

The recordin clicks on and without the usual prelude, Tom Jackson begins. It feels as though he's in a confession booth.

TOM JACKSON

It was late June, a month after our last day of middle school. David and I had spent that whole month closer than ever, never leaving each other's sides. Things had gotten much worse at his house, but he never talked about it, so I just kept him with me as much as I could. Tried to keep him out of that house. In fact, most nights, he would sleep over at my place. My room was small, but he would always bring a sleeping bag to sleep on the floor beside my bed.

He laughs.

TOM

It didn't matter, though, because we would sit on my bed talking, facing each other, until we fell asleep where we were, crashed next to each other. We were inseparable. I think we spent one full day apart because I had a doctor's appointment in town and he didn't come join. But the rest of the whole month, we were getting closer and closer.

In fact, there were times-. But no.

He clears his throat.

TOM

Anyway, the week leading up to what happened had been so filled with anticipation: David's dad was out of town for some work conference - what work conference farmers can possibly go to eludes me, but it's none of my business - so David's older brother had decided to throw a party in the empty house.

All the Peterson boys had gone into overdrive, cleaning up the house, cooking, buying booze, getting it all ready. David and I were caught up in it, having never been to a proper teenage party, but dying to get our first taste, especially before high school started. We needed to be prepared!

We would trail his brothers as they prepared, giggling between the two of us, learning so much. A few days before, we would stay up at night talking about what the big night was gonna be like.

When the night came, our expectations were met and then some. Cool kids flooded the Peterson house and spilled out onto

their porch. Music poured from every window and beer cans littered the floor. The dim lighting illuminated just enough of the rooms to see how packed they all were with dancing, drinking kids. David and I couldn't stop grinning. We were just wandering the house together, scampering from room to room, soaking it all in.

We tried beer! It was horrible and we quickly stopped and grabbed lemonades instead, but still! We tried it! A- a girl slapped a boy for grabbing her ass and we SAW it happen! There! In front of us! We fell over laughing and eventually tumbled out to the porch.

We were talking together excitedly, debating whether all of high school would be like this, when one of David's brothers grabbed us and said he was running to the store for more ice and asked if we wanted to join. I wanted to stay and see what was gonna happen, but David was getting affected by some of the smoke circling our heads, and wanted some fresh air. So we both ducked out for a break.

Tom stops. He can see it all so clearly.

TOM

We rode in the open bed of the truck all the way to the gas station. We just sat next to each other and stared up at the stars as the cool breeze blew through our hair. The quiet rang in our ears after the overwhelming noise of the party. I remember looking over at David, who was looking up and smiling at the stars, and being unable to stop smiling.

We were high schoolers now!
Together!

And his eyes were so big that it seemed like every star in the world was reflected in them.

He looked over at me looking at him and grinned so big, it was like he could swallow the world. And the world should be-. Well.

He chuckles.

TOM

I felt the same tug at my heart that I did that day in the creek, so I looked away. But, um.

But it didn't go away this time.

When we pulled into his gravel driveway, the older brother jumped

out. . . but David grabbed my hand to hold me back.

Once the brother left and went inside with the ice and the party kicked up again, it was just David and I outside in the back of the truck on the front lawn. We were right outside the party, but it felt so far away. It was almost like it was quieter than when no one had been talking.

Tom pauses. Goes on.

TOM

I looked down to see him still holding my hand.

And the world pauses around him. Tom is lost in it again.

TOM

When I realized this, suddenly, a shock went up my arm and back down my spine and I found I couldn't look up at him, even though I could feel his eyes on me. I just stared at our hands. I hadn't even noticed they were together.

He said, "Thomas."

I nodded, eyes down on the bed of the truck. How did my sneakers get

so much dirt on them after just this one summer of having them?

He laughed softly. "Look at me."

I shook my head. I, to this day, don't know why.

He didn't either, he asked, "Why?"

His tone had some gentle concern in it. I wanted to tease him, and I would've any other day, but tonight was not like any other day.

I didn't know what was different, I didn't know what had changed, but his hand was still on mine and he was so close to me in the bed of the truck, I could feel my heart beating through my shirt. Once again, I worried, oh my god, could he hear it? I could've sworn he could hear it.

I just said, "Cause I'm scared."

Maybe I was having a heart attack. Now?? How embarrassing would that be? Just when something was about to-.

He is interrupted by David's memory.

TOM

I heard him exhale. I knew he was shaking his head at me, even without looking. He was familiar like that.

David's voice through Thomas gives a lilting laugh.

TOM

"Thomas. Look at me anyway."

And I felt myself look up. Oh my god, my heart was beating so loud-!

And then it stopped.

He was right there in front of me, all wide eyes full of stars and smile and soft, freckled skin. We locked eyes and suddenly, every noise of the party, every shining light from the house behind us disappeared.

It was just him and me in the back of the truck on a June night.

And I knew him.

"Can I. . .?"

I honestly didn't know what he was asking. But I nodded.

He fell forward the rest of the distance and his lips were on mine.

And I was a goner.

I let out a breath that I didn't even realize I had been holding - I don't know how long I must've been holding it - and closed my eyes, melting into him. I had never known where I was supposed to be, my whole life. But in that moment, I knew that I had gotten it right, that I was where I was supposed to be in that moment. And it was good.

Tom exhales with relief.

TOM

Suddenly, he had one hand on my denim jacket lapel and one on the back of my head and we were falling to the bed of the truck. We were hidden from any and all eyes, from now until forever. And his fingers in my hair felt like I had just found that God everyone was always talking about. Why did people struggle so much with finding him? He was right next door to me. Easy.

Tom, once more, goes quiet. Lost.

And then he is found.

TOM

I've spent my whole life trying to get back to that truck on that June

night. Everything I've done has been to find it again.

It's funny, I've spent over 20 years now with my wife. Happy, happy years. And I would say they've been full. But I'm not 100% sure I always was, you know? Have you ever been a part of something like that? When you're together, you can convince yourself you're complete, but without them, you just have a sinking feeling you're not.

It wasn't like that with him though.

I mean, it was summer and there were bugs everywhere and his dad was horrible and everything was wrong. I mean, everything was wrong. But when we would run out to the cornfield and he would almost touch my arm. . . well, that distance closed by itself and I felt like that summer was the only time I LIVED.

Maybe that's why I'm not worried about dying. Because I lived once. There.

He finishes simply.

TOM

With him.

Maybe we only get to live one moment in this life. One small, infinite moment that plays on repeat for the rest of our time and makes us hope we'll be able to find another one again.

I'm glad I made my moment count.

Suddenly, the spell of this story is broken. And he knows: he isn't going to find it again. He has to let go of it to finish telling the rest.

TOM

But.

But that's not all.

The next day, I woke up in the Peterson's home, passed out on the couch. I had a vague memory of us falling asleep in the truck, and then an even vaguer one of him carrying me into the house. He was always so strong, that even though I wasn't sure it had really happened, I could picture it so well that I chose to believe it. I propped myself up on my elbow and looked around. David was sleeping on the floor below me, one finger hooked into my jean cuff on my leg dangling off the couch. I fell back asleep, convinced the sun must've

been rising because how else would I have felt this warm?

I was woken up what felt like 5 minutes later, but the sun was fully up, so it must've been hours.

Tom falters, just for a moment. He goes on.

TOM

David was standing over me, fully dressed, saying my name and shaking my arm. I sat up, rubbing my eyes. There was no one in the house anymore. The debris of the party was still there, but everyone had cleared out.

He stepped back and there was a fire in his eyes that I hadn't seen before, that I can still, all these years later remember so clearly.

He grinned down at me, "We're going."

I said, "What?"

"We're going. We're getting outta here, running away. Come with me."

This was David, the one I knew, sure, but. . . heightened? This was David untempered by anything.

I said, "David, what are you talking about?"

"My brother left his keys in the truck last night. I can drive us, they've been teaching me. Let's go, get out of this town, go start somewhere else."

Tom scoffs.

TOM

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. "David, we're kids. We can't just run away somewhere. Plus we start high school soon! You don't want to leave. We have stuff here."

He looked at me a little bit disbelieving. "Thomas, you can't tell me you really care about that. Not now. Listen, last night, we can do it again."

I sat up. I was awake. And he was serious.

"David, I don't know what you're saying. Ar- are you running away?"

He rolled his eyes. "No, dipshit, we're running away. Together. Now let's go, come on!"

"David, I- I can't just DO that."

He said, "Why not?"

"Because I have to. . . I- I can't just give up everything I have here!"

He scoffed, "Well, what do you have here? Why not?"

"BECAUSE." I was starting to get angry now. "Because! That's not how this works! I mean, I don't even- I can't- This isn't what we're supposed to do!"

"But we can't ever be together if we stay here."

I said, "I know!"

He stepped back like I hit him.

Years of regret weight the next sentence.

TOM

And for some fuckin' reason, I kept going.

"David, just slow down, we're not running away. We can't do this. Just- I'm gonna go back to bed, so, shut up and let me sleep, you dork."

He sat down on the couch next to me.

"Thomas, don't you want to go somewhere else? Somewhere with me, where we don't have to lie in a truck bed? Where we can be whatever we want? You can be someone new!"

I was starting to get annoyed.

"David, I don't wanna be someone new. I mean, maybe I do, but I'm not just gonna up and leave my whole life for you!"

I didn't know what I said. I was sort of just saying whatever I had to. But when I said that? I instantly regretted it, because this dark cloud came over his face. I didn't want to let that on, though, so I doubled down.

"You're not?"

"No, David. And for the record, I'm fine being who I am here."

"You are?"

"Yeah. I am. Why, is there something wrong with me?"

He looked at me as I rolled over with a huff. I was always so

stubborn-! As I closed my eyes, I could hear him standing there for a bit. But I didn't say anything, I didn't wanna be the first one.

And then he went, "That's okay. That's okay."

He leaned down and kissed my cheek.

"But I have to go."

For Tom, that's where the story ends. He breaks down, crying. He tries to continue more detached. It sort of works.

TOM

I stayed there, but when I heard the car turn over in the driveway, I rolled over. As the gravel crunched, I felt a panic. I jumped off the couch and ran outside, but the truck was already long gone down the dirt road. So I stood there in the summer sun and watched the heat lines off the road, waiting for the truck to come trundling back.

He has gone harsh again.

TOM

It didn't.

Now, David had "run away" before, but he always came home for dinner.

So I wasn't too concerned. I mean, I had never seen him so serious before, but still. He had nowhere to go, and we had had that last night, so. Why would he run? Where would he even run to?

I- I never got the answer to those questions.

Because I never saw David again.

He gave me the chance to fix everything. He held out his hand and I ignored it. What if I had done it? What if I had run away with him, what if I had been in the cab of that truck with him as it pulled away and someone else had been waiting on the driveway for us to never come home again?

What if I'd been different? Not so easy to leave?

David's dad and brothers never talked about him again. It was like he'd never existed. It was such a source of shame that they pretended he had never been a part of the family.

How could they do that?

My parents never really saw what he was to me, so they didn't get the

change that came over me in high school without him.

As a matter of fact, no one got me after that. I never told anyone. I think I thought maybe he would. . .

He is barely audible.

TOM

. . . come back. Come back and- and, I don't know, maybe he'd ask again? He wouldn't give up on me. But I don't know. Maybe he did and I wasn't home. Maybe he found somewhere he could be himself. Maybe he found someone he could do that with. Maybe he doesn't remember asking a boy to go with him.

I don't know what he thinks of me or what he thinks about anything anymore.

His voice breaks.

TOM

I don't know him.

He cries. Hastily shuts off the recording.

TOM

And that's all there is.