

## Vantage in Thin Air

"Go!" yelled the boy in the faded plaid pants, and Sammy, at the ultimate forward apogee of his swing, flung himself free of the chain-suspended nylon sling. The sky lowered to pat him on the head and he clutched at its gentle blue, but it vaulted out of reach and he crashed back to earth in a rainbow's arc, such as would splinter the hues asunder.

Lying on his back, Sammy watched the clouds drift for a few moments until a familiar face invaded his field of vision.

"You okay?" the boy asked.

"Yeah," said Sammy, and he got up slowly, absently brushing sand off himself and still looking at the sky. The boy in plaid followed his gaze.

"You see something?"

"Almost."

They sat down on the curb that bordered the large sandpit of the playground, a childhood oasis in the endless, boring stretches of park green. The boy in plaid began retying his shoelaces, until one snapped off. He tossed it away with a sigh and looked at Sammy.

"Well, what now?"

"I dunno."

"You wanna try again?"

"No. That last one hurt enough."

They sat quiet for awhile, looking out over the sea of grass that rushed up to their feet. Silent trees hushed the breezes and looked back at them.

"Well, I'm gonna try again."

"Go ahead."

The boy got up, but Sammy watched the tiny figure of someone walking in the distance pass from sight before turning around. The boy was on the same swing Sammy had used, adjusting his body on the seat for maximum efficiency. Once satisfied with that, he put himself into motion. From the curb, Sammy's eyes followed his progress, back and forth, to and fro, as the arcs got longer, and the boy swung faster, and the chains creaked louder. As the boy was nearing the moment of the quantum leap, Sammy found his interest rekindled. He wouldn't have to yell "go" for the boy as the boy had for him -- the boy liked to call his own shots, as well as others', it seemed. But Sammy didn't mind so much right now, because this was the plaid boy's project. Or at least idea. So the boy could yell for himself, which would be any minute --

"Now!" It was the tireless shout of a child that floated over the suburban park, heard only by the trees and his friend on the curb. Propelled airborne, his body was a mad scramble of churning limbs. His feet kicked violently down on nothing, while his hands groped desperately at empty space. But he was now past the pinnacle of his launch and Sammy turned away, not wanting to see the entire reenactment of his own disappointment.

After a long moment in which the thud of failure should have occurred, Sammy looked back again. The boy in plaid, no longer flailing through the air, was now shining a head-splitting grin upon him. From at least six feet off the ground.

Sammy gawked at him. There the boy stood, in mid-air, his plaid pants high-flying flags of glory. His face was as radiant as the sun, and an unspoken "I told you so" shimmered in his

smile. His shadow lay puddled a little off to the side, dimmer than Sammy's.

"Whoa," was all Sammy could utter. He slowly stepped up to where he would have been in comfortable conversational distance if the boy had been six feet lower, and looked up. Sammy saw traces of old gum and other stuff in the treads of the boy's shoes.

"Oh, man. Oh, man! I can really see... things." The boy's eyes looked intent on the horizon, beyond the park green and sidewalks unseen. "This is so in-cred-i-ble ...."

Neither boy noticed that the shadow of the one in plaid was rapidly fading, as if heavy clouds were sponging away the sun. But no such thing was happening, it was still a wonderfully dull brazen day.

"Well, tell me!" Sammy finally blurted. "Tell me what you see!"

"Oh, it's... where'd you go?"

"I'm right here!"

"Where?"

"Right here! I'm practically under you!"

"I can't see you! Where'd you go? I can barely hear you! *Where are you?*" The boy looked wildly down around him, his eyes passing right over Sammy half a dozen times.

"Stop playing" Sammy wanted to say, but the boy's growing fear was infecting him. Sammy watched in stunned silence as the boy peered madly about, and was apparently trying to leave his suspended perch. Finding himself trapped, he abruptly began crying.

"Don't cry, I'll get you out!" Sammy shouted and backed away.

"*What?*" A teardrop fell to the sand.

Sammy was already running toward him full tilt, kicking up little sand flurries that ate away the power of his strides. He leapt up at the boy with all his strength, and immediately saw the futility of his effort as his outstretched hand came nowhere near touching even the soles of the boy's shoes. He ended up in front of the swing that had put the boy up there, and got a better idea.

"*Sammy...*" the boy's cries came in feeble shouts, as if from a block away. His wide eyes roamed unseeingly over Sammy and the playground and the entire park.

Sammy saved his breath and started swinging. He struggled hard against inertia, painfully birthing the momentum he needed. As the plaid boy silently wailed and swung his fists against the air, and the sunlight seemed to erode his opacity, Sammy alternately tucked his heels under his seat as he swept back, kicked his toes out rigidly before him as he coursed forward; his young arms ever straining at the chains to bring himself higher. He ignored the growing tickling in his stomach, the wind singing in his ears, the lightening of his head, and he clenched his teeth and shut his eyes and swung higher.

Instants later he opened his eyes again and saw the boy in plaid looking over his shoulder. He was pale and shaking. Sammy traced the boy's gaze to his left, but saw only the giant rocket slide twenty yards away. Then the boy's head snapped forward and he pressed up against the invisible barrier that held before him, his face a rictus of silent terror.

Sammy fought to concentrate. A sense of urgency chewed at him, but he knew he only had one shot. Or none at all if he waited too long. He decided the next one would have to be it. As he completed another forward motion and fell back a final time, he heard the sound of distant oceans roiling under thunder-torn skies, underspeaking the wind rushing past his temples. An instant later the boy's wide, horrified eyes fell blindly on him, with such morbid conviction that Sammy lost his rhythm and thrust his legs forward late on the all-important final swing. He tried

to recover, refocus on his efforts and shut out the growing persuasion of fear, pulling hard on the chains and sweeping further forward and upward, until, as he was about to hurl himself at the boy and snatch him out of the air, even as his body lifted off the seat, a sight passed before his eyes that made his fists seize up on the chains.

In an instant, a tiny eternity, a small part of something huge invaded that space. It completely filled the space, compressing the boy into the ethereal wall he couldn't breach. Blood streamed from his flattening body, darkening his faded plaids, but only a few drops hit the sand below. A strangled shriek squeezed through to Sammy's ears. Then an eye burst and he was gone, as if pushed through an aerial membrane. The space was empty, except for a noxious breeze that poured out of it, carrying hints of violent discord diluted by untold distances.

Still clutching the chains, Sammy allowed himself to be dragged back down in a mock gallows-dance. His heels dug into the sand and he came to a dead standstill beneath the swingset's crossbar.

He fell back into the seat and tried to catch his breath, never taking his eyes off the place in the air where he thought he'd seen a boy in plaid pants standing six feet off the ground. A bird flew through that space and disappeared into a tree some yards away. Sammy looked thoughtfully down at his feet, then cast a glance over at the broken shoestring lying on the grass. He stared at it, and absently began swaying gently side to side, but he noticed that this movement was much more restricted than usual. He was bumping up against unseen barriers on either side. For awhile, he sat pendulously within the Cheshire cat's grin he'd torn in the cross-woven fabric of space and time.