



Skating Uphill: Ben's Tale

An Excerpt by Dr. A. Davis Smith

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I didn't need to be a rocket surgeon to see that Vaughn was upset as he shuffled into my house like a zombie, his head hung low and a slow dragging of his feet with every slow step that he took. On his face he had what looked like a pitiful combination of road rage and the loss that you see on grieving widows at funerals (at least the ones where the widow is actually going to miss her dearly departed significant other, not the one's with the sneaky smiles and internal celebrations that 'his ass was finally dead' as she counts insurance policy dollars to herself). He dragged himself into my home without a word and collapsed on my couch like somebody shot him with a sniper rifle (truer than I knew at the time), all the while his face kept ricocheting between those two overpowering emotions like a tragic game of table tennis. Ping, a flash of anger. Pong, a flash of sorrow. Ping, more anger. Pong, here comes our buddy sorrow...

Looking at the flashes of emotions that kept alternating on his face kinda reminded me of one of those old-fashioned slideshows done with an actual slide projector, this one starring my best friend. I managed to bury the thought, "Here we go again..." as I busied myself with the traditional preparations and used the opportunity of Vaughn staring into space (after 5 minutes or so, the facial slideshow had stopped and had been replaced by a blank screen made up of a slack and lifeless expression and vacant eyes) to get the game ready and to give Vaughn his time to continue to get his shit together (assuming that spaced out was an improved mental state over homicidal/depressed, then he could be considered better). It was our ritual whenever life got a little too real; ever since we had become friends, most of the challenges that we had faced had managed to be worked out through talking for hours in front of the TV screen while killing demons or slaughtering bad guys on one video game console or another (our latest source of electronic therapy was an X-Box 360). We had solved stalker girlfriend issues on a Sega Genesis, chosen grad school for Vaughn on the original X-box, and dealt with the loss of my father on a Playstation 3 a couple of years ago. I shot a quick glance at the emotional wreckage that was my friend, with his tomato colored eyes from too much crying and the 'weight of the world on my shoulders' demeanor; it looked like it was going to be a gaming session unlike any other.

Despite the fact that we were supposed to be best friends, his call for help had taken me by surprise. Our friendship had been a little rocky lately, and we tended to interact less and less frequently as the years flowed by. To be honest, we really hadn't spoken more than once or twice since the intervention that I had orchestrated on his behalf several months ago; the significant male

figures in Vaughn's life needing to be assembled in order to pull him back from the brink of a catastrophe of his own making.

Our limited communication wasn't a new thing, easily dating back to the time that I got married, and our relationship had definitely changed for the worse over that time. It wasn't as though I didn't want to have a better role in the lives of my friends, particularly Vaughn who had been the best man at my wedding. It's just that life always had a way of beating the crap out of best intentions. The friction caused by the changes in our relationship hadn't been lost on our mutual friends either. Even Damon, a man hardly known for his gift of observation, was constantly buzzing in my ear about the need to fix things. But with Vaughn, it was always hard to know where to start. As long as I had known him, his friendships always had to be on his terms, done his way (the right way of course), or you risked letting him down. As Vaughn saw it, either you were his friend to the same extent that he was yours, or you weren't really his friend at all.

We had had conversations about it before, and I had to admit that I was a little impressed (as well as a bit annoyed at the bitchiness of it all if I'm to be totally honest) that he was man enough to express his concern about how our friendship seemed to be disintegrating. He had called me out a few times over the last few years, basically asking if I thought that it was cool to stash my friends on a shelf until I had time for them, like toys that I had lost interest in for the time being because circumstances had bought me something newer and shinier. He always ended the conversation in the same way, telling me that he was tired of being the only one that was trying to maintain our friendship and trying to get us to hang out or talk like we used to. The last time that we had revisited the subject he had made it clear that he was tired of bringing it up (although probably not as tired as I was of *him* bringing it up...). Indicating that he was finally fed up with how things were, he had told me that he was only going to put as much into our friendship as I did, meet me at my level of involvement was how he put it. Yet months later, when he was in trouble, here he was reaching out. And as always, I was there for my friend.

Despite our troubles, something in Vaughn decided that I was the ear that he needed to borrow, and I was pleasantly surprised when I had gotten a call from him earlier that morning. I could tell right away by the wavering tone of his voice, reminding me of an upset child fighting to hold back tears (a battle that Vaughn had clearly lost at some point), that all wasn't right in the world of Vaughn. He had been very cryptic over the phone, unwilling to share any hint as to what the

crisis was, so we had agreed to get together in our usual problem-solving way. I was fairly certain that the situation had to do with his latest girlfriend Cassi; I couldn't think of a single thing else in his life that had the potential to impact Vaughn this significantly.

As Vaughn and I began to play Gears of War 3, both of us frantically mashing buttons to correspond with the pumping of bullets into rampaging monsters and the lobbing of grenades at hordes of mutated soldiers, he finally opened up to me about a very different type of battle that he had been having with Cassi. Once he started speaking, each initial syllable a slow and deliberate chore to get out at first, the words gathered momentum; beginning to pour out of him in a bitter flood that was occasionally slowed by strong emotions as he relived the pain of the events that he had suffered through. The gory details included their 3-day break-up/reconciliation, her frequent disappearances/lack of contact and her subsequent surprise relocation from Maryland to New Jersey. That last detail most stuck with me. She had just up and moved 300 miles away without saying a single word to the man that she 'loved,' not bothering to let him know until weeks afterwards. Who does that?

I sat silently through the entire description of events, balancing my attention between the videogame that we were playing and Vaughn's voice. I had to fight every urge to jump in with my thoughts along the way, barely managing to hold my tongue because I didn't want to interrupt all of the stuff that I knew that Vaughn needed to get off of his chest. From the corner of my eye I saw Vaughn's tears, and my heart went out to my friend who was clearly in agony. It took almost 20 minutes for Vaughn to finish, his eyes firmly fixed on the TV screen in exhausted silence with me playing the game at his side.

Despite all of the eloquent and supportive thoughts that I had choked down as he spoke, "You're fucking joking," was all that I could come up with after Vaughn had sat as still as a park statue covered in pigeon shit for a few moments. My mind was bubbling like a pot of water on high heat and I was furious about what had gone down. No one could possibly be that foul, at least not to someone that they loved. And if they found a way to justify being such a bitch, Vaughn most certainly didn't deserve to be on the receiving end of that kind of treatment. "She really moved to Jersey and never said anything to you before she went? Fuck me..."

I sat back on the sofa with such force that the coffee table rattled slightly and a recent photo of me with my wife and child toppled over with a clatter that made us both jump. I sat there for a

moment in silence, shaking my head in disbelief, suddenly finding myself having to pause the game in order to bring the chaos of my thoughts and my anger down to a simmer. I was having a hard time wrapping my mind around what had been going on in Vaughn's life. Hell, what he was *allowing* to go on in his life.

Vaughn's tears had stopped, replaced by a shallow veneer of anger barely covering the tremendous pain that was etched all over his face. He seemed to be holding himself together by sheer force of will, but had the stunned look of a boxer who had taken a few shots too many to the head and didn't know where he was. "Yeah man. I got a call from her last night to give me her new contact information, and she acted like it was no big deal." His voice was sad and defeated.

"No explanation? No apology?"

"She apologized.... She said everything happened so fast after getting the job offer. She said that she had a lot of things to coordinate in a relatively short amount of time, so she had to focus on that," Vaughn offered, not really defending Cassi, but sounding a touch too much like he was making excuses for her for my taste.

"That's bullshit and I hope you know it. This is foul as hell!" I got up and stomped to the window, each thundering step a testament to my growing frustration. I needed to figure out how to proceed with Vaughn, because although it was clear to me that he was really shaken up by this turn of events, it was also clear that Cassi's hold on him was still strong. It certainly would be counterproductive to get him riled up and defensive, especially since he was so obviously in love with Cassi. But it also wouldn't make sense for me to say nothing, and let him go running back to her like a dog playing fetch now that she had resurfaced. Seeing only one useful avenue to attack the problem, I opted for using a little of that psychobabble that Vaughn was always pulling with his friends.

Sitting back down and restarting the game, I let out a big sigh. "So what happens now?"

"I wish I knew. This doesn't make any sense to me. I can deal with the fact that she had to go, and she certainly didn't need my permission to move, but the way she did it..."

"I know it hurts, but look bruh. You've got to make some decisions of your own. It sounds like you're about to let her decide what happens next."

Vaughn turned to look at me, a wry smile on his face. "Sounds like someone's trying to counsel the counselor."

“Told you that advanced degree crap was a waste of time. I mastered that psychology shit without going to grad school like you!” We both erupted into laughter, which went a small ways towards easing some of my concerns. For the briefest of moments, the pained expression that had dominated Vaughn's face disappeared.

“Man, I still love her. Even after this stunt,” Vaughn muttered to no one in particular.

“I just don't get it. Damn man, what is it about her that has your nose so wide open?” I felt compelled to ask. I still couldn't get my mind around it.

“I think she's the one...” Vaughn replied, a sheepish grin plastered on his face like he was embarrassed to say the words. “Even after all of this drama I still believe that.”

“Awww hell no. What makes *her* the one?”

This time it was Vaughn who paused the game. “Ignoring all of the physical stuff, she's damn brilliant. We're able to talk about everything and a lot of the time I learn as much from her as she does from me. Then there's her spirituality. I also love that she's ambitious and has these huge goals that she's pursuing. There's also the fact that she's very caring and compassionate.”

“Leaving you like she did doesn't sound very caring or compassionate to me...” I offered, failing to hide my continued frustration with him.

Vaughn just nodded, as if to say ‘too true,’ but continued on as though I had never said a word. “The biggest reason is probably that for the first time I can really be myself with someone. I don't have to hide the different parts of myself, including my nerdy side, because she has one too. I can show my sensitive side without worrying about some smartass comment like ‘no this nigga isn't crying because old Yeller died.’” We both laughed again.

“Seriously man. She's the one.”

“I may be crazy, but I always assumed that a major requirement of ‘the one’ would be that she'd want to be in a relationship with you as much as you wanted one with her. It's damn clear, at least to me, that Cassi doesn't want that. At least not yet. Shit, who knows? Maybe she never will. Man, love isn't supposed to be this hard, and you know that. Everything God sends you isn't a blessing. Sometimes it's a test. Hell, no one saw the plague of locusts or the great flood as a gift.”

“Yeah, I know all of that. Shit, I've probably told you something similar a time or two.”

“Then why are you acting like this is the right situation for you to be in? Like she's the only girl in the world for you? What's it gonna take to free you from this chick?”

“Bruh, I love her. I think that our problems are more related to the fact that we’re at different stages in our careers and the difference in our age than anything else.”

“You know I took psychology in undergrad too, right? I remember that shit is called rationalization. That shit aint your problem.”

“Now you’re being a smart ass.” He threw his video game controller on the sofa cushion beside him and glared at me.

“Nahhhh, I’m being for real, and you really need for someone to not pull their punches with you. Listen, Vaughn. Timing is everything. It’s not enough to find the person that’s everything you want, you’ve got to find that person at the right time. If the timing is off, they aren’t the right one for you. Not to say that they’ll never be, but at that point in time they aren’t. You need to accept the fact that that’s what you have with Cassi. She’s not ready to give you what you want, and there’s no guarantee that she’ll ever be. I’ve got to say it again, Vaughn. Love is not supposed to be this fucking hard. Certainly love is work. Hell, as a married man I can testify that it’s ‘hard work,’ but this is something else entirely. You deserve better. You deserve to be treated better, but you won't hold her crazy ass accountable to do so.”