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AP Lang/Amer Lit

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Change

The incident that permanently changed my life began as many changes do- with the slightest deviation from what is normal. I never would have thought that such a microscopic imbalance from the regular passing of my existence could have such a drastic effect on my life. And yet, as you shall see, my life would never be the same.

It all began on an overcast Monday afternoon. After school, I followed my usual path along the tainted floor tiles of the dingy corridors of Ashton High. I found my ancient Ford amidst the motely of cars in the back parking lot. I shoved my backpack across the console to its spot on the passenger seat, and sat down heavily onto the cream colored seat, exhaling a breath as I pondered how terribly I had just performed on my chemistry exam. I inserted my key into the ignition, and the engine violently spluttered to life like a gray haired man who couldn’t stop wheezing. Ashton High’s infamous overcrowded parking lots were a result of little funding, and on this particular day, it took a good fifteen minutes to get out of the lot. I muttered to myself something about the “ridiculous school board budget priorities” as I sat amidst the chaos of honking cars and angry teenage drivers. All of this was part of my daily routine.

But then, I turned left out of the parking lot instead of right.

In the spur of a pity-on-myself-post-traumatic-chemistry moment, I had decided it was time to go purchase myself a rejuvenating raspberry ice cream cone at the Ben and Jerry's a few blocks down the road. However, after driving for five minutes or so, I became unsure of where I was. The number of cars on the road had rapidly declined the further I left school, until there was only my solitary car rumbling along the faded pavement followed by a cloud of the yellowish-gray dust. Assuming that I had missed my turn off of Barlington Pkwy, I was about to circle back around when I heard the faint noise of- a cat, was it? No, no, perhaps a young child? The noise grew louder and soon my ear could recognize the distinguished crying of some distraught little boy. I pulled over and with all the might my arm could muster, tugged at the grimy window crank. The crank took an extreme amount of effort to be rotated since I had left the device untouched ever since I bought my Ford. Once the window was adjusted, I was able to judge that the sobbing seemed to be originating from the line of maple trees to my right. I peered over my shoulder, then at the narrow, winding road beside me. There was no soul in site. The sobs were turning to moans, and I quickly decided that I would have to get out and attempt to find and give aid to this poor child in need.

I stepped out of my car and marched up a scruffy little hill to reach the forest, at the border of which I stopped shortly. The trees swayed eerily in the chilling breeze that I was only just noticing. Lacking a sweater, I wrapped my shivering arms around each other and squinted into the forest. The overhanging branches of an ash-colored spruce tree stretched out in bizarre patterns, unlike any other spruce I had seen before. Between the breaks of the moaning, the lonesome lilting of a nearby bird became audible. I cautiously stuck my foot into the darkness of the wood, and began to wander through the maze of trees, attempting to find the source of the noise. To my frustration, just when I seemed to be getting close to the child, the crying ceased.

“Hello?” I called. “Where are you? Are you okay? Can I help you out?”

Nothing. The only sounds I heard were the rustle of leaves under my feet and the dismal calling of the bird; no human sounds of any kind were produced.

I considered turning around, but the thought of a little kid in trouble quickly rebuked my desire to leave. I proceeded through the woods, which grew denser and darker with every passing moment, until I reached a large slab of striated granite. The moaning started up again, louder than before, and I scrambled around the rock with a sense of urgency. There before me was an ovular pool brimming with water as dark as a raven’s feathers. To my surprise, I saw clusters of mangrove trees lining the outer rim of the pool. These plants rarely venture this far north due to their tendency to thrive only in coastal areas. The black water lapped eagerly at the sides of the bark, strangely reminding me of emaciated figures being taunted by some sinister force. I shook my head at my vivid imagination, and instead turned my attention to the edges of the pool. Vivacious olive green moss engulfed the entire surface of the banks.

During my infatuation with this strange exotic pool that had such an air of unnaturalness, I had forgotten my mission of helping the child. Soon I came back to my senses. I called out once more to the silent trees, in a tone displaying slight exasperation at the nature of this child to stop crying just as I seemed to be reaching him.

“Can I help you?” I yelled. “If you don’t respond, I suppose I will just leave because there is no way I can find you when you remain silent. Please, just tell me, where you are?”

It was at that instant that I had called out those words when I saw the movement of a dark blur in the edge of my peripheral vision. However, as I inquisitively twisted my body in order to see what the dark spot was, the sky darkened in a matter of milliseconds. Adrenaline rushed through my body, and I shook at the thought of sharing the dark woods with that thing, whatever it was. I also felt worried for the child, who I had just been gaining a close proximity to. Now, that child, and myself, were near this unknown thing, and in the dark literally and figuratively.

Presently, I heard a scuffling noise coming from the direction of the black blur I had witnessed. My head jolted away from the noise, and I stumbled backwards. Just as my eyes were beginning to adjust to the dark woods, my glasses slipped off my trembling body. It was as if everything blurred together into one veil of black cloth, with no holes for light to pierce through the blackness. I stooped over and my fingers frantically felt the ground for my glasses. I felt blades of grass wet with dew, a sharp chunk of granite, and finally, my cold, smooth glasses. I shoved them across my nose as I stood.

As soon as I had placed my glasses on, sunlight again streamed from the sky. My heart leapt with hope, and relief filled my body like rushing water soothing an oven burn. As strange as that random darkness and black spot had been, I was so overjoyed to see everything back to normal.

However, the golden silence was momentarily broken by a *crunch crackle* from behind me. I slowly turned, expecting to find the child. There before me was the black figure of a man encircled by what seemed to be a cloud of smoke. The smoke made the figure very hard to see clearly; the only feature that seemed to be distinguishable were his bulging white eyes with pupils the color of a dying iris. I felt a wave of intense fear ripple through every limb of my body. I stumbled backwards a step or so as my face grew numb and the knuckles of my hands grew white as snow. The phantom, or whatever it was, began slowly approaching me, transported by its smoky haze that allowed it to glide about a foot above the ground.

I quickly spun one hundred and eighty degrees around, taking off in the fastest sprint I could muster. I let out a gasp as everything turned black once more. I realized that, once again, my glasses were not on my face. They had fallen again! I madly pawed the ground for them, and when I put them on again, the light was back. But so was that phantom! When the sky darkened, it had stopped in its tracks, frozen in a grotesque position with knobby fingers stretching towards me! As soon as my glasses were on, and the light permeating the air, after a few seconds the phantom was able to move again!

“Stop! Please! What do you want from me, creature of evilness?” I belted out. But any pleading was of no use with this horror. The phantom continued to float towards me. I pulled my glasses off, on purpose this time, instinctively employing the only way I knew to stop the phantom. A plan formulated in my head: I would keep my glasses off, run out of the forest, and drive away at ninety miles per hour.

There was a major flaw in my plan, though. That flaw was the fact that every time I tried to run, I tripped over rocks or tree roots. The darkness permitted my blurred vision no hints as to what was around me. I felt the warm moisture of blood accumulating on my raw palms and knee caps. Standing soon became harder to manage, but my determination didn’t falter as I earnestly tried to escape the nightmare that had become a reality. At one point, I ran face first into the boulder I had previously avoided. Painful minutes that felt like days continued to pass, until I collapsed on the ground, defeated, in one heap.

Movement of any kind became unbearable. Pain shot through every joint of my body. I brushed my long hair away from my tear-streaked face with my one good limb- my right arm. The arm that held my glasses.

I knew there was no escape. Either darkness, and no way of moving, or a phantom. Either way, I was bound to die. I reasoned with myself that the most quick death would probably be the one including the phantom. My heart pounded as I unfolded the metal sides of my glasses and slowly put them on, one last time.

The harsh sunlight bounced from the gray blob of granite to my left to the ominous circle of black water in front of me. A streak of crimson bird flew by my right ear. My pursuer took his opportunity to approach me as soon as he became able to move. Squeezing my eyes shut, I curled up into a ball and waited for death.

I felt the chilling breath of the phantom exhale against my neck, and before I knew what was happening to me, a cold hand was on my shoulder, rolling me, pushing me into the abyss of black water in front of me. The last thing I remember is ripping through mangrove roots as I sank to the bottom, where I felt my head hit something as hard as a diamond. Then blackness, and nothing more.

Today, 22 years later, I still dwell in the “Neurotic Injuries Section” of Southview Hospital. After the incident I just described to you, I woke up in the gray plastic hospital bed that I lie on now. When my car was found on the side of the road, the police soon searched the surrounding forest, and I was found, half-drowned, clinging to a rotten log on the edge of the pond. I don’t remember how I even managed to swim up to air after my plummet to the bottom of that pool. Doctors told me that I had hit the back of my head with a considerable amount of impact, and that the brain damage was so severe that I will probably never remember anything from my previous life. However, they were not completely correct. True, after I woke up I did not have any recollections of the poor blonde woman who sobbed uncontrollably as she claimed to be my mother. True, I did not in the slightest recognize images of my old dog. True, I did not recall my birthday, or even my own name.

However, what the doctors *were* wrong about was my ability to remember the day of the accident. That day, starting with my chemistry class and ending with my dive into the swirling darkness of the pool, remains as fresh in my memory as if it happened to me yesterday. I will never know what became of the crying child. He most likely endured a similar fate that I endured. I will never know if the man surrounded by smoke really was a phantom. I will never know why he did what he did to me. I will never know how I ended up alive, clutching a log.

What I will always know is that one small change, a right turn instead of a left, cost me the life I had always known.