

1224A

## Whoop-Dee-Do!

### ONE - Crashing Bikes With Friends

Here's some good advice: Be careful what you wish for!

I learned that lesson one day while riding mountain bikes with my two best friends. We lived near some fields with dirt paths criss-crossed through them. Someone long ago called those trails the Whoop-Dee-Do's, and so did we.

Hundreds of kids like me created those paths over the years, speeding up and down packed dirt hills, flying high and landing smooth. There's no feeling in the world like hitting a bump at just the right angle and velocity. That's when you catch some serious air and go sailing.

On this day, we were riding as usual when I wobbled and lost control. My friend Chris tried to warn me before I slammed into the bushes.

"Casper, look out!"

I yelped when I landed in the prickly branches. My hand got scratched up, but not too badly. Crashing your bike was a guarantee when you rode hard like we did. We weren't exactly daredevils, but it's a risk you have to take.

"Are you okay?" my other friend Desi asked.

"Yeah," I said. "I'd rather hit bushes than a tree trunk."

Chris said, "I bet there's poison ivy in there."

"Shut up," Desi said. He punched Chris in the arm. "No one's ever gotten poison ivy out here."

"Leaves of three, let it be!"

"You don't know how to count."

I reached my hand out to Chris. "Help me up."

We walked our bikes to our clubhouse, which was a big shed someone built out of old boards and tin sheeting, set up under the highway bridge.

"You launched into space!" Desi shouted.

“Seriously, man,” Chris added. “I thought you weren’t gonna land at all.”

“I wish,” I replied. “Every time we come home from the Whoop-Dee-Do’s, I dream that night about flying. I think about it in class when I’m bored.”

Desi nodded. “Flying. That’d be the best power to have.”

“I’d like super-speed,” Chris said. “I think I’m slowing down in my old age.”

Desi laughed. “You’re thirteen, dummy.”

I didn’t laugh. “I know what you mean, Chris. One day I’ll stop daydreaming about superheroes and adventures. I’ll meet the right woman, and she’ll sell my toys in a garage sale.”

“Dude, you’ve got the best toys,” Chris said. And he was right. My family didn’t have a lot of money, but I saved up sometimes for collectible figurines in the original boxes.

Desi gazed at the sky, trying to look wise. “Don’t trade your toys for girls, Casper. They’re not worth it.”

“Not yet,” I responded. “But I’d trade them to fly. I’d take any power, I guess. Super-speed sounds dope.”

“X-ray vision?” Desi asked.

Chris chuckled. “He just said he doesn’t like girls yet.”

“That’s not what I said!”

## TWO - The Goopy Stranger

That day Desi brought a package of off-brand Oreos. None of us knew any magic, but we made those cookies disappear. I don’t remember what else we talked about, maybe TV shows or video games. It sure wasn’t about school or parents or the news.

After we cooled off, we spent another two hours on the trails. My bike was a Riptide Coaster I got on sale at Walmart. I was proud of how beaten up it looked. Any kid with a spotless bike was sure to be a couch potato.

We walked through the fields toward the road. The alfalfa was shoulder-high. It was easy to walk or ride between the rows of grain.

Chris asked, "Are you coming to my house to eat tonight?"

"Naw," I said. "My mom's making biscuits and gravy."

"I hate biscuits and gravy," Desi said.

"Good. You aren't invited, dork."

Chris told Desi, "Call my cell if you're coming."

"Oh crud!" I shouted. "I left my phone at the shed!"

"Loser!" Desi laughed. "You gotta ride back like three miles!"

"Whatever," I said, then turned my bike and sped away.

I found my phone where I left it, sitting in the shed on an old wooden fruit crate. The sun almost touched the horizon. Mom didn't care if I was out too late. Our town was a sleepy suburb in Oklahoma that never made the nightly news. But I didn't like the idea of riding through those fields at night.

Racing to beat sundown, I peddled hard past the Whoop-Dee-Do's and back to the field. I sped down the soil track, listening to my music through earbuds.

That's when I crashed a second time.

With the alfalfa casting a thick shadow, I couldn't see the ground at all. I didn't expect anything to be blocking the track, but I hit what felt like a boulder. I landed on the soft soil hands-first, then my bike crushed me as it fell from above. My first thought was that I broke a bone or sliced open my torso. My head hurt, too.

"Oww," I moaned, holding my sore wrist. The night grew darker.

Then I heard another moan. It wasn't mine.

"Hello?" I almost shouted.

I hope you never know what it's like to be in pitch darkness with the certainty that someone is hiding nearby. At first I assumed it was one of the guys, but they wouldn't have stayed silent this long, unless they were badly hurt in the crash.

A woman's voice said, "Who are you?"

I was half-a-second from leaving my bike there and running as fast as I could, but I didn't know which way home was. I might be sprinting back into the lonely fields. At night. With this crazy lady.

"I'm just a kid," I said. My voice trembled more than I wanted it to.

"Where am I?"

The question shocked me. "You don't know? Did someone dump you here?"

"Let's go with that for now." I could hear her dust herself off as she stood. Her groan made me feel guilty but also less embarrassed by my own noises of pain. I remained on the ground.

I said, "You're in a field near Midwest City."

"Oklahoma? Wait... no... is this... the Whoop-Dee-Do's?!"

"Yeah." Whoever she was, she grew up popping jumps around here. I was about to say more when I felt liquid running down my left arm. I cried out.

"What is it?" the woman asked.

"I think I'm bleeding!" Even though my right wrist was sore, I reached into my left shorts pocket and wriggled out my cellphone. (At this point, I realized I'd lost my earbuds. I saved months to buy those!) The bright phone screen lit up the slow-waving grain. I turned on the phone's flashlight and aimed it at the stranger.

She was taller than my mom and had wavy, dark brown hair. Her long overcoat was black, made of thick fabric. Something shiny coated her cheek and shoulders. I thought it could be blood, but it was a thick goo, dark purple like blackberry jam. What really caught my attention was the long, wooden staff in her hand, a deadly weapon for a deadly person, or a shepherd.

I hesitated to turn from someone who might want to hurt me, but I couldn't keep from aiming the flashlight toward my bloody arm, which didn't really feel injured. That's when I realized I was covered in the same purple goo. Our collision had spread the mess down my arm.

"Oh no," the woman said.

"Wh-what?"

“Kid, listen to me. You’re about to go for a ride.” The way she said it scared the poop out of me.

“A ride?”

“Nothing I say can prepare you for what’s about to happen. Keep your wits, okay? Pay attention to details. And keep that compound from touching anyone else!”

“What kind of ride?” I demanded. “What do you mean?”

“Don’t think!” she yelled. “Act. I want you to act as quickly as possible. Use your instincts. Trust your gut. This should all be over in an hour or two.”

“Who are you??”

“My name is Key. What’s your name?”

I couldn’t keep my voice from shaking. “I’m Casper.”

“Heh. The friendly gho—.”

Then she disappeared.

I mean, she literally disappeared. No movement, no warning. One moment my flashlight was shining on her, and the next it shone on the alfalfa behind her.

Before I could wonder about it, the thick goo on my arm started buzzing. I felt static electricity crawl along my skin under the goo. Then the static spread across my body.

I jumped to my feet. “What is this?” I yelled, knowing no one could hear me. I felt more panic than pain, but the pain was increasing.

Guess what happened to me next.

### THREE - Afternoon at the Beach

Without warning, without any kind of change, the soil beneath me went away. I don’t mean it blew out from under me, or that I was lifted up off it. I’m saying the ground just wasn’t there anymore.

I fell through open air for a second or two, but it seemed a heck of a lot longer. Then *SPLASH*, I got walloped by a surface of icy water and what felt like sand underneath it. As I pushed onto my hands and knees, a huge wave hit me, flooding my senses, shoving me into wet sand. Then the tide rolled out, and I was left coughing. I got salt water up my nose.

I crawled further from the waterline, coughing to catch my breath, then collapsed on the beach. That's right, the beach. I'd never been on a beach before, but some things you can tell right away. Maybe I was having an insane delusion, but the delusion was a beach and not a grain field. The sun shone above the distant horizon, not on it, reinforcing that I wasn't in the same time zone as before.

"Hey... I... whoa..." No words came, only babbling.

I examined my left arm. The goo had washed off, leaving my skin welted and red. But the goo wasn't all that was missing. I had lost my shoes and T-shirt, leaving me in only shorts and socks, although the shorts felt looser. I noticed the buckle of my belt had gone missing. No phone, either, and no bike helmet. The painful static sensation was gone.

I stood with one hand holding my pants up. I was unbalanced, teetering, exhausted. I hated the feeling of wet sand between my toes. The late afternoon sun warmed me quickly. Finally, my brain calmed down a little. Time to start screaming.

I sneezed.

And the beach vanished.

Some force yanked me *upward* into the sky! I crashed on my back into a kind of glass sheet, cracking it in two. I needed several long seconds to realize I had flown down, not up. Although I'd been standing on the beach, now I was oriented facing the ceiling. The force pulling me was gravity.

"What are you doing?!" a man shouted nearby.

He wore khaki pants and a nametag on his polo shirt. I recognized the location, one of those stores at the end of the mall where they sell furniture. I'd landed on a coffee

table with a glass top. The glass split but didn't shatter. Its wooden frame did the most damage, like a baseball bat slamming my spine.

"Sorry," I muttered, which is what I always lead with when I'm getting yelled at. I didn't even try to move.

"Are you okay?" Concern replaced the guy's outrage. He might have felt differently if I'd been wearing clothes. I must have looked terrifying—half-naked, dripping wet, cut and bruised.

"Am I bleeding?" I asked, gritting my teeth through pain.

"No, but I can't see your back. What happened, man?"

"I... I dunno."

"Is this a YouTube trend?"

The mall disappeared.

#### FOUR - Pretty Sure It's Not a Dream

My bare back pressed against a linoleum floor in an empty room. No gravitational yanking this time, no pain, just a gentle delivery to a flat surface. Relaxing more from instinct than will, I released tension in my neck and shoulders.

"Who are you?" asked a voice through a loudspeaker.

I inspected my surroundings, a hospital room with no bed, but anyone would recognize the electrical sockets covering one wall, the sink in the corner, the fluorescent light. A one-way mirror like from a cop show dominated the wall before me. The outside window was blocked.

"Casper," I answered with a croak, still on my back.

"Ha, that's clever. Are you with The Displaced?" the voice demanded.

"The wha?"

"How did you find us? Do you have the gel?"

"The... the gel? You mean that purple muck?"

The unseen stranger put on his mean voice. "Move to the corner. Face the wall."

I rolled onto my hands and knees. A sliver of glass jabbed my leg. The glass was everywhere, from a container in shards on the floor. Also, there was a guy in a yellow hazmat suit kneeling behind me, holding tweezers and a tiny dustpan.

"Hi," I said.

"Hi," he replied.

Suddenly, silently, the woman from the Whoop-Dee-Do's appeared out of nowhere, like a soap bubble popping in reverse, forming instead of exploding. There wasn't any goo on her. She held her gleaming wooden staff at her side.

"Casper!"

"Key!"

"Are you okay?" she asked harshly as she gripped my arm.

"Well... probably not?"

"Stop them!" shouted the guy kneeling next to us, although he seemed frozen.

"Don't bother looking for traces," Key said to the guy. "I took every last drop." She raised her staff high above her head, then brought it down on the man's skull, which was protected only by a thin layer of yellow plastic. He slumped to the ground like spilled pudding.

The man in the next room said, "Don't you dare bounce!"

Key said, "I'll take care of that guy, too. Meet me on the other side of the door." She pointed to the exit, then without another word, she disappeared.

Everything hurt, and I think I mean that literally. With strength I don't remember possessing, I stood and walked to the heavy wooden door. Locked with an electronic keypad. I pressed my knuckles against the wood. Now what? I was supposed to... appear... just like that... outside the room? An instruction manual would have been nice. Surely she had time for one more sentence before she abandoned me.

*Use your instincts. Trust your gut.*



No one had to tell me what a hospital hallway looked like. With my eyes open, I imagined the hallway and held that image in my thoughts. I sort of *pushed* my brain forward, like I was leaping off the edge of a cliff.

The lighting changed. I was still staring at the door, just the opposite side of it. An alarm echoed loudly through the hallway. Someone had done something wrong, and that someone was me.

To my right, the corridor stretched for some distance. To my left, the woman stood smiling. She was younger than she sounded in the dark alfalfa field, maybe college age like my sister. “Good bounce, buddy! Easy, wasn’t it?”

I screamed, balling my hands into fists. “Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!! What did you do to me? What’s happening?!”

“We call it ‘bouncing,’” she said, trying to be heard over the piercing siren. “Once you get the hang of it, you’ll never want to stop. Unfortunately, stopping is exactly what you’ll do when the gel wears off.” She reached in her coat and retrieved a stack of folded clothing. “These are natural fibers. We cannot teleport anything inorganic. No metal or plastic.”

*Teleport.*

The word vibrated in my brains. *Teleport, teleport.* Was that a thing? Did someone invent it? Aliens? Bezos?

She pulled a gray tank top over my head then yanked my saggy shorts down, not caring if she traumatized me, and had me step into a different pair of black shorts. I tied the drawstring as she dropped thin fabric slippers on the ground. I stepped into them.

“The metals in your body are slowly depleting with each bounce,” she continued as she dressed me. “When you get home, you’ll need mineral supplements, especially zinc, copper, manganese, molybdenum, iron, and cobalt. You can’t write this down, so remember Z,C,M,M,I,C. ‘Zombies crave M&M’s in cream.’” (The acronym worked, because I still remember it.) “You’ll find the first five in multivitamins for older women. But cobalt ain’t cheap.”

“Did you kill those guys?” I asked.

“I never kill. I don’t have to. But doling out concussions is my hobby. Now follow me.”

“Wait, wait!” I yelled as I jogged after her. “I’m not moving until you explain all this!”

She wasn’t running, but she didn’t slow down, either. “You know that thing people do when they’re scared and confused, and they take a beat to figure out what’s going on? We can’t do that right now.”

“Why did you do this to me?”

“Dumb luck, kid. Wrong place, wrong time, for both of us. The gel triggered my power, sent me out of control, just like it did you. I meant to destroy it, not plop it on some random tween in a corn field.”

“Is this real?” I whined, not bothering to correct her about the corn. The furious alarm blared on and on.

Key spun on her heels to face me. She grabbed both sides of my head. “If I tell you it’s not,” she said, speaking slowly for effect, “will you stay in this spot and wait to wake up?”

Even in a dream, I wouldn’t let the bad guys catch me. I’d look for a way out.

But who was the bad guy? Could I be looking at her?

“Let’s go,” I said.

## FIVE - Invincible, Kinda

Key led me down the long corridor. The former hospital felt like a prison with its barren hallways and unmarked doors. The windows behind the nurses’ station were blocked and sealed.

“I told you to trust your instincts, and you did, or you wouldn’t have made it this far. The gel remembers where it’s been, meaning where I’ve been, meaning that room.”

“What is that stuff?”

“Quantum topographic organosiliconic gelatin. Q-TOG for short. It’s made from organic nanites. Can you believe that? I’ve seen the blueprints. They fused carbon-fluoride molecules around a di-sulfur molecule and made a tiny little gear with tiny little teeth. Think of the applications! Don’t you wish mad scientists tried to save the world instead of ruining it?”

I’m annoyed just remembering how fast she talked. “And it makes you teleport?” I asked.

“That’s the short version, yeah.”

“This is crazy! It’s fictional! How’d someone invent it?”

“No one invented it. The gel’s a copy of the real deal.”

“So where’s the real deal?”

Key thumped her chest with her thumb. “You’re looking at it, baby.” Her smile made me feel shy. I finally got why boys often chose to not date beautiful girls. Some of them are nuts. “I estimate there’s around twenty of us on planet Earth. Evolution made us.”

The alarms quit blaring. We heard voices and footsteps at the end of the corridor, coming from men in camouflage, at least eight of them. They sounded angry, as did their clattering weapons.

“They’ve got guns,” I said. The words fell out of my mouth. I was really scared.

“Tranquilizers. They’d love to capture me. Stay here.”

Key vanished. The moment of teleportation looked like a video cut in a TV show—no transition, no click or fuzz, just a clean break from being there to not.

I glanced where I expected her to appear amidst the soldiers. They didn’t seem surprised, but they weren’t prepared, either. How could they be?

She changed positions with superhuman speed, teleporting inside the same space like someone strapped in that gyroscope thing at the state fair. Her fists and legs lashed out at bizarre angles, knocking the soldiers around like laundry. Sometimes she’d appear behind a dude, knock his brains out with her wooden staff, then reappear on the other side of the fight.

Every motion was an impossibility of physics, like when you play a video game and the pixelated plumber jumps insanely high, changes direction in mid-air, bounces as only a rubber ball can. Whoop-de-doo!

Anyway, Key left those gentlemen unconscious in piles on the floor, their guns scattered. She picked up a rifle, plugged each soldier in the leg with a tranq dart, *poomph poomph poomph*, then tossed the gun on the ground.

I trembled a bit, mumbled, “Guys with guns are chasing me.”

“I bet that’s all of them,” she said as she stretched, touching her toes like kids do in gym class. “These guards are just for show. Their bosses know they can’t stop me.”

“I wanna go home.”

My back slapped against the wall. I slid to the floor. Cosmic forces which shouldn’t exist were yanking me helplessly across hundreds, maybe thousands of miles. All the while, I’d barely taken any steps.

Key spun her staff like a plane propeller. “Casper, you can go home anytime you like. But I need you to help me destroy the labs first.”

“Destroy?”

“That’s right. No one can have this power except those Darwin gave it to.”

“Why should I help you? I don’t know you. Maybe you’re the villain.”

“Maybe you’re right. It’s good you think that way. Let’s assume we leave this place standing. That means normal humans learn how to teleport. Can you think of a government or corporation that’ll use the power for good? How about the Americans? You trust them, right?”

Realization dawned on my face, plain for Key to see. Even if I’d never met this lunatic, I’d incinerate every drop of gel on the planet. And if she were lying, and this lab didn’t make the gel, I could enjoy blowing something up without getting in trouble. As long as no one got murdered.

“Fine,” I said, standing with a grunt. “But I’m not joining your cause or whatever.”

“No, you aren’t. The gel wears off in about forty minutes.” She tried to open a door nearby. “These paranoid idiots locked their fire escapes. And they think they’ll survive bouncing? Meet me one floor down.”

Key disappeared.

Imagining a corridor like the one I was in, I pushed my mind, then *bounced*.

## SIX - Getting Reeled In

Instead of standing, I arrived in a hover with my head almost touching the ceiling. Gravity slammed my feet on the floor below. I twisted my knee a little.

“You land funny?” Key asked.

“Doesn’t feel funny. Oww.”

“Fortunately, you don’t have to walk. Let’s get going.”

We had another long hallway to travel down, windowless, made of concrete, obviously an underground tunnel. Key bounced to a point in the distance, and I bounced next to her like it was second nature, then a few more bounces. We covered what felt like a mile.

A steel garage door blocked our way. Key bounced without speaking, hoping I’d get the hint. I did. On the other side, I discovered a massive warehouse, empty except for a building in the center, constructed from powder blue shipping containers.

I followed Key to the exterior of the blue building. Looking through the window, I saw bright white rooms full of laboratory equipment, partitioned by transparent walls.

“No,” Key whispered. “Oh no. Please no.” I hadn’t heard her that quiet before.

Inside, a guy sat in what looked like a dentist’s chair. He had long, wild blonde hair, with a beard but no mustache, dressed completely in black. The wooden staff in his hand was jet black as well.

I watched him disappear.

Key turned quickly, so I did, too.

The older man stood a few yards away. “Hola, Doña Quixota,” he said.

“This is the Fisherman,” Key hissed. “Don’t tell him your name. We used to be friends.”

“That’s rude,” the man said in a European accent. “I never stopped liking you.”

“You’re the one,” she said. “You gave them your blood.”

“Spinal fluid. They betrayed me, of course.”

“I suppose you’ll kill them and keep this lab for yourself?”

“They need to die because they want to steal our gift. But yes, it would fit my plans to control the gel. Who’s your sidekick?”

“Just a Q-TOG victim.”

“Victim? I bet he’s loving this, aren’t you, child?”

“If I let you have the gel,” Key said, seeming to drop her guard, “will you share it with me?”

“Happily. Tell me where to FedEx—”

Key bounced close beside him, then swung her staff. The Fisherman was gone by the time her weapon slashed through his space.

“Meet me in the room!” she shouted, then bounced.

What room? In the blue lab? No, I didn’t see her through the window. Maybe the first room? I bounced to the place where I’d landed. The man in the hazmat suit hadn’t woken from his nap.

Sure enough, Key was there. “We don’t have much time. I can’t beat him, but I can hold him off. Listen, go inside that blue building. You’ll see plumbing along the ceiling. Break the pipes. Hit ’em hard. Make the flammable liquid spill everywhere. Do it quickly.”

“How?!”

“I don’t care how!”

“I mean, how do I get back there?”

“Same way you got here. You’ve been there! When it’s done, go to the Whoop-Dee-Doo’s.” She bounced again.

I reappeared in the warehouse. Key and the Fisherman were already engaged in a kind of battle I could never have imagined. They both moved like Key did when she fought the guards, but this time, there was no pause in the movements. They swung their staffs and kicked their boots, but at these speeds they didn't even touch. If the Fisherman got lucky and connected with Key's skull, he'd be after me next.

Once inside the blue lab, I looked for a club to swing. Next to the dentist's chair stood one of those hospital poles you hang drip bags from. I picked it up and chopped at the pipes. I only needed a few strikes to crack the copper. The fumes smelled like gasoline. I guessed the lab nerds worried they'd have to escape in a rush, so they rigged the place to burn.

I smacked pipes in every room. The fluid sprayed all over computers, microscopes, fridges and freezers, filing cabinets, and rows of machines I didn't recognize.

I bounced back out. "Key!" I shouted, letting her know it was done.

The Fisherman popped in front of my face! He swung his fist at my nose. I bounced out of the way. How did I do that?? I still can't believe I reacted that quickly.

Key stood in the distance. She bounced. The Fisherman and I both swung around to look inside the lab. There Key stood, with her hand on a Bunsen burner. She grinned and waved at us both. Then she used one of those ratchet things that creates a spark to light the propane.

A fireball appeared where she was standing. I had a fraction of a second to worry about her, then to worry about myself. I bounced to the far side of the warehouse just as the entire lab exploded. The blast of heat threatened to tear off my skin. Debris came flying my direction, but I was gone by the time it reached me.

Total darkness. The alfalfa field. My heart pounded. I fell onto the soft soil. I'd been gone less than an hour.

"Casper?" Key yelled from farther away.

"Over here," I shouted, then coughed hard. I must have caught fumes in my lungs.

"Exceptional." Her voice was now beside me. She sat on the soil. We were silent together for the first time since we'd met.

“Did we do it?” I asked.

“We did. But I’ll have to do it again. Not sure when or where.”

“I don’t think you needed my help.”

“I expected another bouncer might oppose me. Couldn’t have done it without you.”

“Now what?” I asked.

“Now, go home. No more bouncing for you. If you visit Madagascar as the gel wears off, you’ll have to swim home.”

“You’re sure I won’t keep the power?”

“Not a chance. The gel is unstable.”

“Okay,” I said, trying to sound disappointed but feeling relieved. Like a kid handed the steering stick in a helicopter, I had fun for a minute, and then I’d had enough.

Key stood. “I owe you one,” she said. I didn’t hear her bounce.

Just one last task to complete. I closed my eyes. When I opened them, I was sitting on my driveway.

## EPILOGUE - Careful What You Wish For

The next day, I went with Desi and Chris to retrieve my bike, phone and shoes. Never did find my headphones. Then we hit the hills. Each time I grabbed air, I felt like I was bouncing again.

They had no idea I hadn’t gotten home as quickly as they had that night. I told them nothing. All I had to show for my adventure was a collection of welts, bruises and tiny cuts. Other than the clothes Key gave me, I retained nothing but memories to prove it happened. I couldn’t stop thinking about that clerk at the furniture store. I bet he freaked out.

Even though I’d been scared silly, I thought I’d get to bounce more on purpose before it ended. I know I give the impression I was terrified past the point of rationality,



but geez, at least I understood my wish had been granted. Flying, super-speed, maybe x-ray vision if I were patient.

Desi and Chris finished riding for the day. They headed home, but I wasn't done. I couldn't quit pretending, not yet. I had to capture that feeling again, the feeling of defying every known law of physics.

That's why I got distracted and crashed. I only had a microsecond to brace for impact.

Then the ground vanished.