

A man in a dark shirt and pants is hanging upside down from a thin rope. He is positioned in the center of the frame. In the background, a large, white, rusted airplane is partially visible, surrounded by dense, dark green jungle foliage. The scene is dimly lit, with a strong light source from the right creating a bright, hazy glow around the man and the plane.

THIRTY THOUSAND FEET BELOW

*You don't survive the fall.
You survive what follows.*

ANTHONY KINCAID

Thirty Thousand Feet Below

A Short Story

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First Edition

The last week of school passed in a haze of chalk dust and ticking clocks. Summer stretched ahead like a blank page, but mine always began the same way—duffel bag, airstrip, the long flight to Grandma’s place in the Keys.

I was upstairs, shoving the last of my things into the bag—swim trunks, worn paperbacks, all the restless energy of a sixteen-year-old set loose—when the phone rang.

Not its normal trill.

This one was sharp. Insistent. A blade cutting through the quiet.

I knew it was about the trip.

It was always about the trip.

By the time I reached the kitchen, Mom already had the receiver pressed to her ear. She stood still, back to me, framed in the window light.

“Mom? Is it for me?”

She didn’t turn. Just raised her hand.

“Shhh.”

The quiet changed.

Not empty. Not peaceful.

Held.

Like the house itself was waiting.

I watched her shoulder tighten. Counted time in the slow drip of the faucet.

Plink.

Plink.

Plink.

When she finally hung up, the click landed too loud.

She turned. Her face had gone flat—like something had been smoothed over and sealed shut.

“What is it?” I asked, though something low in my stomach already knew.

“That was your grandmother,” she said. Calm voice. Too calm. “Weather’s turning bad over the Gulf. A real system.”

I shrugged, because that’s what you do at sixteen when something older than you starts to matter.

“So? We’ll be thirty thousand feet above it. Pete’s flown through worse.”

“Tony.”

My name came out different. Not sharp. Not soft.

Locked.

“You know how I am about storms.”

I did.

I knew the way the air thickened before lightning hit. I knew how she watched the sky like it might answer her back. I knew it had something to do with Uncle Dave, and a story that never got told the same way twice.

Sometimes he died because he stayed.

Sometimes because he ran.

Mom never said it the same way twice, but the outcome was the same—death.

I didn’t think.

“Uncle Dave died because he stayed. He should’ve left.”

The words didn’t echo.

They dropped.

Stayed there between us.

Ugly.

Final.

Mom's eyes drifted somewhere past me. Somewhere I couldn't follow.

"Your uncle wasn't stupid," she said. Barely above a whisper. "He trusted the wrong things."

It took longer than it should have to convince her.

Logic. Promises. Pressure.

Begging, mostly.

Begging wears people down.

Eventually, she called my grandmother back. Said I'd be there that night.

Then she looked at me.

"If Pete says no, you turn around. You understand?"

I nodded.

I didn't mean it.

Dinner passed in silence.

Not the good kind of silence.

The kind that presses in. The kind that waits. The kind that eats at you.

Dinner was meatloaf.

It tasted like nothing.

When I finished, I didn't linger. Grabbed my bag. Snatched the keys. Got out before she could say whatever she was holding back.

Warning. Plea. Something else.

The air outside felt wrong.

Still. Heavy.

Like something hadn't happened yet—but would.

I loaded the car. Honked once.

Too sharp.

Too impatient.

She came out with a sweater draped over her shoulders, even though the night was warm.

We drove without speaking.

The airstrip sat under a sky the color of faded denim.

Empty.

Waiting.

I grabbed my bag, gave her a quick hug—half-hearted, already gone—and crossed the tarmac.

Lightning split the sky.

Close.

Too close.

I moved faster.

Pete stood by the open hatch, just like always.

Grinning like nothing bad had ever found him.

“Hey, sport.”

Firm handshake.

Solid. Familiar.

“How's it going?”

“Ready to get out of here,” I said. “Mom’s driving me crazy.”

“Yeah,” he laughed. “They tend to do that.”

He started one of his stories.

I cut him off.

Didn’t feel like hearing it twice.

Inside, the plane hummed low. Alive in that quiet, mechanical way.

“You wanna co-pilot?” Pete asked.

“Nah. I’m crashing in the back.”

“Suit yourself.”

The engines roared.

I put on my headphones. Closed my eyes.

Sleep came quick.

Too quick.

I wake up on the floor.

Violenc—

I don’t know that word.

I don’t know any words.

Wait. What’s my name?

Violence.

That’s the only word that fits.

The plane bucked—hard, sudden, wrong.

Another hit.

Worse.

I grab the seat as I'm thrown upward—ceiling meets me halfway.

Then—

Explosion.

Burned wiring.

The smell hits first—hot copper, melting rubber, something organic I don't want to name.

It stays in my nose.

Stays in my mouth.

The plane drops.

Not falling.

Dropping.

Fast.

I lose my grip.

Seats blur. Metal screams. Light breaks apart—

Darkness.

Then deeper darkness.

Cough. Cough.

“Where am I?”

The voice doesn't feel like mine.

Why is it dark?

Who am I?

Nothing answers.

Pain brings me back.

Slow.

Weak.

Borrowed movement.

The cockpit door won't budge.

I find a broken seat leg. Try to pry it open.

Nothing.

The plane doesn't care what I want.

The hatch opens too easily.

Outside—

No ground.

Just leaves.

Vines.

Green swallowing everything.

A plane.

In a tree.

I sit there long enough for it to feel real.

Then I pass out.

Morning comes whether I'm ready or not.

Birds. Noise. Light.

The world kept going.

I crawl to the hatch.

A branch below.

Close enough.

Deadly enough.

I need to get into the cockpit.

That thought sticks.

Everything else falls away.

Three bags.

One isn't mine.

The pilot's.

Pete.

The thought lands late.

Heavy.

Where is he?

Where is anyone?

I don't finish it.

Don't need to.

Emergency bag.

Matches. Rope. Knife. Compass. Flashlight.

Enough to pretend I have control.

The rope bites into my waist.

The other end anchors to one of the seats.

I lower myself out.

Slow.

Careful.

Deliberate.

The plane is wrecked.

Wings gone.

Caught between trees like something thrown away.

The ground waits below.

Twenty feet.

Maybe thirty.

Close enough to matter.

Far enough that if I fall...

I block the thought.

I move forward.

Measured.

Intentional.

Then—

Crack.

No warning.

The branch gives.

“Uhhh!”

The rope snaps tight.

Pain explodes through my ribs.

Sharp.

Deep.

Wrong.

I hang there.

Useless.

Swinging.

Breathing fire.

I kick.

Again.

Again.

Each swing costs more.

Pain doesn't negotiate.

Finally—

A branch.

I grab it.

Cling to it.

Hold on like it's the last honest thing left.

Then I break.

Then I sleep.

The swamp below stretches forever.

Water. Rot. Stillness.

It doesn't look like something you escape.

It looks like something that keeps you.

We were supposed to be thirty thousand feet above the storm.

But this place felt thirty thousand feet below the living world.

Up or down.

Both bad.

Both final.

I go back up.

At least I know that fall.

Inside again.

I wrap my ribs.

Eat like a starved animal.

Canned chicken. Hands. No dignity left.

Drink.

Sit.

Sleep.

Morning again.

Pain stayed.

Settled in.

I climb.

This time I make it.

The cockpit is empty.

Too empty.

The pilot's seat sits pushed back slightly.

Headset hanging from the yoke.

One ear cup dark with dried blood.

I stop.

Don't touch it.

Don't look too long.

Radio's dead.

Just my breathing.

My heartbeat.

Too loud.

Too alone.

Lightning.

That's what did it.

That's the memory.

That's the truth.

Your uncle wasn't stupid. He trusted the wrong things.

Mom's voice.

From somewhere else.

What did Uncle Dave trust?

Storms don't bargain.

But it doesn't answer the real question.

Who am I?

Flight plan.

That's the answer.

It has to be.

I find it.

Paper. Ink. Names.

Pieces of me written down like I'm something that can be filed.

Forgotten.

Anthony Stephenson.

That's me.

Florida Keys.

That's where I was going.

Pete...

I stop.

Some truths don't help.

The door gives.

Then everything gives.

The plane shifts.

Slow.

Then faster.

I grab the frame.

Pull.

Too late.

The ground rushes up.

Sudden.

Hungry.

Certain.

crunch

Darkness.

Death.

“Agggggggggggggggg!”

I sit up.

Breathing hard.

Alive.

Bedroom.

Walls.

Familiar.

Safe.

“Tony, dinner’s ready!”

I swing my legs off the bed.

My feet hit the floor.

Cold.

Wet.

I look down.

Mud.

Dark.

Thick.

Pressed into the lines of my skin.

Something smells.

Faint.

Rot.

Swamp water.

I don't move.

Don't breathe.

From the kitchen—

“Tony?”

I look at the door.

Then back at my hands.

At the mud.

At the thin red line across my ribs.

Not a dream.

Not all of it.