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## Jamais Vu

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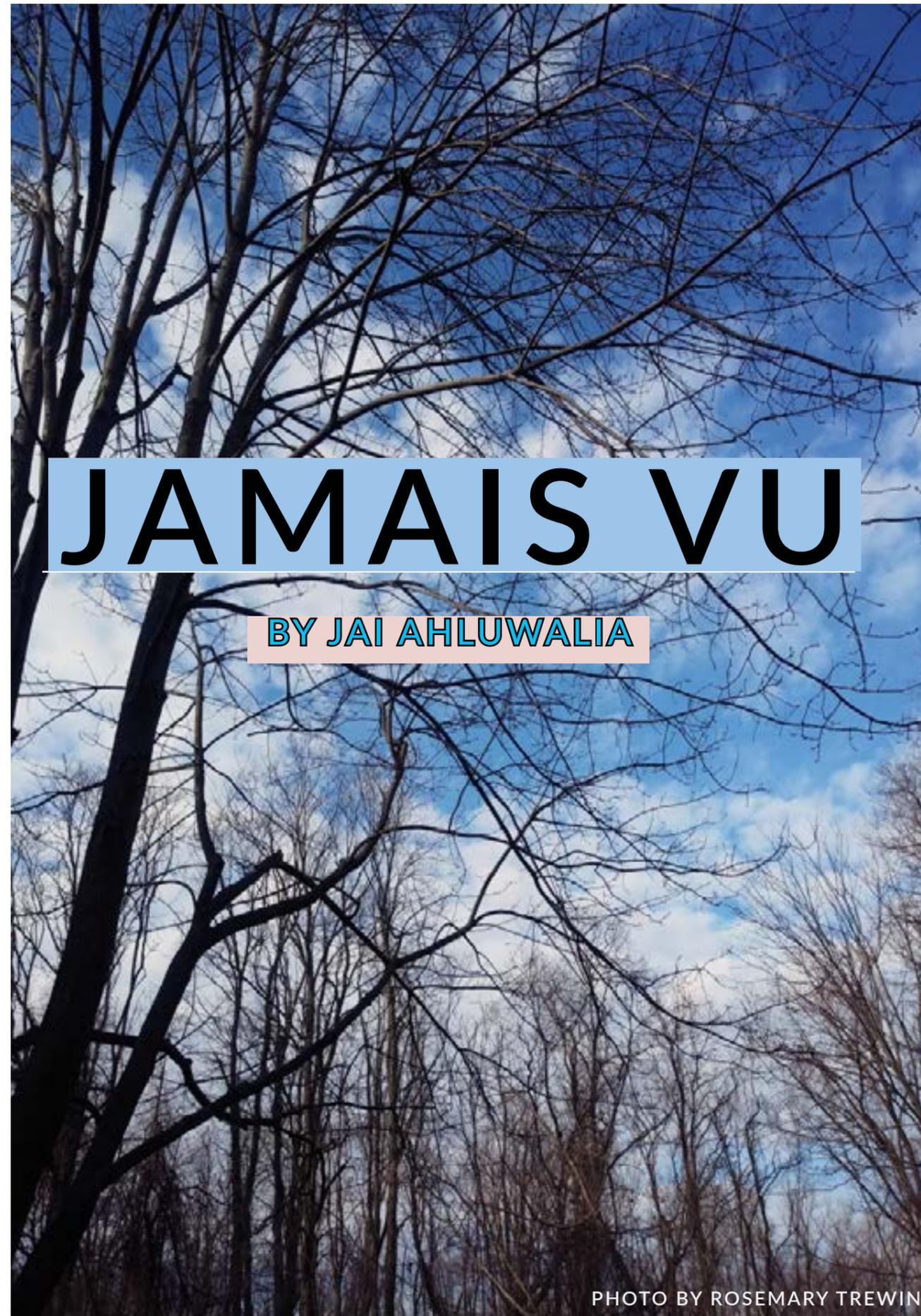
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# JAMAIS VU

BY JAI AHLUWALIA

PHOTO BY ROSEMARY TREWIN

BOREDOM AND PARANOIA FILLED MY LUNGS AS I TOOK a deep breath in the kitchen of my childhood home. I had been left to take care of the place for the past week while my parents visited relatives off the coast of Maine, and I felt eyes on me. I always felt eyes on me when I was here. A cold beer sat in front of me begging to be opened, asking to occupy the seemingly unnecessary and pointless time that had occupied my life as of late. Might as well go for a walk with it. You could get away with that around here, nobody you ran into around here would care. Letting the paranoia win once again, I peered over my left shoulder into the pine tree forest surrounding my house before shaking it off and walking out the door.

The sun beat down heavily on my bare back as I wandered my day down the seemingly endless country road before me. Never before had I taken this route in the 17 years I lived at home, but here I was, a sweaty T-shirt in one hand, a bottle in the other. Even though I had left the forest and now found myself staring down the vast expanse of farmland, I still felt as if I was being watched. But it was daytime and I was semi-lost, wandering without a purpose. I was convinced I was going crazy.

From behind me a machine roared. Turning quickly to assess the danger, I moved a little too slow. A single man in the driver seat of a car pulled up next to me, some sort of a revolver pointing out his window. We shared a stare at one another. He fired. I was hit. Fire emerged from my right shoulder and I could feel the blood pour slowly from my fresh wound. The man drove off, the shooter smiling carefully at me as I plugged my wound with the loose t-shirt.

Looking to get away from any other sort of trouble, I turned right and headed up a road I had never seen before. Just to take a rest. I felt the staccato beat of my heart radiating up my chest and out through my wound. I found a thick tree to prop myself up against, and peacefully lost my consciousness.

I woke up to the gentle breath of winter blowing against my weak body. How long had I been out? I pulled the t-shirt off my shoulder. The bleeding had slowed down, but didn't appear to be stopping any time soon. Why was it snowing all of the sudden? Using the stiff tree as my staff, I pulled myself up to find myself surrounded by redwood trees in all directions but one - a massive hill that I could have barely managed, perhaps in perfect health. But it didn't look as if I had a choice, for the path upon which I had once traveled had closed up behind me. My decision had been made for me.

Trying not to think too hard about the fever dream I was certainly suffering through, I took a deep breath and took the first step of what would certainly be a long journey. As I trekked my way up the steep hill, my feet grew painfully numb. The snow beneath me had infiltrated the top of my shoes, for it was at least 6 inches deep now. With only a few dozen feet standing between me and the top of the hill I felt my jacket being tugged on by a young boy, no older than 10. Our eyes locked for roughly 7 seconds before he spoke.

"At the top of the hill rests a man twice your age. Ignore your first instinct at all times when he speaks, for you will betray yourself if you don't."

Dumbstruck, I stood staring at the boy, even after he had turned around and ran into the woods to my right.

In a feeble attempt to shake off the boy's strange advice, I took another deep breath, taking a second to appreciate

what surrounded me. Redwoods and snow- two elements that rarely met. I wished they had met more though, after appreciating what a beautiful couple they made. Even in the middle of a crisis, it was almost as if together they released an aphrodisiac that snuck its way up my nostrils and straight to my brain. I was centered again.

I reached the top of the hill and found myself surrounded by trees on all sides except the path I had just traveled, now behind me. Each direction had its own cleared off path surrounded by the redwoods, but only one had foot-steps. If I were to take the boy seriously, I still needed to find the man even if I wasn't to trust him. I just needed to ignore my instincts the second he started speaking.

I continued formulating my plan as I moved along the snow-free path. The intense density of redwood trees must have been protecting the ground from snow. Besides trees, I was surrounded by silence. There were no cars, no broken lights, no angry arguments, not even the sound of a plane above my head. In my temporary lapse in focus, I saw a set of beady eyes staring at me through the trees. With nothing to defend myself with but the empty bottle of beer, I stood ridiculously, hand gripped tightly around the bottle for the second time that day. The grip loosened as I processed what was staring at me. The beady eyes belonged to the head of a fully grown buck. They didn't blink because the rest of its body was missing. All that was left was the head.

In a state of hemorrhagic shock and redwood-aphrodisiac induced fear, I sprinted down the path, following the new smoky smell being emitted from a few hundred feet away. Panting, I came to rest at a campfire already burning, taking a seat on a petrified tree stump just behind it. Recovering from the horrifying sight I had just seen, I felt a hand rest upon my shoulder. Just as the child had predicted, I was looking at a man roughly twice my age. He was looking back at me.

"I'm not to trust you" I said, frankly.

"You don't even know me though. Do you?" He responded, genuinely.

"I feel like I don't know anyone here. Not that there are many people to know." I took a second to pause. "Was this all here when I was a kid?"

"That's a bit of a tricky question, and I don't think I have time to explain to you why." He responded with a slight sense of urgency.

The man took a look at his watch.

"Why the rush?" I asked, reaching my numb hands toward the fire.

"Spring is coming soon, and unfortunately you must continue running for your life."

The sky had begun changing from the cloudy grey infinity of winter to the hopeful blue skies of spring. The wind that had penetrated the membranes of my skin with blistering snow was transforming into a cool breeze just strong enough to blow out a candle. Without the numbness of the snow, my bulletwound began to sing once more. I needed to keep moving.

But I didn't, remembering at the last minute the boy's advice.

"Good idea my friend. Give it some time to rest. You don't have to leave right away. That deer you saw earlier won't be coming back to life anytime soon, after all" He smiled.

Once again, remembering the child's advice, I gave



myself a few seconds to think. The man had a trusting nature to him. He seemed to know things about me that I didn't know, even if he hadn't said much. With this in mind, I doubled down and took off in a dead sprint back down the path. The deer's head was gone, but that was the least of my worries, for soon I would be hearing the sound of the truck driven by the strange man in black. I felt as if I was a few seconds away from a second bullet.

The old man was far behind me, and so now it was time to trust my instincts again. I emerged from the woods to the top of the hill and took a hard left up the path perpendicular to the one I had just taken. I sprinted gently along the side of the track, making sure to keep my feet away from the mud, avoiding the placement of incriminating footsteps.

I ran and ran and ran until there was nothing left to run on - the path had ended and soil upon which I was running had dropped from beneath my feet. I tumbled down the emptiness below, miraculously and narrowly missing the trees that were rotating in and out of my vision. With my eyes open I saw the world turning with me. The sky became the ground, the trees became a set of repulsive walls down the shoot from which I fell



freely. Eventually my body came to rest on whatever the ground was, my world spinning around me as I gently lost consciousness once again.

I came too with yet another set of beady eyes staring into my own. This time they were attached to the head of a grown woman around the age of my own mother. She bore a 29 pearl necklace and a tiara that gave her a wise yet youthful energy.

"What has happened to me?" I asked hopefully.

She stared back, wordless, but smiling.

"How do I get back?" I grasped at straws once more.

She nodded her head in the



direction to the left of me.

I turned my head slowly, against the resistance of the light summer breeze that had replaced the cool spring one. After a few seconds, I was reoriented. I was at the bottom of a hill again, only this time I was facing a challenge nearly twice as large.

I got up gingerly, but for no reason. Nothing hurt anymore, my bullet wound was gone and my oscillations between pain, numbness, and both had ended. I turned back to thank the woman who must have healed me, but she was gone. I took a deep breath and took another look up the hill, this time noticing a giant trudging its way up it.

Desperate for help and my way back home, I began a hesitant and exhausting sprint up the hill. Just when I thought nothing could surprise me, a light snow began to fall. The giant paused for a moment,

sticking its hands out and looking up in utter shock. I did not take the time to appreciate the miracle of season switching, for I needed every second I could get if I was going to catch up. As the snow piled, my strides became increasingly taxing, burning holes in my calf muscles. With one final push I made a drive for the giant's cloak, hoping at the very least he'd notice my feeble bottle weighing against his mammoth one. To my luck and surprise, he noticed, turning around.

It took me a moment to process what was happening, the wheels turning in my head. They clicked.

"At the top of the hill rests a man twice your age. Ignore your first instinct at all times when he speaks, for you will betray yourself if you don't." I mumbled.

I was the giant. And I was me. I was the child with a warning. I knew I had to be. Although I was unsure why. With nothing left to say, I stuck to the script, sprinting off in the opposite direction.

I needed to see the old man if I was to make sense of all of this. Head spinning, I took my longest strides through the untouched floor of the woods, pausing only when I saw my savior lying peacefully under a tree. It was the buck, this time with a full body. If I were to reach the top of the hill before myself, I would need his help. He seemed to understand, for when I mounted his back, he rose gently and strode gracefully up the hill, running parallel to the path giant me was currently traveling up.

In a matter of seconds I had reached the peak, I dismounted him and thanked him with a confident nod of my head. A sense of profound sadness filled me when



I remembered the buck's fate, but he seemed to understand as well. We parted ways and I made my way parallel to the side path, down which the other me would soon follow. But when I arrived at the site of the fire it was empty, and there was nobody near me. I looked at my watch, as if that would give any indication of the arrival of the old man.

Luckily, my idiosyncrasies had saved me, for the presence of this watch indicated my emergence from childhood. I was the old man now. With little time to think, I began working on a fire with what scraps of wood I could find. After building a small one in the clearing, I made my way back into the thicket, with the hopes of coming up with a bit more before I arrived.

Realizing I would come up empty, and that I only needed a few minutes worth of fire. I made my way back, to find myself sitting, bleeding profusely in front of the fire.

I emerged from the woods, taking a seat next to myself.

"I'm not to trust you," he said, naively.

"You don't even know me though. Do you?" I responded, sarcastically.

Upon the conclusion of our conversation and my eventual sprint down the path, I put out the fire and took a second to think. The hunter never followed me down the path that ran perpendicularly to the one I was on now. Perhaps they caught a whiff of the fire, and assumed I was still down



here. Regardless, it is my philosophy that sitting still never gets anyone anywhere. So I assumed myself to be correct and decided to travel stealthy off the path, but toward the intersection of paths.

Awaiting me at the intersection was not the hunter, but instead his revolver. It would cost me a few seconds to get it. Did I have the time to spare? I had already wasted enough time analyzing this. So I got back to the task at hand.

I knew what would await me if I took the perpendicular path once more. I certainly would once again be sent down the abyss, and perhaps restored to the state of a child once more. All that was left



was the third path, the only one I had yet to take. As I ran down the path, the seasons changed as predicted, the light spring breeze greeting me as I passed through a seemingly identical thicket of trees as the ones behind me. But as my speed picked up, my surroundings changed. The breeze started to warm up, the redwoods turned into cherry blossoms, and the cherry blossoms turned into palm trees, and the palm trees eventually became the native pine. The trees were not the only things changing; I felt my clothes getting baggier on my body, my skin growing tighter upon my bones. The watch became too loose and went flying behind me. There was no time to save it, for I was where the trees ended.

I came to an abrupt stop at the edge of the forest, dropping my belly to the ground and staring through the weeds. Through



it all, I saw my home, specifically the kitchen through a window. And there I sat, with an unopened bottle of beer and a look of supreme boredom. I watched myself get up, pace around the kitchen, and eventually stare out the window. For a second, I swore we locked eyes. He turned abruptly, exiting the kitchen and eventually the house. As if I was receiving divine instructions, I rose automatically and made my way down the back yard, through the baby trees that sat propped up by a few poles and some string. I entered my home through the back door, just in time to hear the garage opening and my parents entering. My back to the woods from which I had just emerged, I for once took comfort in the eyes that I knew were watching me.

