

The recording clicks on. He shuffles in the beginning, getting settled in.

TOM

Tom Jackson, day 528, 5 days left before my death day. Oh god, death day, how dramatic. I wish I could bake a cake or something, celebrate in style.

God, a cake sounds good, though. Oh my god, chocolate frosting. I wonder what my last meal will be. I think I get to choose from the packs of dehydrated meatloaf or - what's that new one - chicken parm? Somethin' like that. How thrilling. Actually, they're not so bad. A little dry, but they're dehydrated so you know.

I think if I was back on earth, and I had to pick a last meal I might choose, like, a really good summer BBQ. Corn on the cob with butter and salt, brisket or maybe fall-off-the-bone-pork-ribs, buttermilk biscuits, maybe some collard greens - goooood collard greens - Mmm. Peach cobbler for dessert, with really cool vanilla ice cream that melts when it hits the heat of the peaches.

Dang, I can feel myself getting heavier thinkin' about it.

My mom made this incredible cobbler in a dutch oven that was just *chef's kiss*.

It's funny what you think most about up here. I can't seem to keep my mind from drifting back to home, back to my childhood. It wasn't like that when I had a job to do up here, but now it's much more difficult to keep my thoughts on anything present or future. I've lived such a long, full, life as well; it's not like I don't have enough to think about, you know, more recently.

But I'm just stuck on the early days, growing up.

I think I'm cursed to think about them now, in painful detail, because I've been avoiding doing just that for my whole life.

I keep thinking about my parents, my hometown, about. . . the people I knew.

There's a long, deliberating pause. When he talks again, even though he's just talking to a tape recorder, you can tell he's not making eye contact.

TOM

Hey, listen. I know earlier, a couple days back. I had talked about how happy my childhood was. And- and it was! But I don't want to leave the universe with the impression it was all flowers and giggles and romps, or whatever I made it seem. There was. . . a lot of unease and

unhappiness. There are reasons I didn't go back.

I mean, nothing that bad or anything; I had a family, a great place to grow up, a house mainly to myself. I do remember, though, I would get stressed when that house wasn't clean. I would sweep and straighten every night before my mom got home, so it would be *just so* when she got in from the late shift. She would always come into my room to say good night and even when she thought I was asleep, she would kiss my forehead and say, "Thank you, Tom." and leave again. It kept me doing it. Looking back, I'm not sure she ever noticed. The thank you might've been for something else, or nothing at all. But it kept the house clean, so what did it matter?

It mattered. And Tom knows it.

TOM

Oh my god, but I got angry a lot at the attic, though, for the same reason! It was always so cluttered! My dad would keep all of his things he actually used in the garage, so I never understood how so much shit got in our attic. Well, it wasn't technically an attic, it was this crawlspace off the room I slept in. My bedroom. I don't know-. Yeah. We just called it an attic. But that's why it bothered me, it's off my space! And there were so many boxes of things, it

got overwhelming. He kept boxes of- of- of old memorabilia he couldn't throw out, holiday decorations we always forget to put up, old clothes stored on hangers that had fallen to the floor years, maybe even decades, ago. Going in there was so scary and it always had so many bugs and so much dust and things would fall on you suddenly and. . . it was just so bad, that I never went in to clean it all out. And why should I have? Why would that have been my problem? Dad should've cleaned it out. That shouldn't have been on me.

I don't know why that bothered me so much.

He huffs out a half-hearted laugh. Funny how much he laughs at things that aren't funny to him.

TOM

As much as I was so happy to be alone for so long, there were times when, I mean, I was lonely. It wasn't often, it was usually during the school year. Watching the other kids all get off the bus and run to something, whether it was family, friends, some unknown after school activity. I was the last stop on the bus route and I'd get off slowly and walk to my front door and let myself in - latchkey kid - to heat up whatever after school snack my mom had left me on the counter, covered in saran wrap, that morning before she left.

It was always pretty quiet around my place, cause the boys next door, David and them, all left for their boarding school. I missed all the noise and clatter and yelling they brought with them when they were home over the summers. During the year, it was just the dad and the mom, til the mom died of lung cancer, and then it was just the dad tendin' the fields.

I remember once I fell asleep on the bus and I guess I was so small and quiet that the bus driver assumed I wasn't on that day. He just skipped my stop and dropped the bus at the bus barn and left. I woke up that evening in an empty bus, in a place I didn't know. It wasn't as scary as you'd think. I just got up, looked around, realized what happened, pried the doors open, and walked the some odd miles home in the dusk. I remember the sunset that day and how gorgeous it was walkin' home. All purples and pinks, streaked in with the clouds that, I swear, were fit to rain blood like some biblical plague, they were so red. When I got home, there was no one there yet, so I just heated up my dinner and went to bed like always. No one was any the wiser.

Well, I was. I never fell asleep on the bus after that. I stayed awake.

He hastens to clarify.

TOM

It's not that my parents were neglectful. They just both worked, so I had to manage. You know, I think I might've taken it harder, had I not had the example of the Peterson's dad next door to see what bad parenting could do.

In this pause, Tom's rage seems to build and build, even as he says nothing. When he speaks, it's tempered a bit, but still higher than it's been.

TOM

He was a nasty man, drank all the time, and got worse after his wife died. I think she softened him a bit, so when she left, he retreated into his shell like some snapping turtle in a pond and lashed out at his sons, who couldn't manage to do what she did. God, I hated him. I hated him so much for what he did to David. And not just one time, but consistently. Even just sending him off to school, I hated him for that. I could never say one kind thing about that man. I *would* never.

In fact-

He stops himself. Sighs.

TOM

And I- I know what I'm about to say. And. . . And I know how I feel about it. So I'm just gonna say it.

There was a time when we were about to start 8th grade, so toward the end of my time with David. It was summer and we were feeling like the "Big Men on Campus" we were. We had this tradition of waiting for each other every morning on each other's lawn, so whoever got up first would sort of go and collect the other one. I hadn't ever been up before David all summer, so I was so proud to come out on my back porch that morning and see he wasn't already there. I kinda sauntered over to his place to wait, just to tease him for sleeping in.

His Missouri accent gets stronger the further into this memory he falls.

TOM

So I was waiting this one morning and it was so peaceful out. You could hear the nightbugs just goin' to sleep and the crows were cawin' and the August wind was blowin' hot and strong through the cornstalks. Whenever that wind would blow, the sound of it through the sycamore tree in between our houses would sound just like rain. I remember that morning closing my eyes and pretending it was raining. That I could feel it on my face.

Then suddenly there was noise.

In the house. It sounded like the biggest bookshelf in the world

fallin', like the earth under the house had split in two and rumbled apart. Crashing, banging, scraping. My eyes flew open and I froze.

It wasn't raining anymore.

Then there was yelling. Five loud voices all at once and one even louder, deeper voice. I had frozen to my spot in their backyard, stock still. I was trying not to listen to the one voice I could hear in the house with absolute clarity.

And then there was a crack like a branch breaking.

Stillness. Quiet. Not a noise.

A few minutes later, David came slowly down the steps toward me. He didn't look up at me once. I realized my mouth was still open and closed it hurriedly. I suddenly forgot how to stand normally and- and shifted from foot to foot, unsure of what my arms were doing. I tried to have an air of, "I just got here, I didn't hear any of that", but it was hard.

Finally, David reached me. Without looking up, without looking at me, he said,

"Can we go to the pond today?"

He was so hushed, so quiet, I had never seen him like this. David was lightning always, moving, running around, leaping, laughing. But now he was stone. I nodded silently. He nodded back, copying, saying, "Good, good."

He started walking, expressionless, down through the cornfields to the creek. I watched his back, watched him go for a bit, not moving. I think I was in shock, I couldn't process what had happened and what was happening. He had never been like this, with not even a hint, a ghost, of a smile. As I remembered myself, I hurried to catch up with him, finally reaching him and keeping pace quietly. I kept darting glances at his face. But not once did he look at me. Or, actually, look anywhere but straight ahead.

Once we were under the shade of the woods, he seemed to relax a bit, shoulders lowering and brow unfurrowing. He even shot me one of his lopsided smiles before picking up the pace and jogging down the hill to the pond our creek fed into. I laughed, mainly out of relief. Maybe he had just needed some time! You know, he'd be fine now, I was sure of it. He was always fine.

We threw our stuff down on the banks under a tree and stripped off our shirts. I remember it so clearly. I

remember he hesitated, shot me a look and then turned around, reached up to take off his.

And to this day, I'm sorry I gasped.

But the welt was so long across his back.

As his shirt came over his head with his back to me, I could almost see it getting redder every second. He winced as the shirt came over it and so did I. He noticed and turned to me. To this day, I can't remember if he actually had tears in his eyes or if I just remember it that way.

He said, "Can you see it?"

Those words snapped me back and I didn't know what to say. I just looked away, shaking my head. I don't know why I didn't ask my questions. I guess I didn't want to make him lie to me. Or maybe I was afraid he wouldn't. I was just a kid. He sighed, and I didn't look at him again until I heard him go into the water.

We played all day in the pond and I don't remember what else happened that day, when we went home, or what the next day was like, or whether I ever saw that. . . mark again. I think it was all normal after that.

There's a long pause here. He seems unsure whether he's going to speak again.

TOM

But, for some reason, I remember one thing more from that day.

We were in the pond later that same day still and all of a sudden he gasped, went so still, as if trying not to disturb something, you know? And he called me over. I waded my way to him slowly, something telling me to be as gentle as he was being. As I got to him, I saw the biggest wasp I've ever seen on his arm. And I would've freaked out, but David was just being. . . so calm. When I looked up from the wasp to his face, I almost didn't recognize him. He looked so small and thoughtful. He smiled softly, and with this. . . impossible gentleness, looking at the wasp with its big stained glass wings and striped body, he just said, "It won't sting me."

Somehow, he knew.

The wasp stayed there, crawlin' up and down his arm. David just stared at it, transfixed. He would turn his arm over and over gently to give it free roam. It stayed there for what felt like eternity, but all of a sudden, without warning, it flew away. I started slightly, but David didn't seem surprised. Like he knew that it had to at some point.

He just followed it with his eyes, up and up and up.

I was suddenly aware of how close we were, and that we hadn't moved in a long time.

As Tom says this, an underscoring of a harp plucking three simple, echoing notes comes in under him. He speaks as if in a trance, not focusing well, lost in this time.

TOM

As soon as I thought this, it was like David sensed it and he took his eyes away from the sky and turned to me. He smiled, moved a little closer to me.

He takes a quick, shaky breath in.

TOM

I could feel my heart beat through my chest as he did so, wishing it would *shut up*, I was worried he could hear it. He took my arm in both his hands suddenly, turning it over and over as he had done his own. Every hair on my arm and the back of my neck was standing up straight.

This water was so cold, had I noticed that before? It was giving me chills.

The harp is met with a low bass guitar strumming the same notes under it, still haunting and slow.

TOM

He looked at my arm closely, holding it so gently for a moment before muttering, "What if it had landed on you, Thomas? Would it have stung you? Would it have flown away?"

But I wasn't looking at my arm, I was looking at him.

I had never seen this David.

The strings are met with gentle bells in a counter-melody.

TOM

Suddenly, his eyes flicked up from my arm to lock onto mine, and suddenly, something leaped in my chest I had never felt before. When had he gotten so close? When did that happen? It was like I had not really been looking at him all these years and now, all of a sudden, I could see him so clearly, it hurt. And he wasn't glowing or sparking or beaming or anything that you'd expect. . .

He was just there. And I was seeing him. And it didn't hurt at all.

The bells fade out. Just strings. Quieter now.

TOM

I looked into those doe eyes, breathless, for longer than I should have. Suddenly, he reached up, halting only once, to gently push my wet hair

out of my face. When his fingers touched my skin, I felt like I was on fire. My heart skipped and my breath caught in my throat.

And it's just the harp again. Gentle. Small.

TOM

He combed his fingers through my hair, and then cupped my cheek in his hand. I felt *everything* in my body lean into that touch and I closed my eyes. I mean, I- . . .

I had never been held quite like that.

The music is gone. And Tom is louder again.

TOM

Suddenly, I could feel something shift. I opened my m- my eyes to see what was the matter. But his eyes were closed as well, moments away from mine. They fluttered open suddenly, as if he knew that mine were, and I tilted my head, quizzically. He broke into a full grin, and before I knew it, he had dunked my head under the water.

Tom laughs, coughing a bit.

TOM

I came up spluttering and gasping for air, him laughing hysterically as he swam away. I laughed too and chased

him down and it was like the day started again.

I can't explain it, I've never- I've never thought about it since it happened.

He runs his hands over his face audibly, muffling bits of speech.

TOM

I tried to ignore it, I suppose. But sometimes, you can't just can't. Some things bend and bend and bend, and that's easy to ignore, but once they break, you have to notice. You have to care.

I think life was harder for people in my town than it was for me. It's interesting. I wish I could have taken the time to see that when I lived there. Life wasn't all happy for me, but I could handle it when it wasn't.

He sounds troubled, desperate.

TOM

What changed?

There's a long pause. Is there more on the tape? Then he sniffs, audibly sighing and wringing his hands slightly. He wipes tears from his face and continues.

TOM

I wish I hadn't said that story out loud.

He sounds harsher now.

TOM

It's gone now.

(impossibly quiet)

It's gone. Oh, god. Oka- Bye.

And the tape cuts off abruptly.