

There's a slight struggle, then the tape recorder flicks on. The ambient noise of an abandoned space station, quiet and yet loud in its silence, rush in, followed by the sound of Tom's voice mumbling.

TOM

Whoop, got it on. God, that damn button keeps sticking on this thing. All it has to do is just make it a couple more days. Uh, Tom Jackson again, hello everyone. Day- shit, what is it, I forgot to check. Ummm. . . five hundred. . .

(incoherent muttering)

. . .twentyyyy six? Five? Yeah, five. Day 525 in space. Which means I have 8 more days left. Oh, fuck me, that's not that much time, huh.

A deep breath is drawn in.

TOM

I honestly can't tell if these logs are helping or hurting this, you know, this coping with grief thing. Although, is it really coping with grief if it's your own death? But- you know- on one hand, when I do these, I'm talkin' about shit I haven't talked about in years, which is kinda nice. I assume it's like therapy, but I never really managed to do that back on Earth. I keep thinking about how I have so much more to say, so many stories to tell and to give, that my life's not over yet- it's not even *CLOSE* to over yet!

And that's all well and good, but, on the other hand, doing these makes me realize how little time I have to say and give all of that- all of that. . . that I want to give. I wanna give so much more, put so much more out there. And I have to decide what to leave and what to take, like I'm packing for a long trip.

Which I guess I am; it's just a one-way ticket.

Well. So far as we know.

Tom gives a soft chuckle.

TOM

I'm also thinking about how much I missed out on doing all this when I was back on Earth, this whole self-reflection thing. Did you know, I never went home to Missouri after moving away? I didn't even talk about where I was from. Why did I wait until now to look back on what I've done, to remember my past and where I came from? Was I too focused on- on- on my life, on what I was doing with my wife and career, that I simply didn't have time to look back? Or was that just an excuse and it was just that I was scared that if I thought too much about it, that I would start to miss it and I would give up and go back to it? I'd move back.

Would that have been so bad?

This is almost said like a challenge, shot out to space in desperation.

TOM

Either way, I think I'm starting to get at something I need to get at before this is all over.

He laughs, remembering.

TOM

Talking yesterday was so weird, talkin' about school? I've been out of school for what must be two decades now- Jesus. I- it all feels equal parts fresh and distant. Like, it was long ago and I can't even remember the names of some of my teachers or- any of the problems I was having back at that time seem so. . . small and trivial. But at the same time, I can still recall how, like, sneakers sounded in the hallways of my high school, or what gym class smelled like or what the bells sounded like. And, you know, the only thing that I have to compare this feeling of realizing I'm going to die, the only thing even a little bit comparable, is the feeling of flipping through a test, and reading the questions, and not understanding even one of them and realizing you're gonna fail. It's that same sinking, regretful, resignation.

It's almost like I don't quite believe it. Like it's a bad dream and it's not

actually gonna happen. And that I can go back and change something that would make it different.

There's a long pause. No sound or movement from Tom.

TOM

High school was good to me, but it's funny how much of it I spent trying to get out. My friends talkin' for all four years about what they'd do once they split from our little town, who they'd be, what they'd do, and. . . It was always something they banked on doing, something that was a given. No one wanted to stay in our town, let alone in Missouri, doesn't matter how many people end up doing just that. But I was always fine stayin', hadn't even considered that there was something for me beyond the creeks and fields and my parents and that house.

You know, I actually remember when it first occurred to me to leave: me and some buddies were at a football game. It was a Thursday night game, which meant you would only go if you wanted to procrastinate doin' your homework. And a group of pals and I had snuck some beers in and sat up in the stands, half-watching the game, half-losing our minds. And we were so excited, cause we were startin' to win, but the other team turned it around and started whoopin' our asses.

He sounds like he can picture it all, feel it all still: the stadium lights buzzing, the noise of the crowd, the crash of football pads and helmets.

TOM

We didn't care, really, what does a 3A team have to lose? But I remember seeing the coach for our team and he took his ball cap off, and ran his hands over his thinning hair, and went to rub his eyes with the back of his hand. And, I remember, I couldn't take my eyes off him. I just- he looked so. . . impossibly tired. I remember watching him the rest of the game as the team kept losing, and seeing the way he got deflated and got very, very small, and as we all walked back to our pickup truck in the parking lot once it had got dark and we'd lost, I remember the only thought that was running through my mind as my friends joked around me was, well, "I think I need to get out of here."

A deep inhale to move on.

TOM

So I started working at the same auto shop as my dad. I had listened to him my whole life talk about his work, so I picked it up fairly quickly. You know, he never questioned why I suddenly joined him in the shop. Never mentioned it, we didn't even talk about work. I kept saving the money and working longer and longer hours after school and on weekends. My dad

just nodded and moved on, but I think.
. . somehow he knew what I was doing.
Granted, I never told him I was
planning on leaving. I don't know why
I didn't, I just. . . I had this
feeling it would've gotten to him.

That of all things.

Then the acceptance letters came in
from colleges. He would bring them
into the house with the rest of the
mail, and wordlessly hand them to me.

Tom lets out a derisive snort. There's no mirth in this
laugh.

TOM

He wouldn't say a damn thing. I
remember, as childish and petty as
this sounds, I kept getting angrier
and angrier, wishing he would say
something, *anything*. You know, tell me
to go or tell me to stay, it didn't
make a difference to me, just-!

He stops himself to take a shaky breath in. . . and
out.

TOM

So when I got my full ride to Cal
Poly, I waited a week for him to
mention it, then eventually just
accepted. We had always kept talking
to a minimum between us, we were a
very quiet family, but we were always
still father and son. But after that,

we just kinda. . . trailed off.
Stopped talkin'.

He was at work the day I moved out,
had already left, so we didn't really
have a goodbye.

That lingers in the air for a moment, unsure where to
land.

TOM

I think leaving Missouri felt great at
first, you know. College was as good,
maybe even better at times, as high
school was to me. And I really started
to kinda find my place in everything.
You know, I decided, after studying
astrophysics for a semester or so,
that I wanted to do thar and narrowed
all my classes down get that degree. I
met my wife freshman year and we
married right after senior year. It
was sort of the perfect 4-year
experience.

That enthusiasm fades a bit, like a beautiful house
that you realize is just a facade when you round the
corner.

TOM

I don't really talk about freshman
year much, though. It wasn't like
that. If I'm honest, I think it was
harder than I ever let on to anyone.
You know, I hadn't even left my town
before, let alone moved across the
country with no one I knew to be there
with me. And none of my friends had

gone out of the state, so no one back home that I would contact *really* knew what I was doing, they couldn't really equate my shit with theirs, try as they might. So I just felt. . . well, it was just very lonely.

My move to California was terrible. It really was. And this is gonna get a little bit sad, so. . . be ready. I was just so tired all the time. It felt like I didn't smile for a whole year, like I didn't want to bring that joy that I had felt somewhere else to this new life, like that would be betraying it or something. There were weeks I would go without a true laugh, and then when I did laugh, I could feel how much I ached to do it all again, so I didn't really appreciate that I just had. I couldn't figure out how to be happy again- like a switch had turned off in me, and I was fumbling in the dark for it on the wall and couldn't find it. I couldn't quite hold onto why I moved, which made it all the worse.

There's a pause so long that there's a moment where you're unsure if Tom's going to keep talking. But he does.

TOM

My heart felt so heavy, there were times I wanted to rip it out of my chest just to be able to breathe again. I couldn't hold it all. There were days I couldn't even get out of bed and days where I refused to go

back to my apartment because I hated it so much, so I'd crash on my friend's couch. I couldn't bear spending all of my time with myself, I got sick of my own thoughts, hated myself, I had to get out of my own head.

There's a desperation now, a pleading in his voice.

TOM

I felt like no one really. . . knew me. Like I was one of those animals you hear about that's the last of their kind and. . . doesn't have anybody quite like them out there.

I learned to listen a lot more; I got even quieter. That actually when I started drinkin', mainly so I had something to do.

I felt a huge pull back home, I missed it all so much.

(sniffs)

I missed Missouri, my house, my family, my friends, my routine, knowing everything about my town, you know, I knew all of the streets I had to drive through. I missed knowing exactly how the world was turning; I missed sitting in the little diners and walking the same paths every day, that familiarity.

I don't know if that's home or not, but. . . whatever it was, I missed it.

In sophomore year, I got a roommate. My roommate had this, uh, well, this friend from the West Coast who hated the Midwest and hated the South. Historically, that's fair, it's got issues, but it was odd to hear how angry he got at anyone with a Southern accent. We were at this- this sports bar once and someone at a table next to us said something with an Alabama accent. I remember how much lighter I felt, my heart lit up and I- I turned to introduce myself and find someone like me to talk to. But my roommate's friend, before I could, he rolled his eyes and scoffed really loudly, immediately writing off anything we had to say as stupid and hick- no matter the fact that we were all at the same college, by the way.

It would always make me so angry. Why would he not even give us a chance?

He said everyone from the South and the Midwest was racist, which seemed to me a lazy way of excusing his own racism and, you know, not looking at his actions, cause how could he be racist if he was from the West? Which, by the way, is all kinds of torn apart by race relations. This is an American issue, and to say it only affects certain areas is a sure way to make sure it doesn't get better.

What's worse, sometimes he would clarify that I was an exception. And

that would just made me more angry:
don't remove me, isolate me from my
family and friends, making me not
belong in the one place I belonged
once, just because you think you know
that place better than me. No one
knows better than me the problems
Missouri has; I get it, I grew up g-.

He cuts himself off, breathes in sharply.

TOM

*(quickly, with an air of
finality)*

Don't talk about what you don't know.

Moves on.

TOM

One time we actually-

He laughs.

TOM (cont.)

-and this is such. . . stupid to look
back on now, but we actually got in a
fight over it. A group of us were
walking back from the library late one
night and they were laughin' at me
cause I said something in an accent,
said "y'all" or "ain't". Usually when
these discussions happened, I took a
back seat and I didn't say anything.
Whatever they had to say about me,
wasn't really about me, they just
needed to feel a certain way, so I let
'em go on and stayed quiet til they

had fluffed themselves up enough to move on, feeling superior.

But this time, something changed. I got angry. Somethin' snapped in me and I was sick of this. So I called the boy out and he got all defensive and was saying I didn't understand it and how could I, it was a city thing. And no one really said anything in my defense, and so he kept going, trying to get everyone on his side, mocking me.

He finally took the paper I was working on out of my hand, said it "was probably all hick garbage", pulled out his lighter and set the corner on fire.

Tom clearly still can't believe this.

TOM

He actually burnt the paper I had worked on for weeks.

I remember how the ash rose, how the hours of research spun into the air and just. . . floated away. I remember looking up after them, as the specks just became closer stars against the night sky, and thinking, "That's really beautiful."

Then I hit him square in the jaw.

We didn't talk after that.

Sophomore year brought on a, uh, a much better group of friends, so. And I started to get more serious with my wife over the summer, when we both stayed on campus. But freshman year sort of solidified the fact that I didn't really belong. I wasn't like everyone else. Cal Poly isn't really in a big city, but I missed the small town stars of Missouri when I looked up at night, missed the big rivers. No one really gave a damn about the things I gave a damn about. I was learning my place in the world and it wasn't anywhere I knew.

I think I decided then that I had to run even further. But I never really got to figure that out. You know, I had to provide for my wife out of college, so I took the JPL job and moved to Pasadena to work for NASA. I didn't go back home because I had to focus on my training to get up here. I don't think I ever found what I wanted to find.

He pauses for a moment. When he comes back in, there's a bit of anger, a bit of damning the injustice.

TOM

No one ever forgave me for what I wanted from this life. I didnt know when I was allowed to stop giving, so every time I took, it felt like theft. And no one said it was okay. I think we all need reassurances that we're not taking what is not ours. I needed

permission to live and I never got it,
and so I just never got around to
living.

It hurts all the more. that I'm
realizing only now that I didn't need
that permission.

He sniffs, wiping tears.

TOM

(on the verge of tears)

Now. Now I want to go hom-

He breaks off, choking up.

TOM

I wanna go home.

Just once. Just to see it all again.

I wonder what I would want, for it to
have changed or for it to be just the
same.

I wonder.

He sniffs one final time, rubbing his face dry.

TOM

I'll check in again tomorrow. Thanks
for listening. Say hi for me. Bye.