

# The Very End of Summer

*R.J. Jacobs*

The summer before my third year of college, when most of my friends were doing professional internships to advance their job search the following spring, I took a job in Boston helping my uncle. He operated an import/export business from a warehouse situated in one of the more modest exurbs, which suited me, because getting to work was essentially a reverse commute—I had been crashing on my college roommate’s couch in Back Bay all summer, carrying on late at night, taking interest in girls I had no business pursuing. I sometimes recalled their voices and considered their beautiful names—Juliet, Simone, Hannah—as I shook off hangovers while buzzing down the interstate, or riding shotgun in my uncle’s F-150 while he talked on his cell phone.

My Uncle was the sort of compact, painstakingly fit, prematurely-gray man I associated with New England, though his accent betrayed our Louisiana roots. Once, I’d suffered through him smoking a cigar in his truck. A burning ash had dropped onto the package we were delivering, leaving a dusky mark. He brushed at the mark and told me to sit tight as he walked the package to his client. I saw Tom motion toward me, and then he and the client smile, knowingly. I wasn’t upset to take the blame. I was his youngest sister’s youngest son. Whenever Tom waved me over, the agility of his fingertips asserted my superfluity.

On that point, I wouldn’t disagree. My “intern” role will ill-defined, and I filled more than one afternoon keeping up with baseball standings and texting girls I hoped to know better amid the silent confusion of warehouse dust motes.

It was on the last Saturday of my internship that I arrived early at his warehouse, hoping to tidy up the books I’d been keeping so that I might ask for the following Friday afternoon, my second to last there, off to go with some friends to Cape Cod. I could feel the tires struggle through the loose sand of the empty parking lot when I pulled in, the smell of poplar bloom mixing with pine hitting my nose. There was a bell above the front door that clinked when the door opened, which I’d never noticed before, but since I was alone, it’s cheerful ding seemed swallowed by the silence. I sat at my usual desk and began logging onto my computer when I first heard the noise. My fingers rose slightly off the keyboard. I leaned back to listen. My chair creaked.

It came again, then again—a sort of muffled shuffle, metal scraping against concrete. I wanted to believe it was from an open window shifting against the wind.

When a voice called out, I stood. A chill ran through me as I turned toward it. I couldn’t tell what words were said, but I knew immediately it was not my uncle—whoever had spoken sounded as though they were in pain, and were downstairs, where goods were stored for local delivery.

I longed suddenly to be back at LSU, telling about what I hoped was about to be a misunderstanding. I went to the top of the stairs. I glanced over my shoulder at the milky panes of glass in the front door. I'd told no one I was coming that morning. The whoosh of a distant car reminded me I was alone.

Another scrape rose up the stairs, before I heard the word, "help." And then, mumbled, "please."

The first step bent slightly under the weight of my foot. Below me was pure, inky dark, but I could picture the space exactly and knew where everything was situated—I was the one who usually made delivery runs. For a few long seconds, my hand searched the painted brick for the light switch before I finally flicked it on. At the bottom of the stairs was a man tied to a chair.

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He strained forward, the metal banging against his back. A grey shadow from the tall stacks of crates fell diagonally across his face. The man looked to be in his twenties and had a wave of dark hair that flopped onto his forehead.

The overhead lights warmed slowly—he had been in the dark for some time.

I ran my fingers through my own hair. As strange as it was to admit right then, the man resembled me. I'd heard people casually mention that a particular person reminds them of someone else, or that a person has "a doppelgänger" out in the world. The man in the chair could have passed for mine, or vice versa. He looked up at me with pleading, round eyes. Then, evidently reading the fear and confusion on my face, he asked, "So, what happens now?"

I was too terrified to get closer, despite my eagerness to help. "What?" I asked.

He cleared his throat to speak. "Are you going to kill me?"

I might have laughed if I hadn't been so afraid. I touched my chest, where my heart was pounding. "Kill you?" All I had for him were questions, it seemed. Another came out, "How did you get down here?"

"You really don't know? Tom thinks I stole from him. I didn't! But he'll kill me when he gets back!"

"My uncle wouldn't kill anybody."

The man swallowed. I could see a sheen of sweat on his forehead that he clearly wanted to wipe away. His hands were secured behind his back in such a way that made his shoulders arch forward at an unnatural angle. “You must not know your uncle very well.”

The shock of what was happening dizzied me. I glanced back at the front door and sat on the top step, which creaked beneath my weight. It was true, I thought, I did not know Tom deeply, even after knowing him my whole life—even after working for him directly for more than a month.

The man cried out, “*Please*. I’ll never come back, I swear. I wasn’t stealing. I won’t bother your family again. I won’t tell anyone what’s happened. I’ll just disappear out that door and never come back.” He gestured over his shoulder with his chin. “Please. I won’t tell a soul. Tom will think I escaped.”

My thoughts swam as the man talked. Could he possibly be telling the truth? Could Tom have tied him up? Was there any other explanation for him being there? Did Tom really mean to murder him? If Tom had actually restrained him, was he too dangerous to let loose? A wave of nausea washed over me, just as I heard a car door slam.

I stood and looked again at the office door. It was the only exit, aside from the loading dock down below.

The man’s eyes widened and looked sickly white in the purplish, overhead light. “Oh, God, he’s here, isn’t he?” His voice dropped to a hissing whisper. “Please, oh, please. This is my only chance. Let me go, I’m begging you. Let me go, and then run yourself. Believe me. If he knows you’ve seen me, he’ll murder us both.”

There was no time to think.

“We’ll both be *dead*,” he said, “If we don’t get out of here now. Do you hear me?”

“I won’t let anything happen,” I said, stepping back inside the office, where the quiet was so dense it seemed to buzz. I wiped my sweaty hands down the front of my t-shirt. “Try to stay calm, okay?”

“Wait!” he said.

I turned the off the light, then closed the door. I walked as quickly and calmly as I could to my desk, where my computer screen was a watery, jumpy blur.

I looked up as the bell clinked. Tom was squinting at me.

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I have a few talents. Acting is not one of them. I tried to fix my expression to how someone who didn't know a man was tied up downstairs might look if he was simply surprised to see his uncle on a Saturday morning.

Tom winced, like he was reacting to me smelling bad. He dropped into a desk chair beside mine and groaned, then swiveled and put his feet on the desktop. "Surprised to see you here. What's going on?"

"I had some books to straighten out. I wanted to take a look before summer ended." I could hear a tremor in my voice.

"Some books, huh? You didn't want to do that on Monday morning?"

I didn't want to get into the whole story about wanting the following Friday afternoon off. "I guess not," I mumbled. I'd forgotten all about the trip to the Cape.

I had to think of what to do. Obviously, a part of me wanted to tell Tom everything that had just happened, or simply to ask him to come to the head of the stairs, flick the light back on and point. But the man's warning was tough to ignore—Tom turning murderous seemed impossible, but I wouldn't have predicted finding my tied-up doppelgänger downstairs a moment earlier, either. How well *did* I know Tom? I pictured the sweat on the man's forehead as he suggested I didn't know Tom very well. I remembered how Tom had blamed the cigar smoke on me earlier that summer, and something about the memory, about his deceptiveness at that time, made me decide I needed to find a way to call the police—to get someone else over to the office—an authority, preferably one who was armed—to help sort everything out. I eyed the iPhone on my desk. It lit up brightly when I swiped my finger over the screen.

Tom was seated between me and the front door, and seemed to move with deliberate slowness. He yawned into his fist, then scratched a little behind his ear. "How long have you been here?" he asked.

"Not long. A few minutes."

He looked around the room. "You sure you're okay? You're acting kind of funny."

"I'm totally fine," I said. I decided to step outside at the first opportunity. I wondered what would happen if I texted 9-1-1. I'd never called the police before and imagined a scene from a movie—a SWAT team bursting into the room, guns drawn. Or would a clueless deputy arrive, only to joke around with my uncle? Or had I imagined the man downstairs?

When Tom stood, the chair he'd been sitting in rolled with a heavy thud against my desk. My hand shook noticeably as it hovered over my iPhone—the loud noise having pushed my nerves over an edge.

Once more, Tom looked at me skeptically, but also, like he was tired of trying to guess what my problem was. “I’m going to check on something,” he said, starting toward the stairs. “Come on, I need your help.”

I picked up the phone and followed him. The plastic was warm in my palm. My heart had never beat so crazily in all my life. As we walked, my phone found the numbers 9-1-

Tom sighed as he opened the door.

I hesitated.

He flicked on the light and started down.

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Looking over his shoulder, I could see the chair was empty. The overhead light reflected dully on the tan metal. I could see some rope lying on the cement floor. A warm draft rose from the basement.

“Wait,” I said.

Tom turned and looked at me. “Do you want to tell me what in the hell is going on?”

So I did. He went to his desk and pulled a revolver from the top drawer. I followed him down the stairs, the story flowing out of me while he cleared the area. We checked everywhere. The man was gone. Looking back, this may have been the most dangerous time, but I felt safer once the secret was out. Tom called the police and an officer (more canny than any I'd pictured) arrived in minutes. The three of us walked through the basement, then around the building's perimeter. By the time we reached the front, the mood had lightened enough that Tom and the officer shared something like a laugh. “No signs of forced entry,” the officer said, motioning toward the back entrance, which led down a steep, thickly-treed hill. “No cameras?”

Tom shook his head. “Unfortunately, no.”

“You might want to get some installed. And have the locks changed, pronto. Your intruder may have picked it, or have gotten a hold of a key. One thing I'll say, putting himself off as a captive to buy time so he could get away is slick. The things people think of.”

Both the officer and Tom glanced at me, but neither said anything. My humiliation was mitigated only by my sense of relief. I had the sudden desire to fast-forward through the last week of summer and return to college as quickly as possible. I wanted nothing more to do with either the officer, or Tom, and for both of them to have no memory of the event that Saturday morning. I wanted Tom to forget I'd worked for him, and maybe even to forget who I was. I wanted to disappear, too.

I thought about that as the officer's patrol car kicked up a dusty haze as it pulled away from the parking lot. Behind me, the front door banged shut. I couldn't guess what it was like for Tom that I believed the man's story enough to feel afraid.

No way would it be possible to focus on book keeping. I went inside and said goodbye for the day. Tom nodded sagely, then winked at me as I left, which I took as a sign of forgiveness. Me, his naive nephew.

Maybe I would go out to Cape Cod, I thought, as I drove back toward town. It was still early in the day, but the sky somehow held the pink of a mid-summer sunset.

It was about a month later when I saw in the news that the man I'd seen tied up in Tom's basement was dead. I was in the library when I story came up on my phone, which was still set to news stories from the Boston area. My breath stopped when I saw the man's photo. I was certain it was him—his resemblance to me obviously adding to his recognizability. I noted his sanguine expression, his sad eyes—so different from the panicked look he'd worn the month before.

Had he been acting? Lying? Or telling the truth? Or parts of it?

I away my books and slung my backpack over my shoulder before stepping out into the university quad. It was a humid night, with the still, impatient feel of the very late summer. Laughter carrying over the meticulously-cut lawn sounded particularly innocent in that moment. I wondered what job I might take after graduation. I wondered whether I might call my uncle.

Author Bio:

I'm a psychologist and mystery writer, living in Nashville. My first novel, *And Then You Were Gone* was published by Crooked Lane in March. I'm working on the follow-up, *Somewhere in the Dark*, which is scheduled for publication in August 2020.