

# Closure in the Darkness

by Rachel Howard



Jordan's girlfriend had broken up with him two weeks ago. He had basically spent the past fourteen days in bed, staring at the ceiling, focusing on the fading glow-in-the-dark stars he had stuck there when he was a kid, wondering why they were still around. His room was beginning to look as if it had been struck by a natural disaster, and his mom had threatened to come in and clean. Luckily it was Christmas break-if he had to go to school and see his ex every day, he didn't know what he would do. Probably combust.

Here was the thing: Alexis had met another guy who went to a different high school. When she'd broken up with Jordan in a Starbucks, she hadn't even cried. Instead, Jordan was the one who had teared up-like a child-and he had had to end the conversation by getting up to leave. He was sure everyone in school knew about this, and so he had decided to stay in his room, alone for the entire winter vacation. He pretended that he had entered a black hole and had never even been involved with Alexis in the first place.

It was working so far. He had gotten through Kafka's entire collected works, something he had been meaning to do for a while now. He was sure that he was going to turn into a cockroach. But that didn't necessarily bother him.

As Jordan contemplated the greenish moon on his ceiling, his little sister Christina banged his bedroom door open and came running into his room.

"EWWW, it really smells in here!" Christina screamed.

Jordan sat up quickly, the blood rushing from his head; he felt immediately faint. "Christina, get out of here! What are you doing?"

She laughed and began picking up his dirty shirts, strewn over the navy-blue carpet. "Jessica dared me," she said, gesturing toward the doorway. Jessica's little blond head peeked out from the side of the door.

"Sorry," she said, lisping.

"Get out!" Jordan cried.

Their mom came rushing into Jordan's room. "Hey, hey, what's going on here?" she asked. "Oh, wow,

Jor, it really smells."

Jordan flopped back on the bed. "Thanks for your feedback," he said.

"Christina, go outside and play," their mother said. As Christina and Jessica ran down the stairs giggling, Jordan's mother sat on his bed.

"Look, Jor, I know you're hurting, but I need to step in here. You've been cooped up for too long. Stop punishing yourself. It's time to get out a bit," she said gently. "Mikey called the house. He said your cell phone has been off for days."

Jordan stared intently at the ceiling, feeling the tears rise. "It died," he said.

"He wants to take you camping," his mother said. "He's coming to pick you up at noon, okay? You're going to Joshua Tree."

A few hours later, Jordan had showered and had a full meal ("with protein!" ), and he was sitting in his best friend Mikey's car with the windows down.

They pulled into Joshua Tree National Park around four, and set up the "luxury tent" Mikey's dad had gotten him for Christmas. Once it had been built, they sat on some boulders looking out at the campsite, which was deserted except for a few tents in the far left-hand corner.

A slight breeze drifted over them, and Jordan pulled on a sweatshirt. "Thanks for doing this, Mikey," he said, looking at his friend.

"Of course, brother," Mikey said. "I can't believe Alexis did that to you."

They watched the sun set over the Rocky Mountains. The shadows of the Joshua trees, spiky, thick-rooted, and bizarre, were long and numerous. The campsite, lying in the shadow of the mountains, got cold quickly, and the boys continued to layer with jackets until they decided to build a fire.

Joshua Tree was quiet. There had been no movement from the tents on the other side of the campsite. When Jordan looked up, he saw real stars and a real moon, not the pathetic half-glowing ones in his bedroom.

"Man, I hope my mom is cleaning my room," Jordan said, laughing.

Mikey snorted and pulled out a bag of marshmallows from his backpack. "Want one?" he said, offering it to Jordan.

Jordan reached in and pulled out a handful. "I just don't understand how someone you care about so much can be that unfeeling," he said, shoving a few marshmallows in his mouth. The sticky sweetness made him cough.

"Look, Alexis probably has some other things going on," Mikey said, sucking on a marshmallow. "It likely has nothing to do with you."

Jordan sighed. Somewhere in the distance, a coyote (or a wolf? Jordan hoped it was just a coyote) cried out. "I know that. But it's hard not to take it personally."

"Yeah, of course, man. Of course it is."

Jordan groaned and leaned forward on his knees. "Ugh, I just really don't want to go back to school."

Mikey patted his back.

Jordan frowned and kicked at the dirt. It was so dark where they were, but the darkness felt safe, cathartic somehow. Jordan half-expected to wake up and be an entirely different person-not a cockroach, like in Kafka's novella, *The Metamorphosis*-just a better version of himself. He looked out at the shadowy world in front of him and noticed a strip of moonlight on the tents on the other side of the campsite. A lamp switched on inside one of them. Jordan started to think about the people in that tent, and he found himself-for the first time in two weeks-wondering about something other than himself and his current situation. He thought that maybe those people were here for the same reasons he was.

Jordan leaned back on the boulder and looked up. Gazing at all those dying gaseous stars, his problems started to fade. He threw his fist in the air and shouted out, almost triumphantly. Mikey, still sitting up, looked down at him and laughed.

# Climbing Cadillac Mountain

by ReadWorks



Aaron shivered at the bottom of the summit as a cool breeze rushed by him. The moon was still in the sky but lowered each minute to make room for the sun in the early hours of the morning. He tilted his head back to view the highest point of the peak—he could hardly imagine himself and his friends at the top. "Ready, everyone?" Jordan asked. She was one of the best climbers in the group and had agreed to lead the crew of five up to the top of Cadillac Mountain in Acadia National Park, the highest peak on the eastern Atlantic coast, and one of the first places to see the sunrise in the United States.

Aaron had never climbed a mountain this size before. In fact, this was only the third time he had climbed in his life, and the two previous times were to train for the long hike on which he was about to embark. Instead, the tenth grader spent all his free time drawing, painting, and sculpting. He was the artist in his family and hardly ever paid attention in gym class or played sports with his friends. He was good with colors and shapes, but not footballs or baseballs. But this was a special occasion. He wasn't about to hike four miles to the top of the mountain just for fun; he was climbing for a purpose.

Jordan patted Aaron on the back and snapped him out of his trance. Tagging behind her was her mom, with a huge smile on her face. She gave Aaron a wink as she passed him. Aaron grew up with Jordan and her family, forming a close bond with them after a five-year-old Jordan walked over to Aaron and asked him to teach her how to make a paper airplane. Aaron referred to Jordan's mom as Aunt Patty, since she was like a second mom to him. Patty and Jordan were both extremely athletic; Jordan was the star of her high school track team, while Patty was an active mountaineer. She had hiked up some of the tallest peaks in America, and climbing Cadillac Mountain had been a dream of hers ever since she was in college and started to partake in the sport. Despite their differences, Jordan and Aaron remained close friends growing up, each teaching the other their strengths.

But when Patty was diagnosed with cancer a few years prior, she thought she would never be able to

climb again. Although she never gave up hope for a full recovery, she was constantly nervous that she would never again feel the spine-tingling satisfaction of standing on top of a mountain. Her friends and family banded together and climbed various peaks to raise money to pay for her treatments, which Aaron participated in as well. Their first trip was to the Adirondacks, where a group of twelve Patty supporters hiked up a small summit. Aaron had never done something so strenuous, so despite the short distance, he struggled-his chest burned and his muscles screamed out in protest against the exertion. He had never been comfortable with athletic activity and found comfort only in his art studio. But when he found out about Patty's illness, he knew he would do anything to help her recover.

So he began to train to climb his second mountain. He explored different paths in his neighborhood and trekked through local hiking trails in preparation for the next journey. He went on short runs, building up his tolerance for physical activity. When the group made their second mountaineering trip, he felt much more prepared. Shortly after they returned from the journey, which helped them raise nearly \$3,000 for Patty's hospital bills, Patty went into remission. Aaron and his family threw multiple parties to celebrate her health, but all she wanted to do was climb again.

"Everyone, let's get moving! We don't want to miss the sunrise!" Jordan called out from the front of the pack. Jordan, Patty, Aaron, and Patty's two friends picked up their pace and followed Jordan's orders, each walking in silence. They were all thinking about what had brought them to the park and kept glancing over at Patty to see if she was doing all right. But she marched on ahead at a steady tempo, thrilled to be back in her element. Aaron fell to the back of the group to take in his surroundings-the blanket of deep green trees below, the gray rocks that formed a jagged line across the horizon, and the blue of the sky, brightening with each passing minute.

Finally, out of breath, the group reached the top of the peak. Jordan checked her watch. "5:53, just five minutes before sunrise," she said. Patty took a seat on the rocky ground. "I can't believe we're really here," she whispered. Everyone sat beside her and waited to watch the sun peek above the horizon. When it did, they all let out a gasp. A bright, illuminated orange ball rose above the horizon, seemingly rising out of the ocean. The group remained silent as the sky changed colors, the orange from the sun blending with the blue hues of the sky, then forming pink streaks, casting purple shadows on the sea of clouds. It seemed to change every second, Aaron thought.

Patty broke the silence. "Thank you for coming, everyone," she said. Aaron noticed the tears in her eyes. Her daughter and friends placed their hands on her back, and each leaned in.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Use the article "Closure in the Darkness" to answer questions 1 to 2.**

1. What did Mikey do when Jordan stopped answering his phone? Use at least two details from the text to support your answer.
2. How does the darkness at Joshua Tree make Jordan feel? Use at least two details from the text to support your answer.

**Use the article "Climbing Cadillac Mountain" to answer questions 3 to 4.**

3. What was Aaron's purpose for climbing Cadillac Mountain?
4. How does Patty feel once the group reaches the top of Cadillac Mountain? Use at least two details from the text to support your answer.

**Use the articles "Closure in the Darkness" and "Climbing Cadillac Mountain" to answer questions 5 to 6.**

5. How did their friends help Patty and Jordan through hard times? Use details from both texts to support your answer.
6. How did going out into nature affect both Patty and Jordan? Use details from both texts to support your answer.