



## Jasper

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They were the only guests when they arrived at the Airbnb. The owner told them they'd missed the high season by a few weeks. Lucky them, it meant they'd save ten dollars a night on their accommodations. Jasper was still a popular vacation spot, in spite of everything. They hit the trails, three kids who'd just finished university, in bright reflective jackets and hiking boots so new they squeaked and left one of them—a gangly 21-year-old with a BA in Finance—with blisters so bad she'd almost had to give up on hiking altogether.

They posted pictures to Instagram. In selfies, skeletal trees rose up behind them, grey and bare, dotting the mountainside like the last few hairs clinging to a bald man's head. At night they'd cook in the galley kitchen, drinking cheap beer from the local liquor store and standing outside, looking up at hazy stars as they passed a joint around. Its smoke mingled with the smoke that drifted through the air, sharp and acrid. The oldest, not really a kid at all, stayed up late. His face was hard and angular. A scar bifurcated his upper lip. He sat outside while his friends slept, cigarette in one hand, phone in the other, face illuminated by the screen as he scrolled through messages and checked threads on Reddit.

It was about three in the morning on the third day when he woke them.

"Come on," he whispered, "this is it!"

"Dude..." groaned one of them, a short young man with red hair and a round face, as he rubbed the rheum from his eyes. But they rolled out of bed and threw on boots and jackets over their pyjamas.

The oldest took the driver's seat in the rental van. They drove north, the horizon dense with flammagenitus clouds. Flashes of lightning illuminated the road ahead.

"We're gonna get caught," said the redhead as they drove past a sign warning that this land was the property of the Canada Development Investment Corporation, and trespassers would be prosecuted. Their driver didn't respond, eyes on the road, his face momentarily lit by a flash from the bank of clouds ahead. Around them, leafless trees gave way to charred trunks, useless roots jutting from barren soil. Colluvium spread across the road—the slopes around them were sheered off, unstable. After a few more kilometers, the driver pulled the van over. Colluvium changed to scree. A few metres ahead, rockfall had left the road impassable by vehicle.

"We'll walk from here," said the oldest. "It's not much farther."

The ground under their feet trembled. A few pebbles skittered down the surrounding slopes. No one argued—they walked in silence. Smoke rose from the smouldering landscape to the pyrocumulus clouds overhead. They were half-blind from ash blowing on the wind. Lightning flashes left them blinking, dazed, afterimages dancing behind their eyelids.

Once, they saw flashlight beams through the gusting smoke ahead, a patrol looking for trespassers, or else another group like theirs. They froze. The lights slid past them, continued on their way. They were shadowy figures in a shadowed landscape. The road grew steeper, scree shifting under their feet so they stumbled forward, half-crouching, half-crawling to the hill's crest.

The woman reached the top first. She squinted into the darkness. For a moment she saw nothing. Blowing ash and smoke rose up from glowing remnants of trees below. And then, in the murky darkness, she saw it. The redhead stumbled onto the crest beside her, chest heaving, suppressing a cough as hot air scorched his lungs. Below them, something moved. It writhed through the dirt with a shriek like metal grinding against rock.

"Jesus," said the redheaded man.

"Can it hear us?" the woman whispered.

"I don't think it cares," said the older man, scrambling up to join them, "But it responds to something. Vibrations, maybe."

He had been there when it woke up, a dozen years ago. He was just out of high school, and Enbridge was paying better than any other job on offer. He'd liked working in the mountains, in the fresh air.

He'd been on the side when it happened, watching dozens of sidebooms at work. The brand-new Trans Mountain Pipeline glistened in the sun, ready to be filled with ancient life, pumped up from the depths. They'd just lowered it into the trench, the steel-wire cables still attached.

The pipeline had shifted—a trick of the light. And then, it moved again. Metal shrieked. The pipeline twisted, turned. He ran. Behind him, cables snapped and ripped loose as the thing thrashed, newborn. Metal wailed. Men shouted, running, and the thing seemed to respond, its movements violent, desperate. Equipment collapsed around it—workers were crushed under cranes and sidebooms and the flailing length of its impossible steel body. Running toward the hill, he fell, pain bright and clear, mouth full of copper-tasting blood. Someone grabbed his arm, pulling him up and away from the great metal worm. It began to burrow.

After a few years the company agreed to a settlement. It wasn't much. The disaster was unforeseeable, courts said. A few strange internal memos were brought as evidence, but their language was vague, open to interpretation, they said. The government didn't want to place an undue burden on such a fiscally important corporation.

He stared down at the pipeline now, scarred mouth fixed in a permanent sneer, eyes cloudy and distant. The pipeline swayed now, blindly, as if tasting the air. This was where it surfaced most often—its birthplace, ground level now several metres lower than it had been, earth collapsing into the tunnels and chambers the thing had dug.

They sat on the side of the hill, watched as it pushed its head back into the dirt and began to burrow again. Turning and turning, kilometre upon kilometre of metal dragged across the ground. The haze of smoke closed around them, hiding the thing from view, and they stood to leave. Below, the pipeline continued on its way toward another hollow valley of dying stars.

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