

Time to Think

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I don't remember where I was when I heard the news. Come to think about it, I don't remember anything at all about Thursday. All I remember was lying awake that night.

Because life slows down at night. At this point it's the only time I really get to think.

I also remember the first thing I did the next morning. Every pill, every needle, everything, in the garbage. This isn't high school anymore. To hell with withdrawal.

I walked out onto Swasey Parkway and looked up at the sky. It seemed particularly bright that morning, a deep shade of blue that made me dizzy as I stared into it. I remember feeling a tremendous sense of calm at that moment, an inexplicable serenity.

I should be in high school. I'm eighteen and would be just finishing my senior year, but I dropped out. I was failing anyway. Not like I had any friends either. Oh, I wasn't bullied, I wasn't an outcast. I was just forgotten. I was the kid who sat in the back corner, head in his hands, wishing he was somewhere else, knowing that place wasn't home, either.

I could have done well in school, too. There was nothing stopping me. I was bright ever since I was an infant. The problem was that I never got invested. I just didn't care, and now it's too late. I squandered my chance at a normal high school education, and I can't get it back.

Failing wasn't my only problem. During sophomore year I tried heroin for the first time, sitting alone in the backseat of my mom's crappy '97 Honda Accord. I'm not going to tell you that I was hooked immediately – that's not how it works. You don't try it once and get addicted. But I do know I liked it that first time. I liked it a lot. It's a slippery slope.

Where do I go now that it's all over?

That was the question I asked myself, time and time again.

My mother. She was the first person who came to mind.

The Exeter Cemetery looked exactly as it had when I last saw it, back in the sixth grade when it happened. I remember seeing her white, cold body for the last time, seeing the coffin being shut and lowered into the ground. All I can remember was a sense of awe, that my mother would be in the ground, unmoving, for eternity.

With those memories came back even more upsetting ones. The nightly sobbing, the screaming, the fights. That day in June, when I found her hanging from a branch in the backyard. God knows what she was on when she did it. All that I know is that it was inevitable.

After that, my stepfather was less reserved. He had no one to impress, no one who cared about me to keep his temper in check. Because my mother cared. She had problems, plenty of them, but I know that she cared about me.

From then on, he was drunk every night. I'd go to bed with a black eye if I was lucky. At that point, I was still hoping for a normal life. The time I spent with my mother was the happiest time of my life. So I didn't run from him. I resolved to keep going, to make it through high school, to hang on.

But it got hard. By the time I was in the eighth grade, he had lost his job and was broke. That's when the kids at school started to see the effects. Because I had friends in middle school. I had a good time back then. But by the eighth grade I had grown quiet. My stepfather would keep me up until the early morning with his drunken bouts of anger and violence.

I spent an hour in the cemetery, first gathering flowers for my mother and then walking slowly down each row, looking at the graves and wondering about the stories. I always loved stories, and even though I didn't do well in school I liked to read. The graveyard was where the storyteller in me could go wild. Who were all these people? Does anyone remember them?

From the cemetery, I directed my steps to the banks of the Exeter River. I remembered the way perfectly – snake through my backyard, duck under the willow tree to avoid the view of the neighbors, scramble down a small, steep hill, dash across a clearing, and there it was, just as I left it a few years ago. The rock was there, too, its rounded top poking above the white, calm ripples of the rushing water. I used to sit on it for hours whenever I wanted to get away, skipping rocks absent-mindedly or grabbing at small minnows, only to have them dart away as soon as my hand broke the surface of the water. The rock still holds a special significance for me, even though I don't need to escape anymore, not since my stepfather left me last year. Just up and left. I woke up one day in late May, and his clothes, wallet, car, everything, just gone. I've been living alone ever since. I have no relatives, at least none I ever met. I don't know what else to do.

So, I got a job. I'm working at the Sunoco on Portsmouth Ave from nine to five, and starting at six I head to McDonald's, just down the road. I barely sleep, but at least I'm getting by. I really should be there now, not that it matters anymore. I was planning on attending community college once I saved up some money, but that was a pipe dream anyway.

I leaned down and picked up a rock. It was shiny, smooth against the rough skin of my hand. And I nodded with satisfaction as it skipped over the glassy water, four, five, six, seven times before coming to a rest on the bank where the river curved.

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I woke up this morning and I knew exactly where I was going. Out the door, take a left, right at the library, left on Linden, ten houses down. It was just as I remembered it – gray, slightly sagging, shingles coming detached from the roof. I had never been inside, but I passed it every day for years back when I was in middle school. I walked up the gravel pathway and knocked. And in a minute, there was Vinnie, looking just as he did when I left him, albeit with some wisps of gray hair starting to come

through. Same slightly crooked nose, hardened skin, huge hands. The bastard even had on the same torn, navy sweatshirt he wore every day on the bus.

It took him a second, I think, to realize who I was and why he recognized me. He opened the door with the same uninterested, slightly condescending expression with which one might greet a Jehovah's Witness or a door-to-door salesman. But before I had time to react, my hand was being crushed and I was being pulled inside by his powerful grip. He was clapping me on the back, smiling, telling me how great it was to see me. I couldn't keep up with the onslaught. Finally, I was inside, sitting at the counter, and he poured me a glass of water.

"How you been, man?" was the first thing he could think of to say.

"I've been good. I'm working down at the Sunoco now."

"Since when you got time for that?"

I smirked, and took a drink of water before answering. "Since I dropped out."

He put down the beer that he had been holding since I entered. Beer bottles acted as a sort of hand decoration for him. "Now what the hell'd you go and do that for?"

"Hey, we both know I was failing anyway."

He grunted and looked out the window, so I continued. "You still driving buses?"

"Yeah, still at it. One day I'm gonna quit, though. One of these days, just wait and see. Those brats in the administration, I'm done with 'em. Soon as the wife lets me, I'm gone."

"How is she?"

"She's fine, man, she's gettin by. Still working at the preschool."

"Nice."

He nodded. I sighed. One of the many things I liked about Vinnie was that he wasn't afraid of silence. Some people, they have to be talking, all day, every day. Vinnie wasn't afraid of a little silence. Gives you time to think. Finally, he spoke. "What made you come by? Just felt like checkin in?"

“Well, it’s been a big couple days for me. Real big couple days.”

“Why? What’s been goin on?”

“Well, Thursday I went cold turkey.” The thought of it made my head pound. “Been clean three days now. Threw it all right in the trash. Feel like shit, but I’m glad to be done with it.”

Vinnie was no stranger to my drug habits. I’ve known him since the sixth grade, when he first became my bus driver. I live far from school, so I was always the last one on the bus, and I would sit up front and talk with him until we got to my house. Then, when I was in the eighth grade, he took on the role of janitor as well to pick up some extra money. He became something of a class treasure. Everyone in the school wanted to talk to him for his gruff humor and his good-naturedness. I always felt lucky to know him.

“Hey, congrats, man! Shit, wish I could stop drinking. How’d you do it?”

“Well, I, uh... I had some motivation. I just, uh... I found out on Thursday that I –” I tried to think of the best way to say it. The letter from the hospital was so impersonal. It made me feel like a mark on a piece of paper.

“What is it?”

“It’s... I’m dying, Vinnie. Acute leukemia, stage four. They gave me four weeks.”