he’s here,” I say, putting the finger to my heart. “And if we want him to be, he’ll be with all of us. To the end of the line.”

After the funeral, I’m standing at the freshly covered plot.

“I’m sorry I didn’t save you like you saved me.” I look down, tears falling into the grass at my feet. Looking at the plot feels too much like looking him in the eye. “I was supposed to be your brother, and when you needed me, I—” my voice breaks, and my shoulders hitch. I swallow it down. “I wasn’t there. I don’t know if you were calling for comfort or to say goodbye, I don’t know if you’d made your mind up yet, but still. I could’ve saved you.”

“What did I tell you?” I turn and see Zi. His tie is undone and the top few buttons on his shirt are loose. “It’s not your fault.”

“It is, though.” I look at the grass again. Anything but his eyes. “Maybe this is the good old Catholic Boy in me, running on guilt, shame and self-loathing, but I didn’t pick up the phone. I was supposed to be his best friend, and when he needed me more than he’d ever needed me before, maybe more than he’d ever needed anyone, I wasn’t there. What does that say about me?”

There’s a hand on my shoulder again. This time it’s Zi’s. The tears start to flow a little more freely.

“It’s not your fault. It might not even be Jeff’s, but I know it’s not yours. You didn’t control him, no one did.” He pulls me into a hug.
Above us, clouds gather in the sky.

As water drops race down my windshield, I look at the mound of fresh dirt in the distance. I don’t believe that we go anywhere after we die. I don’t believe that there’s a way to live on.

But I don’t know for sure.

I hope Jeff can feel the rain.

I hope all his favorite bands stay together.

And I hope that he knows that even though he’s not standing beside me, he’s with me.

To the end of the line.