

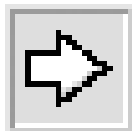
Emergency Break

Not long ago, someone made a mistake. And his error, quite divinely, created a breakthrough . . . a breakthrough with too many implications. He should have kept his discovery a secret. Instead, he whispered it into the wrong ear, and it became poison in the hands of a power-hungry deceiver . . . and he became the enemy. This, of course, was never destiny's desire, but sometimes destiny must bend to human demands. For a time.



Ka-thump, ka-thump, ka-thump, ka-thump. Riding in the back of the retired school bus, Matt felt like a can of soda, shaken to the point of explosion. Matt wasn't trying to avoid his dad . . . necessarily . . . he just preferred to sit with his friends. Lamar sat on his right, Gill and Alfonzo on his left. Their fathers all sat at the front of the bus, gabbing about construction and police chases.

"Gimme that!" Gill insisted, pulling the paper out of Matt's hand.



Matt pulled back and ripped the paper down the middle.

"Hey look!" Lamar said with a smile. "Now we have two maps."

Matt shook his head. "This thing's useless anyway. I don't know how we're ever going to find this address."

"I hope we don't," Gill interjected. "Finding that address could be dangerous. And I have to keep myself in perfect condition for my fans."

"Here he goes again." Alfonzo rolled his eyes.

Gill had recently auditioned for a part in a commercial—and two days ago, he had received news that he got the part. Since then, the redhead just knew fame was around the corner. The closer he got to the date of his filming, the more vocal he became.

Gill patted Alfonzo on the head. "When I'm rich and famous, I'll *try* to remember you."

"Oh boy."

Matt held the two pieces of paper together and tried to make sense of the directions. He had printed them from a mapping service on the Internet . . . and found them extremely confusing. "We need a *real* map," Matt muttered. He wasn't sure how they were going to do it, but they just *had* to find that address.

It might even be a matter of life and death.

For his thirteenth birthday, Matt had received a laptop computer because his dad knew how much he liked to write. But this was no ordinary laptop. Whenever he typed a story into it, all he had to do was push a special key with a clock face on it and *bam!* the story became true. Whatever he wrote actually *happened*.

Amazed, Matt and his friends searched the Internet for answers about the laptop's origin, but they only found a few clues. When they ran a search for "Wordtronix," the laptop's brand name, they received two hits: one was a fake company website. The other was a warning. It came up on a white web page with simple black type.

If you've come here, then I must be dead and you must have the Wordtronix. I hope to God they don't find you. I've evaded them for years now, but I know each day their search intensifies. They want their laptop back, whatever the cost. Don't be fooled. Their promises mean nothing.

Trust me, I know. You have power in your hands.

Wield it well . . . as long as you can.

Just thinking about the cryptic message made Matt shiver. But there was a light at the end of the tunnel: The boys had discovered the message was written by someone named Sam Dunaway, who lived at RR1, Box 87 in Landes, Arizona. And since the address was near their youth group's first annual father/son retreat, Matt was determined to stop by.

"I can't believe you guys really want to find this place," Gill pressed.

"C'mon!" Alfonzo countered. "You need a little adventure in your life!"

Gill's head dropped. "Adventure?! Ever since Matt got the laptop, we've been dodging bullets, fists, and storms. Finding this place could be yet one more life-threatening escapade. This could ruin my career. Don't you remember the warning?!"

"All too well," Matt said, "but that's why we *have* to find this address. I don't want to find out who 'they' are one day by surprise. I want to be ready."

"Ready to get hurt?" Gill asked. "Ready to die?"

Matt scrunched up his face. That was the most ridiculous thing he'd ever heard. "You're not going to die. The worst you'll get is poison ivy."

Gill's jaw popped open and his ears wiggled. "*Poison ivy?! I could get poison ivy?!*"

"You're not going to get poison ivy," Lamar calmed Gill, who was already scratching his leg.

Matt looked again at the torn printout in his hand. "Let's see if there's a map up front."

He stood and steadied himself as the bus rolled down the highway. Then he started down the aisle, Lamar on his heels. Eight other boys and their fathers sat scattered throughout the bus. They were headed for the retreat, hoping for "a weekend of fun—camping, playing sports, talking, and seeking the Lord." And Matt couldn't have been less enthusiastic. Sure, a few weeks ago he had begun warming to the idea. He and his dad had been getting along better than ever, and Matt was really enjoying being around him. Then, suddenly, Matt felt like he and his dad were living in different worlds.

They were headed for the retreat, hoping for "a weekend of fun—camping, playing sports, talking, and seeking the Lord."

Matt noticed it for the first time two weeks prior, when they'd gone to Burger King for a late-night snack. All the way to the fast-food haven, they had chatted about an upcoming Pixar flick. They entered the restaurant and were halfway through placing their order when his dad's phone rang. He "had" to get it—and then proceeded to talk business through almost the entire meal. With every chew, Matt felt more and more upset and disappointed. It wasn't

exactly his idea of a rip-roaring good time. Still, it was forgivable; his dad managed several construction sites, and he was very busy. What wasn't as easily forgivable for Matt was when it happened two more times within the same week. Once at the dentist's office and once when they sat down to watch *7th Heaven*. From then on, until now, Matt hadn't expected too much from his dad. It wasn't worth the disappointment.

Matt froze when Hulk Hooligan, Matt's thorn in the flesh, threw his leg across the aisle.

"This is a tollway, Calhan. Pay a buck to pass."

"Cal-a-han," Matt corrected him. "I'm not paying you, Hulk."

"Then ya ain't passin'."

Matt wasn't in the mood. "C'mon, Hulk. I need to ask your dad a question."

Hulk looked at his dad, driving the bus—presumably the *only* reason either one of them was there. His dad had a truck-driving license and Pastor Ruhlen needed a driver. It was a great way to earn a little extra cash.

"Whatcha gonna ask him?"

"None of your beeswax."

"None of your beeswax,'" Hulk mocked.

"How's Nate?" Matt asked, changing the subject. The 200-and-some-pound bully with bleached-

blond hair darkened at the mention of his little brother's name. Matt had helped his brother out a while ago, and Hulk knew he owed Matt big-time . . . though he'd never admit it.

"He's with Gramma," Hulk said. Then, "He told me to tell ya somethin'."

Matt raised his brows. "Really?"

"Yeah." He motioned for Matt to lean in. Matt did. Then: *Baaarrrrraaaaappp!!!!*

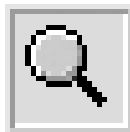
Matt recoiled at the stench of the belch. Hulk guffawed and moved his leg, letting the boys pass. Matt took the opportunity to press forward, ignoring Hulk.

Matt and Lamar made it to the front of the bus where Matt's dad, Gill's dad, Alfonzo's dad, and Pastor Ruhlen sat. Mr. Hooligan, Hulk's dad, was in the driver's seat wearing shades like an 80s rock star.

"Hey, Ace," Matt's father greeted.

"Yo!" Pastor Ruhlen said to Lamar, punching the air with his fist.

Lamar looked at Matt. Matt smiled. Matt knew that Lamar was only on the trip for his sake, to help him find out about the laptop. Lamar's father wasn't there—he couldn't be there—he'd passed away before Lamar was even born. For this trip, their youth pastor, Mick Ruhlen, was taking his place as a "stand-in" father, so Lamar could be with his friends. Pastor Ruhlen was a nice guy, and funny sometimes,



but he wasn't Lamar's father, as Lamar kept reminding Matt.

"Hi," Matt said to no one in particular. "Does anyone have a map?"

"What do you need a map for?" Matt's dad wondered.

"I'm trying to figure out where we're going." It wasn't a lie.

In the driver's seat, Mr. Hooligan thumped his forefinger against his head. "I got it up here," he said gruffly.

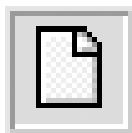
"So no one has a map?" Matt asked.

All five men shook their heads. Matt looked at his dad for a long moment.

Lamar took a different approach. "Are we going to be stopping soon? Getting some snacks? Maybe we can buy a map."

"Dude!" Pastor Ruhlen exclaimed. "We can't stop now! The retreat's only an hour away! We gotta learn to 'rough it' startin' immediately! We are the men of the wilderness, man! Unless there's a bona fide emergency, we're sailin' on through." He winked, his orange Chia pet hair bouncing with every bump.

Matt sighed. "Okay." He made an "oh well" face to Lamar. They trudged their way back to the rear of the bus. Halfway back, Hulk threw his leg out and Matt stumbled,



hitting the ground with one knee. He glared at Hulk, but the bully just laughed.

“Enjoy your trip, Calhan?!”

As if Matt had never heard *that* one before. He noticed a six-pack of Dr. Pepper at Hulk’s feet. It was jiggling with every bump, too, ready to explode. How funny would it be to open one up right in Hulk’s face and soak him. He resisted that thought, however, as soon as it rose up. It wasn’t the Christian thing to do. Besides, Matt preferred to live.

“No map?” Alfonzo asked when they returned.

“No map,” Matt said flatly.

“Not unless we stop,” Lamar added, “which they refuse to do unless there’s a ‘bona fide’ emergency.”

Gill shrugged. “So why not create a bona fide emergency?”

Matt looked at Lamar.

Lamar looked at Matt. “Don’t you dare pop a tire or do something hazardous.”

Matt smiled. “Not all emergencies are hazardous.” He pulled out his laptop. Within 30 seconds it was ready to go. He slid his finger across the small touchpad and then tapped it, clicking the word processor icon. When the program opened he created a new document and called it “BUS RIDE.” Then he cracked his knuckles and placed his fingers on the thin, black laptop’s keyboard.

The air in the bus was stale. Even though it was late in the fall, it was warm outside. Southern California had a way of keeping it warm during the day. This bus was destined for Landes, Arizona, but it was going to stop first.

"How?" Gill asked, leaning into the screen.

Matt smirked. He was looking forward to this one.

Hulk Hooligan's mouth felt like cotton. He reached down and grabbed a Dr. Pepper. He popped it open and chugged it down. Ahhhhhh . . . relief. Then, before he knew it, he had chugged down his entire six-pack.

Matt found the key with the clock face on it—right above the enter key. He pressed it. On screen, the cursor changed into a clock face and flashed gold, then white, then gold, then white, as it ticked forward like lightning. That's all it took. Suddenly make-believe became reality.

Gill shrugged. "I don't get it. That's not much of an emergency."

"Give it time," Matt said.

The four boys watched Hulk intently.

He yawned and smacked his lips, then looked down at his six-pack of Dr. Pepper. He pulled one out

of the plastic webbing. When he opened it, it fizzed and popped and spit on his clothes. "Ugh!" he cried.

"Hey!" the kid across the aisle shouted. "Chug Challenge! 60 seconds! Go!"

Hulk, never the guy to turn down a challenge, smiled wide and began chugging. *Gulp! Gulp! Gulp! Gulp!* One! He popped open the second. It fizzed and popped and spit on his clothes. "Ugh!" *Gulp! Gulp! Gulp! Gulp!* Two!

Pop! "Ugh!" *Gulp! Gulp! Gulp! Gulp!* Three!

Pop! "Ugh!" *Gulp! Gulp! Gulp! Gulp!* Four!

Pop! "Ugh!" *Gulp! Gulp! Gulp! Gulp!* Five!

Pop! "Ugh!" *Gulp! Gulp! Gulp! Gulp!* Six!

"Stop!" the challenger cried, holding his watch.

But Hulk had already finished. He was out of Dr. P's. Kids and dads sitting around Hulk stared at him in awe. Six cans in 60 seconds. That had to be a Guinness world record.



Hulk received high fives from his companions and bragged that he could have downed another had he had one. This victory dance went on for about 10 minutes when Gill finally shrugged again. "I still don't get it, Matt," he said. "I think maybe your storytelling is a bit misguided."

Matt leaned back. "Five ... four ... three ... two ... one."

Hulk patted his stomach and then slowly stood. He stumbled to the front of the bus and said something to his dad. The five men at the front shook their heads and Hulk left the group, his shoulders hunched. He returned to his seat, appearing very uncomfortable. Then he started fidgeting and wiggling.

Gill smiled. "Matt, you are brilliant."

"I know, I know. Thank you, thank you."

A minute later, Hulk got up and walked to the front again. This time, they could hear him begging. "But I really gotta go!"

"Always showing off," his dad said. "Next time you'll think first."

"Sorry, Hulk," Pastor Ruhlen said. "We have to go straight through. You can hold it."

"I *can't* hold it!"

"Hold it, boy," Mr. Hooligan ordered.

Hulk trounced back to his seat.

Matt twisted his lip. "They're not budging. Man, I thought they'd stop for sure."

"You can't just assume what's gonna happen," Lamar pointed out. "You have to think these things through. Work on your plot."

"My plot is foolproof," Matt protested. "It's just . . . missing something."

**They
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Gill laughed. "You just need to speed it up."

"What do you suggest?" Matt asked.

Gill whispered in Matt's ear.

"Okay, whatever you say."

Lamar put his face in his hands. "I can tell this is going to get hazardous," he whimpered.

Matt wrote:

Alfonzo's dad pulled out his harmonica and began playing.

Matt hit the clock key. The on-screen cursor flashed golden and ticked forward. A moment later, Mr. Zarza pulled out his harmonica and started playing randomly.

"Hey, do you take requests?" Gill shouted.

"You know I do!" Mr. Zarza yelled from the front of the bus.

"'River of Life!'"

Alfonzo's dad started playing, and the entire bus erupted in shouting/singing the old gospel favorite:

There's a river of life flowing out of me!

Makes the lame to walk and the blind to see!

Opens prison doors, sets the captives free!

There's a river of life flowing out of me!

"No!" Hulk shouted. "Stop singing! No river!" He was squirming in his seat, trying to cross his

thick legs. His face had turned red from resistance. The faces of those around him turned red, too, but from laughter.

Then the bridge:

Spring up o well! Within my soul!

Spring up o well! And make me whole!

Spring up o well! And give to me your life abundantly!

Hulk jumped up and ran down the aisle. "STOP THE BUS! I'M GOING TO WET MY PANTS!!!"

At the very next exit, the bus took a wild turn into a Stuckey's Truck Stop. No one wanted to go river rafting *before* they made it to camp.



Matt stretched his legs and felt his back pop as he exited the bus. The QoolQuad—as Matt, Lamar, Gill, and Alfonzo called themselves—had found a dandy map at the truck stop, but it still didn't make much sense now that they had made it to their destination. They couldn't find a Rural Route 1 anywhere. Matt decided to let it rest and stuffed the map into the front pocket of his blue backpack, right under the small CD case that held the latest albums of his favorite groups: dc Talk, Relient K, and Bleach. That was another of the laptop's benefits; Matt could listen to music while "roughing it."

"Where are the showers?" Matt wondered out loud.

Pastor Ruhlen chuckled as he passed and winked at Matt. "Nature provides her own showers."

"Are you saying we wash in the river or something?" Lamar asked, following him to the back of the bus, where the luggage and tents were stowed.

Pastor Ruhlen winked again. "Bingo! I've got a smart boy with me."

"Great," Gill muttered.

Mr. Hooligan met the youth pastor at the back of the bus and unlocked a storage compartment.

"Nature provides her own showers."

He shouted for his son, and Hulk came running. "Unpack this," Mr. Hooligan ordered. Hulk didn't hesitate. He reached in and pulled out one bag after another. He started tossing them and the families separated as each boy and his dad searched for their belongings.

Matt and his dad sifted through the packs of luggage, looking for their own.

Matt stopped for a moment and turned to his dad. "It's pretty rough out here, huh?"

Mr. Calahan chuckled. "Yeah, no Playstations. It'll be nice to get away from everything, won't it?"

"I guess," Matt said. "Don't know if I can get used to washing in the river though. Won't it be cold?"

"No, it'll be *freezing*."

Matt and his dad both laughed.

"Of course," Matt said, "you're not roughing it too much—you've got your phone."

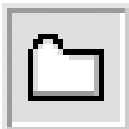
"Well, it's just for emergencies," his dad replied.

"Hope you don't get any," Matt mumbled.

At once, his dad stopped going through the bags. He straightened himself slowly, and then looked down at his belt. He unclipped the cell phone. He began to flip it around in his hand. "Have, uh . . . have I been using this a lot lately?"

Matt kept rummaging through the bags. He shrugged. "I guess."

"Tell you what. This weekend, it's just you and me. No technology. Agreed?"



Matt looked up at his dad. *Was he serious? Was he about to give up his cell phone for the weekend?* Matt nodded. "Okay."

"Put it in your backpack." Matt's dad handed the phone to Matt. Suddenly the phone vibrated and Mr. Calahan pulled it back. He looked at the display. "Um . . . I gotta get this, but it'll be the last time." And he walked away, speaking into the receiver.

Matt let out a short breath. He glanced over at Gill and his dad, yakking it up. He spied Lamar and Pastor Ruhlen laughing together. And there he was, on his own again. Hulk finally tossed out Matt's

pack and Matt picked it up, throwing it behind him. He grabbed his tent, too, and waited for his dad's pack.

Gill and his dad came by a moment later, their gear in hand. "Hey, hey!" Gill said. "What do you think of this?" He put his right hand on his hip, his left holding his tent. He cleared his throat, then, "Carter Tents," he announced in a deep voice. "Rugged gear for the great outdoors."

Matt just looked at him.

"Was it good? I'm practicing for my commercial."

"Your commercial is for tents?"

"I have no idea what the commercial is for. But it *could* be for tents. What do you think?"

Mr. Gillespie asked, "You all right, Matt?"

Matt shook it off. "Yeah. I'm fine."

"So what do you think?" Gill pressed.

His dad grabbed him by the shoulder. "Timing, Gill," he said. "That's the first lesson for great comedians. Timing. You have to learn when it's time to have fun and when someone's not in the mood."

"Matt's always in the mood."

Mr. Gillespie glanced at Matt's dad, talking on the phone. "You think so, huh?"

"It's all right," Matt said. "It was brilliant, Gill."

"See, Dad?"

"Timing, Gill."

Alfonzo ran over with his dad, a grown-up version of his Hispanic son. They both wore forest green jackets and black jeans. "Is this the greatest or what?! This is *serious* camping!"

"Oh boy," Matt said.

And Alfonzo and his dad were off. When Lamar approached, Gill and his dad walked away. It didn't take Lamar any time to see what was bothering Matt.

"Hey," he encouraged, "we all have family challenges sometimes."

"It just never ends," Matt said, then, "Forget it. It doesn't matter. I didn't come out here because I wanted to spend time with my dad or anything." He jerked his head toward the blue backpack on his shoulder. "I came out here to get some answers. And that's exactly what I intend to do."

