

# The Lives We Haven't Lived

It was supposed to be a holiday getaway, a return to simpler times. Back to when they were just two boys with too much free time, no responsibilities to call their own. They packed their bags, throwing them into Wesley's pickup truck, stuffing their little-used tent in between the cooler and the first aid kit. No kids, no wives, no one but them and the open road. 5 days of pure freedom.

Spencer was giddy as he slid in the passenger seat, his best friend already behind the wheel. Looking into the side mirror, he saw his friend's house slowly drift away as they drove off. It was a warm day, so Wesley had his window open, his elbow perched on the exposed metal. A fond smile on his face, Spencer scrolled through his phone to find the road trip playlist he had spent an embarrassingly long time compiling. Smooth guitar strums filled the air and they started humming along. Spencer looked over to Wesley. They had been best friends for close to 20 years, going through middle school, high school, and college together. A friendship like theirs seemed unreal, too stable, and too intertwined. They had been the best man at each other's weddings, were godfathers of each other's children, and had recently opened up their own business together, a little diner. They even lived in the same neighborhood. Still, they didn't get sick of each other. Indeed, as evident by this trip, their idea of time off was to spend more time with each other.

Ever since the diner opening, they had had barely any time at all, but with their families covering for them, they carved out space for this little trip. Bright smiles on their faces, they drove ever further from their daily lives, into the great unknown. The sun was still high, the breeze light and their eyes sparkling with joy. Wesley's curly hair bristled in the wind like a live animal. Of course, Spencer teased him, just like he had always done, but he secretly loved seeing his best friend so relaxed. They had been anxious for so long, now was the time to loosen up. "It's so good to be out here, I can't wait to see nature again", Wesley said, his eyes focused on the road ahead. They were still in a relatively populated area, a far cry from the deserted forests they were moving towards. "Me too, hopefully, the weather will stay this great", Spencer replied, already rummaging in the snack bag nestled between his legs.

As the day went on, the residences became more sparse and the fauna more prominent. The playlist wandered from the indie music they usually had playing in their diner to hits from their childhood to the occasional pop song Spencer was inexplicably obsessed with. Singing along full-throated, he caught an amused glare from Wesley. The snack bag got gradually lighter and the sun had just started to lower when they decided to stop for the night. Parking at the edge of a small sprinkling of trees, they jumped out, dashing to get their supplies out of the truck. A playful spirit gripped them, leading to a full-blown race into the woods. Breathing heavily, they reached a clearing perfect for setting up their tent. Wesley volunteered to build the tent but quickly admitted defeat. Shaking his head in abject amusement, Spencer joined him and together they somehow got

the tent standing and mostly stable. Giggling, they went in, laying down on the floor. “Man, this is awesome.” “When’s the last time we have done this?”, asked Wesley, turning his head towards his friend. In the low lighting, his eyes were black and indiscernible. Spencer turned on his side, fully facing Wesley, his head propped up with one arm. “I don’t know, must have been ages ago.”

Time passed, but they couldn’t tell how much. Too lost in their memories, spilling out in anecdotes traded like marbles. Boring high school classes, their favorite middle school teachers, weird things they had read in the last few weeks. Drifting in and out of conversations as naturally as a bird bathing itself, Spencer only noticed how late it had gotten when the last silence between them had dragged on. His eyes fell on his friend who was soundly asleep, mouth gaping open. Warmth spread through him and almost unconsciously he reached out to push a curl out of Wesley’s face. “Sleep well, Wes.”

The next morning Spencer felt every single one of his 30 years, groaning as he got up. “Man, my back hurts like hell.” Wesley, who was still curled up on top of his sleeping bag, laughed. “Wah, wah, old man”, he teased, one hand ruffling through his hair, trying to fix what a night spent on the floor had caused. Spencer rolled his eyes, a small smile creeping on his face. “Don’t start, you’ll feel it, too, soon.” Packing up their belongings and tracking back to the pickup, their eyes rested comfortably on each other as they were continuing their meandering conversation from the night before. Arms swinging, their hearts were lighter than they had been in a long time. Something about this trip made both of them feel oddly nostalgic. Maybe it was the air, maybe just the stress they had been dealing with before for so long. Now they were free, at least for a little while. Wesley’s eyes lingered on his friend, seeing his strawberry blond hair brightened by the sun, the easy smile on his face. A sigh escaped him.

As soon as he was behind the wheel, the tension lessened, the comfort of his vehicle calming his inexplicably wandering thoughts. Falling back into easy conversation, the hours passed. Between more roadside snacks, a short stop at a deli, and more mildly cheesy songs that they unashamedly sang along to, Wesley’s cheeks had started to hurt a little. His smile had been so permanent, proclaiming his happiness for everyone to see. He barely noticed how close he had moved to his friend, caught up in their own world. They had always been that way, sitting right next to each other, leaning in. Laughing, unaware of the world around them. Nowadays they would get a cross look from across a room at most, but their school years had been rough. Many afternoons had been spent in Wesley’s backyard, building their fort, sharing their thoughts, hiding away from the world. For years Wesley had felt the soul-crushing instinct within him, telling him to move away, to keep his distance. On this day as with many days beforehand, he didn’t even notice, his eyes kept solely on Spencer.

As the day’s end grew close, they reached their final destination, the woods they had camped out in as kids. Moving through these scrubs and trees, now much smaller than they had seemed in the past, the sun was guiding them. After wandering around for a while, they found a clearing next to a small river, perfect for setting up camp for a few days. They struggled with rebuilding the tent, having packed it away incorrectly

the day before. It took them an embarrassingly long time, but they managed. They always did. While Wesley ran back to the truck to get the cooler box, Spencer tried his best to set up a small campfire. He was so proud of himself for finishing before Wesley returned. Sitting next to the burning flames illuminating the darkening forest, they ate a small meal, comprised of whatever they managed to put on a stick and grill over the open fire. As the evening advanced, Spencer pulled out some beers from the cooler, offering one to his friend, who gladly accepted. Sipping their drinks they leaned back, propping themselves up with their elbows. "This is the life", Spencer sighed, staring up into the night sky. Wesley's eyes were glued to his friend, the soft glow of the fire turning his hair golden. The sudden pain in his heart was enough to make him choke slightly. Spencer looked over and started laughing as he saw Wesley coughing, almost choking himself. "Oh shut up", Wesley said, shoving his friend. They only drank a little more before the long day on the road claimed them. Rolled into their sleeping bags, Wesley's eyes didn't leave his friend's silhouette until he fell asleep, the dull pain returning like an old friend. The last thought crossing his mind before he fell asleep was "God, why does he have to look so lovely?"

Waking up with the intrinsic knowledge of freedom never got old to Spencer. Slowly feeling his senses return, the warm glow of sleep clinging to him, he rolled over. Wesley was still asleep next to him, submerged in his sleeping bag, mouth gaping open like always. Even with the slight stubble grazing his cheeks, he looked so young, so much like he used to. The dark shadows below his eyes had lessened and his forehead was smooth, without the deep furrows that had become painfully familiar. The humming in Spencer's chest was back, an odd tension within him. Freeing himself from the confines of his resting spot, he crawled over. He shook his friend's shoulder, who immediately grunted, flailing his arm right into Spencer's face. "Ow, Jesus Christ!" Wesley's eyes shot open almost comically to see his friend holding his cheek with a mix of bemusement and indignation. As soon as they made eye contact, they burst out into laughter. Here they were, in the middle of nowhere, accosting each other at god knows what time of day. It took Spencer a while to recognize what he was feeling so excessively on this trip. He was carefree.

They spent the day exploring the woods and sitting next to the river, disconnected from the world, but connected to each other. The weather was holding up as hoped, just warm enough to lay outside on the mossy forest floor, but broken up by just enough of a light breeze to keep them comfortable. It had been years since Spencer had felt so unconstricted, so untethered from all of his worries. He hadn't spent any time on his phone since they had gotten out of the truck, not to send emails, not to check his messages, not to obsess over the news on twitter. Maybe this digital detox was part of the reason why every time he looked at Wesley he saw his younger self, why every laugh and every smile from him seemed priceless. They had been gangly and awkward, Wesley especially with his untamed curls, braces, and long limbs. He used to be taller back then, until Sophomore year when Spencer finally had his long-desired growth spurt. He could still remember when he had run over to his friend's house, college acceptance letter in his hand, praying that Wesley's would be identical. That he would be able to spend his college years by his side. The odds were in their favor then and they were now. The brightness in Spencer's chest had long spilled over into an absent-minded smile. He still couldn't believe how lucky he was.

If Wesley noticed him staring, he didn't say. Something about these woods, the quiet rustling and airy rushing of the river, was stirring emotions in Spencer's heart he wasn't quite ready to acknowledge. Averting his eyes from his friend's face, he gazed into the distance, trying to let go of the sapling of thought growing in his mind. Wandering over to the river, he crouched down, dipping his fingertips in the cool stream. His legs had just started to ache when he heard Wesley approaching. Turning around, Spencer saw his friend, his hair spilling out the sides of his newly donned cap. He looked ridiculous. Spencer couldn't help the snort escaping him, Wesley's slightly incredulous look making matters worse. "Dude, you look like a camp counselor!" "Oh, like you look so much better, Mr. Middle-aged Dad", Wesley shot back, no real bite behind his words. Both of them laughed and shoved each other, breaking out into an impromptu play fight. Still laughing but slightly out of breath, they sat down next to the river, shoulder to shoulder. "I'm glad we're here", Spencer said quietly, nudging his friend. "Me, too", Wesley replied, leaning into Spencer's shoulder.

As the stars began creeping into view on the darkening sky, they huddled close to the campfire, carefully cooking some canned goods. Living off of beans and stew wasn't that great, but it was all worth it in the end. The beer they had brought had run out, but they still had a bottle of whiskey, taken from Wesley's home. It had started gathering dust on the mantelpiece it was standing on, so he impulsively decided to bring it on the trip. That spontaneity was paying off now as they passed the bottle between them. "Don't drink too much, or we don't have anything tomorrow evening", Spencer cautioned, his voice lower than usual. The warm glow of the fire on their faces and the comfortable burning in their throats from the whiskey had started to blend together. Propped up by his hands, Spencer gazed up into the sky, a beautiful mix of dark purple and indigo, broken up by a few fleeting streaks of pink. "Look at this!", he said, one hand pointing upward lazily. Wobbling from the shifting support, he almost fell back, but Wesley caught him, his warm hand burning itself into Spencer's shoulder. They were so close he could feel Wesley's breath on the side of his face, smell the whiskey, and the lack of tooth brushing. Usually, he would have told him to back off by now, conscious of other people's stares eating away at them. But they were alone now. So he didn't. Instead, he leaned into it, a sigh escaping him. Sitting there felt like an eternity, the only constant the gentle rhythm of passing the bottle back and forth and the warm shoulders connecting them.

Spencer regained consciousness when he felt something wet touch his skin. Without opening his eyes he was acutely aware of the weight against him, the gentle breath grazing his cheek. Slowly opening his eyes, he was face to face with Wesley, who had evidently started to drool on him, open-mouthed sleeper as he was. They must have fallen asleep in front of the campfire, a careless decision. Luckily they had built a secure fireplace, keeping the flames at bay, even if left alone. Any morning dew that might have settled on their skin had already dissipated, the warm sunshine caressing them. Just as Wesley was caressing him. One hand near his shoulder, the other near his waist, they were fully tangled up with each other. Like lovers, Spencer thought, the sapling returning in his mind, now a small tree. A voice in his head urged him, expected him to move away. To shake his friend awake and escape as far away as he could. But it was a faint complaint, drowned out by the rustling of the tree's leaves, soothing him. He was comfortable like this. He didn't want to leave, so he didn't. He stayed in his friend's embrace, breathing shallowly as to not disturb the moment.

An undetermined amount of time slipped by until Wesley stirred, opening his eyes lazily. Spencer, who had started to cloud gaze, turned towards him as he felt his friend move. There they were, eye to eye, in each other's arms. A small smile crept onto Wesley's face, almost unconsciously, a red dusting covering his ear tips and nose. A shyness he was unfamiliar with descended upon him, causing him to look down as he detangled his limbs from Spencer's. "M' sorry", he mumbled, rubbing his neck. "No need to apologize", Spencer said, his face burning. As they got up to tidy last night's remainders, their eyes kept returning to each other, occasionally accompanied by self-conscious chuckles at the other's pitiful attempts at packing up. They were never the most organized people, a frequent complaint from their college friends when they visited their apartment. Spencer didn't realize it at first, but a lot about this trip reminded him of their college days as roommates, before dates with girls and fiancées and children and separate households. Back when it was just the two of them goofing around. Cooking in their miserably small kitchen, squeezing onto their couch to eat, sharing one bedroom. Fighting over who got to shower first, playing silly little pranks on each other. Before Spencer got home one day to introduce his girlfriend. Before the cold gazes and the awkward double dates. Before crying at each other's weddings, not sure if what they were feeling was joy or pain. Long before those restless hours at the hospital, hands clasped tight. It had been several years since then, but Spencer could still see the incomprehensible joy in his friend's eyes as he held his daughter, so fragile and tiny in his arms. He must have looked the same when he held his son, knowing he would protect him with his life. In the midst of the clinically bright light, no shame controlled them as they wept into each other's arms, the emotions too strong for either to handle alone. And if the soothing words they whispered to each other then steered a little too far into loving, who was to know?

All Spencer knew that he was too caught up in old memories, his absentmindedness so obvious he could feel Wesley's concern emanating through the air like sweat on a hot summer day. Sitting down at the river had become a constant throughout their stay here, always beckoning them to dip their hands in, to breathe in deeply, to let go of their worries. The cool swirling water grounded him a little, the memories settling into his mental tree like birds. Between the confusion and the twinges of pain, he mostly felt fondness in remembering the past. Some memories had been well-handled over the years, their edges smoothed out like old photographs. Looking through them on this trip though, Spencer couldn't help but be acutely aware of the darkness hidden below so many bright moments. Back home the shining lights drowned out so much, with Elliot and Sophie running around, with their wives filling the air between them.

Wesley remained quiet, eyes settled on his friend who seemed deep in thought, absentmindedly lapping his hand through the water of the river. He looked pensive as if trying to solve a riddle. Wesley knew full well how that felt. Sifting through old memories, trying to make sense of it all. Looking back, it was hard to pinpoint when exactly he knew. Maybe it was watching his friend standing at the altar, waiting for his bride. Or maybe that momentous night as Wesley was holding his daughter, Spencer sitting beside him, one arm comfortingly wrapped around his back. Perhaps it had been there all along, way back on the fateful day they met, just two boys sitting at the back of science class. Wesley should have known that that bashful smile would change his world. Now here they were, almost two decades later, both married to other people. How cliché it was a grown man, in love with his best friend. Still, Wesley had always been a hopeless optimist. He

couldn't help but hope that maybe, just maybe, Spencer felt the same. The pain and the guilt and the confusion were all worth it for that sliver of hope.

Whenever Spencer and Wesley were together, time couldn't seem to pass any quicker, the hours slipping by like raindrops down a window. Even though both kept drifting off into their own thoughts, just the quiet security of each other's company was enough. They once again lit their campfire, by now a familiar sight, and cooked their meal above it. Something about the dim lighting, the quiet rustling of the leaves and the closeness they allowed themselves to share, filled Wesley with a sense of peace he hadn't felt in so long, he almost forgot how it felt like. With hidden eagerness, he pulled out the Whiskey bottle from the cooler, handing it over to Spencer. Last night had been the best sleep he had had in a long time, the comfort of Spencer against him soothing his very soul. On this last day in these woods, he hoped for another such night, if only to keep as a memory to tide him over harder times. He might have imagined the gleam in Spencer's eye as he grabbed the bottle, taking a generous swig. Even fully sober he was intoxicated, the pressure against his left side the loveliest torture.

"Remember our apartment?", Wesley said, one hand buried in the moss below them, the other loosely touching Spencer's back. "Course, man, it was so tiny, I can't believe how we survived in there!" "I liked livin' with you though", Wesley murmured, his hand now firmly on his friend. "Me, too", Spencer responded, his voice low. They were so close now. It wouldn't take much, Spencer thought, his mind slightly foggy. Just leaning in a little closer. The campfire crackling in the background, the bottle of whiskey between them, Spencer brushed his lips against Wesley's. It was a little awkward, they couldn't help but giggle afterward. The dim lighting cast deep shadows on their faces, accentuating their features. The fuzziness of the whiskey blurred out all of their anxieties, that was for future them to worry about. Now all they wanted was to lean in again. So they did.

The unflinching light of the next morning hit Wesley as he slowly got up, his limbs heavy. He was alone in front of the campfire, neck cramped from the uncomfortable position he had fallen asleep in. The bottle of whiskey had fallen over, a damp spot on the floor all that remained of it. The fire was dead, grey ash spilling out on the sides. While his mind was still foggy, he hadn't been quite drunk enough to forget what had transpired the night before, hidden in the comforting darkness. One hand touched his lips, remembering the kisses they had received. Spencer had kissed him. They had kissed each other. And now he couldn't see Spencer anywhere. Standing next to the remainder of their transgressions, Wesley couldn't stop fidgeting with his wedding ring. This was the time he couldn't push away his feelings. This time he couldn't pretend. Because it wasn't feelings anymore, it was action. It was a line that could not be uncrossed. The pooling guilt he felt carried with it an amount of exhilaration he was almost uncomfortable to admit. Yet, after all these years, they had finally kissed! From the darkness between memories, from all the what-ifs, buried deep beneath the drenching jaundice of life, this moment had fought its way to the surface. Wandering around, looking for Spencer, Wesley filed away the memory of the previous night, because no matter what happened, he would still have this. A brief moment of tenderness, protected by the darkness and the rustling trees.

Sitting on the cargo bed of Wesley's pickup truck Spencer's cheeks were wet and he had a hard time reading the messages on his phone. Between the wetness and the whirling thoughts, the words of his wife were sharp as ice. Questions. So many questions. Why he hadn't answered her. Where he was even at. Beneath the simple words, he saw so much more reflected back to him. Why did you leave? Why did you do what you did? Why did you betray me? Everything had become blurred beyond recognition, but the tree was still standing. Even as he questioned everything he had known, he couldn't bring himself to regret kissing Wesley. The tree's roots had buried themselves into his very core, filling the space between his memories. All the life he has lived nourishment for the soaring branches.

When Wesley sat down next to him after what felt like an eternity, Spencer knew this was it. He could pretend it was all a mistake, blame it on the alcohol or the seclusion or the stress or any other damn thing. Go home and pretend. Lie in his bed, next to his wife, carrying the weight of this trip, this moment in time, until the end of days. Wondering if she could tell. Seeing a bottle of whiskey in the basement and being right back here at the crossroads. This was the choice. He leaned into Wesley's shoulder.