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10<sup>th</sup> Grade

### Gone In A Moment

*Fire crackling.*

*Burning.*

An old man stood in front of a dilapidated house. He peered up at the grimy windows through round glasses so large they covered his worn face, his liver-spotted hands tightly gripping a wooden cane.

*Smoke.*

*Thick and black, covering, enveloping.*

It hadn't changed at all. The pink paint still peeled off the wooden slats, thorny grass still sprouted up out of the chunks of cement that was still the front lawn.

*Coughing.*

*Choking.*

He closed his eyes for a moment. Breathed in. The familiar smells reached him, as if from a memory from many years ago.

*Screaming.*

The scent of smoke, faint from the factory only a mile away, the smell of pot, tangy and sickeningly sweet, the smallest drift of a flower, planted in a box by some owner hoping beyond hope that it might, perhaps, grow.

*Crying.*

*Sobbing.*

The sounds of kids playing baseball in a corner of the street, the lower murmurs of two teens quickly exchanging a packet of a white powder, nervously glancing around, the happy sounds of a barbecue only a few houses away.

*"Please!"*

His still clear blue eyes flew open with a start, wide and fearful, as he looked up at the old house, straining his ears to hear that voice again.

To see that person again.

He took a slow step forward.

And then another.

And another.

Until he could see the yard of the house.

The yard of so many memories, of so many adolescent wanderings and adventures.

He could remember it all.

*"Let's play!" She cried, a happy grin practically bouncing off her cheeks.*

*"Play what?" He grumbled, kicking a stone. "There's nothing to do here anyway."*

*She stopped then, looking at him, her head tilted to the side in confusion. "What'd you mean?" She asked, her voice sweet and young. "There's plenty to play with here. Look!" She pointed at the old rubber tire.*

*Against his will, he looked.*

*"That can be our ship! Come on matey, let's get sailing!" She cried, her bright green eyes sparkling. She grabbed his hand and dragged him to the black tire. With a push, she sat him on one edge and took her seat in front of him.*

*And they were off, sailing the great ocean blue, fighting off monsters as big as mountains, as mythical as the creatures of old Greek legend.*

With a half strangled sob, the old man reached forward and unlocked the rusted gate, opening it with a creak.

Slowly, slowly, he moved to the back, to the corner of the yard where that tire had once laid. He stared at the barren patch of dirt that was now there, dry and dusty as sand.

*"I'm worried." He whispered to her, crouching next to the scrawny oak tree.*

*"About what?" She asked him, her head tilting in that familiar way.*

*"Tomorrow." He told her, his eyes big and round. "It's the first day of high school. What if I don't make any friends? What if I'm the loser in school, the one nobody ever wants to talk to? What if—"*

*"Shhh." She cut him off, one finger on his lips. "Don't worry. Besides, I'll be there, won't I? We'll do it, together, right?"*

*She smiled at him then, her face so happy and cheerful that he felt all his troubles melt away, vanish into air, as if they had never existed.*

*"What would I do without you?" He asked her, his eyes closing for a moment.*

*"You'll never have to know." She told him seriously.*

*"Never?" He asked.*

*"Never."*

His gaze moved to where that old oak had once stood, lame and bent, never offering much more than the briefest of protections, the smallest of leaves.

*"What are you doing?" He heard a voice behind him.*

*Whipping around, he stuffed the still smoking white roll into his back pocket, a guilty glare already in place. "Nothing." He said defensively.*

*"Don't lie." She said, taking a step closer. "You're smoking, aren't you?"*

*The wind whipped across the barren yard, blowing dirt into frenzies of dust.*

*"No!" He cried, stepping backwards. "And, and, what is it to you if I am? Why are you so nosy all the time?"*

*"Smoking is bad for you." She snapped, pointing an accusing finger at him. "You'll get sick."*

*"God." He rolled his eyes mockingly. "Why don't you go get a life and leave me alone? Do you have nothing better to do than bother me?"*

*She seemed to shrink then. She seemed to sort of cave in on herself, as if something inside of her had broken. Or died, perhaps.*

*She turned, wiping tears angrily from her eyes.*

*"Fine." She said. "If you want me to leave you alone I will. But those friends of yours, Jackie, and Robb? They're horrible people. Did you see what they did to poor Ashley Stevenson yesterday? Did you see how they—"*

*"Shut up." He cut her off, his voice low and even, a whip slapping her into silence. "Get out of my sight. I don't want to talk to you. Ever."*

*She half-turned back to him, her face filled with absolute disbelief and hurt. But then she had sighed, a sigh so filled with pain that, if he had listened properly, might have broken his heart.*

*But he didn't listen.*

*So she ran.*

With a sigh, a sigh much like the one uttered so many years ago, filled with so much pain and hurt, the old man slowly scanned the bare yard, his eyes lingering on the minute details that had once been his very life.

He turned to leave.

"Sad, isn't it?" A voice said from behind him.

Turning, he saw a younger man with dark hair, gazing around the lot with a speculative look.

Noticing his look, the younger man continued. "Horrible story this place has. I wonder why they haven't just knocked the entire thing down, especially since it's obviously not worth much."

They were both silent.

"Do you know the story?" The young man asked presently.

A cough, and the old man was silent.

"Apparently, there was a fire." The young man said, nodding. "Horrible one. Years and years ago, though. Some boy started it. Smoking, he was. And the worst part? A girl died. Yeah. Some poor little thing ended up dying in that fire."

*"Please stop," She begged him. "Please, please, stop! You're going to kill yourself with that stuff!"*

*"Get out of here!" He hissed, shoving her behind him. "Didn't I tell you that what I do is none of your freaking business?"*

*"Please...please..." She pleaded.*

*"Sorry guys, I'll get rid of her." He nodded to the two men leaning lazily against the fence in the backyard, puffs of gray smoke rising from their mouths. "Move it!" He gave her a little push*

*She just looked up at him, her head slightly tilted in that oh so familiar position. Her eyes begged him to drop the roll, to just snuff it out and take her hand, to leave these people and these things behind.*

*"Move!" He shouted, and this time, the push wasn't so gentle.  
She fell, her foot twisting out from underneath her, into a heap.  
The cigarette flew out of his hand, and landed, still burning, next to the almost empty oil  
drum in the corner.*

*And everything blew up.  
Into an orange and red blur, into a screaming and shouting match, into an eye watering  
smog of smoke, into a mix of fear and worry and anger, into the realization that it was over.*

*That it was all over.*

*That it was all gone.*

"...sir? Hey, sir?"

With a violent wrench, the old man was jerked back to the present. He trembled, unsteady on his feet, and then he collapsed, cane clattering to the ground.

With his knees in the dirt, and his hands clutching the sparse grass, the old man fell, tears running down his cheeks.

"Hey, wait, are you okay?" The young man's voice was concerned and worried. He bent over him, rubbing his back. "It's okay, you know. That happened a long time ago, probably before you even came here."

Sob after sob was pulled out of him, yanked out by a force greater than he could control. Every emotion that he could feel, of love, of pain, of hurt, of anger, of sorrow and regret, everything was laid bare for the world to see.

Moments passed.

Moment after moment.

Minute after minute

And slowly his sobs subsided, his hands stopped holding the ground in a death grip.

The old man slowly, shakily climbed to his feet. Picked up his cane. Leaned for support.

With one gnarled hand on the fence, the old man closed his eyes once again, for just that moment.

"If there was one thing I wish I could have said to her..." He spoke, his voice rusty and hoarse, weathered, it seemed, with time and sadness. "Any one thing...It would have been thank you."

The young man was silent, at a loss for words.

The old man slowly started to walk, to move, inch by inch to the rusted gate.

"Did...did you know her? The girl, I mean?" The young man finally asked.

The elderly man paused for a moment, his hand gripping the handle.

"Did I?" His voice was soft. "Did I know her? Did I know her, love her, and lose her?" He turned and looked at the young man, his gaze desperate and pleading. "Did I?"

Suddenly moved by a burst of unexpected compassion for the huddled little figure so pathetically clutching onto the past, the young man replied.

"You knew." He told him, with a calm assurance. "You knew. And I think...I think that she knew too."

The old man managed a smile then.

One smile.

A single smile.

Crooked at one end, filled with sadness and regret.

And then he opened the gate,

And he was gone.

*Word Count: 1655*