
A MINUTE AND A HALF TURN OVER TIME

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Tommy, when he finds himself in awkward social settings, and particularly when the awkwardness has been achieved by something he's said or done or seen, as had been the case so often in the past, he now thinks, squeezes the space under his arm, in order to determine whether his anxiety has soaked him, whether the creases of his t-shirt are beginning to harden. He can smell himself in these moments, almost as if his fingertips were nostrilled, and he wonders whether anyone else senses the pang of deodorant mixed with cool sweat. In high school he would sweat rings under his arms, great rings whose borders were shaded in white, a product of the sodium in his Mountain Dew.

He hasn't shaved in about ten days, not since he pre-gamed the reunion, and peppery stubble poke at his probing, moist fingers as he sizes up his neck, another nervous habit.

It's good to be here, it's great to be here, he knows. Airplanes land. They take you home. Don't worry. Get on board.

There is a crack in the seat of the yellow plastic chair, and every time Tommy shifts his weight, it pinches the fat on the back of his thigh. He lifts his leg and the chair releases the loose denim of his jeans with a muffled pop. Though his eyes are trained on the ceiling, counting the rotting spots in the roof beams, he can feel everyone looking at him, a common sixth sense. Some are glancing at one another. No one has spoken in at least a minute and a half, and the tension doesn't seem to be deflating. Actually, if he's right, Tommy can feel it in his feet—the tension—a steady flood of battery acid. He lifts his leg to pull it out of the sting, and the chair pops again.

"Let me run and get an ashtray real quick," Mark says. He crosses the room and disappears up the stairs into the kitchen. The air is lighter, but still tactile.

The other guys in the room look around and make eyebrow-heavy eye contact. It's likely that no one has ever asked if they could smoke a cigarette during community group before, and even more likely that none of these guys has ever seen someone smoke while giving their testimony. Which makes sense and seems fair, Tommy acknowledges. Even to him, the entire concept of a lit cigarette festering in a basement among a group of people gathered to praise God and study His Word does seem—well, not evil, really, but it does straddle a few lines that no one in the group seems too comfortable examining, Tommy included. “So, yeah, welcome, Tommy,” Mark had said. “We’re glad you’re here, the Lord is good. So, the way we usually go is, we’re gonna open with prayer, and then I thought before we get into the Word, do you want to share your testimony with us?” And then, without hesitation, as if he’d been waiting for the chance to ask, Tommy said, “Can I smoke in here?”

It's cold in the basement. The walls are unfinished. Dirt and jagged corners of concrete look like they're falling out of the wall. There is a scrap of rug that was once green but has now faded to the color of toothpaste. In a corner, just visible behind the still-rocking movement of Mark's fading periwinkle recliner, a washer and dryer groan and tremble as they do their work. The air smells like dried air. As basements go, even Michigan basements, it lacks a natural charisma. There are folding chairs, too, the kind that are made out of a khaki metal and which squeak when you shift your weight, which most of the others do, staring at the ground, examining the scratches in their leather shoes, waiting for Mark to return. They can hear his footsteps falling on the kitchen floor above.

Tommy prays to stay awake, to not slip.

“Anyone seen Paul lately?” Jared asks. Jared had been a class ahead of Tommy and the others and, with the exception of Mark, is the oldest person in the group. His navy Detroit Tigers cap has an improbable brown stain at its crease, and his heavy white sneakers are oily in the corners. “Tommy, weren't you staying with him?”

Tommy's reverie breaks. “Yeah.” He clears his throat. “Yeah, I was, but I'm over at my mom's now, on Lake. I actually haven't seen Paul since the reunion.” Jared looks surprised. His mouth opens, but Mark rambles down the stairs and hands Tommy a Flintstones mug. “Sorry, this is all I could find,” he says.

Tommy pries a pack of cigarettes from his pocket. "I'm sorry," he says, "do you guys mind? I should have asked that." Emphatic noes and head-shaking from everyone. "No worries, man," says a guy Tommy doesn't remember named Cody. Cody is remarkably tan for Michigan in the springtime; his pookah shells pop off his bronzed neck like teeth. He'd bumped fists with Tommy in a strange way at the reunion.

Mark settles back into his recliner. He has his hand on the plunger, but he doesn't pull it back. His eyes are small, almost squinty, and they're encircled with loose, dark skin that baffles his thirty-two years. He could be twenty-three or forty, Tommy thinks. He looks deeply satisfied, almost post-coital, so calm that the firmness of his handshake startled Tommy on Sunday.

Besides Tommy and Mark, most are sitting in the folding chairs. Jared and a bearded guy Tommy vaguely remembers named Chris are on opposite arms of a love seat, their Bibles and notebooks between them. Tommy lights his cigarette and creaks back into the chair's pinch.

"Alright, well," he says, flicking his ash into the Flintstones mug. The cigarette gives his hands office while he talks. "So, I don't really know how to begin and all, except to start—" he cuts himself off. He hunches over onto the edge of the seat. His legs are bouncing. Stay, stay. He has given pitch speeches to developers in catered rooms; he has spoken to scores of therapists and psychs in no-smoking rooms on padded couches. But then, he always talked about the past, and about things that had happened and had finished happening. They wanted a story, so he had shaped them one, culled from a context that was to them blank. But this, these guys spread around the basement—they know, they remember. They have to. They saw him with space in his eyes. They had talked to him, in those moments, unsure to whom they were speaking—was he in? There was no comedy then, no blockbuster concepts, no interesting phenomena. There was only a hole in today.

"I guess I should start at the beginning of all of this," Tommy says. "I guess it's—it's hard to tell?" He looks around the room. No one seems sure whether they are supposed to answer him. "I mean, do you guys just want to know—what do you want to know? What did you guys talk about when you—I mean, when you, like—" "Tommy can't get himself to the word 'witness.'" He sighs.

He pulls at the cigarette. It's not like things are completely different. It's not like his mind is finally right—different, better, but not right—or like he finally wants the right things, or good things. He doesn't do the things he wants to do yet, or, the things that he thinks he should probably want to do. He actually does want to do *some* good new things: he wants to be with people, to hear what they have to say. This is good, a delicious peace. All of this new wanting, and knowing what to want, and figuring out how to want: it's so queasy and fresh. He feels like he's walking on an electric floor in fuzzy socks when he goes out, like his moves are shot through foreign currents. Desires, both the living and the dead ones, mingle and cook together. All is hot.

“Well, I guess we—what we'd like to know, really, is what all happened that led to your joining us here,” Mark says. His nose rounds to a point. He looks like a stoned cartoon turtle. Strange. All of them, they all look so different, Tommy thinks. So different from the little boys they'd been when he last was around any of them. He reminds himself that he just met Mark on Sunday, that he'd seen the rest a week before that.

“Okay, sorry. That's—okay, let me start over.”

“Take your time,” Mark says.

Everyone is paying attention. Their heads are cocked, their eyes drawn. Mark's recliner is rocking gently. A guy named Michael, he had a crisis about whether he should like Nirvana, he's leaning forward on his thighs. Across the room, Jared is slumped in the love seat. An empty and dented Coke can sits next to his feet. His chin is resting on his chest, his knees almost obscuring his face. But he looks focused, ready. The posture is almost a decoy, Tommy thinks, to disarm you before those eyes. This is one of the ways men love each other.

Tommy nods at Mark, pulls from his cigarette, exhales, consider another angle. “I guess I felt trapped. Everything was so vivid for so long, so intense, you know?” Those who do nod back. “And I guess I should have probably felt like life was amazing, like it was full of wonder. I know people like that, people who never had what I had. That...gift, or whatever. They just sorta *knew* that life was bigger, deeper. Enchanted, almost, if that makes sense.” Tommy surveys the room. Most are still following him. Mark is nodding, but Tommy knows what he thinks Tommy is saying is not at all what he's saying. If he

finds out—when he finds out—will he ever be able to see me? How could he? What would he find him, and believe him to be? A prophet? A mystic? “I shrunk,” Tommy says, but he stops, and shakes his head at himself. He’s looking over Mark’s head, letting himself be hypnotized by the spin of the dryer. “Trapped,” Tommy says, “by sin.” Michael lifts off of his knees and sits back. Mark nods profusely. Jared nods.

“Maybe—maybe that’s not the right word. Well, or, maybe it is, but I’m not sure if I’m using it right, yet.” This is their word. It belongs to them. It’s not meaning what he wants it to mean. There is a chance, he’s known since coming in, that the moment he opens his mouth to say exactly what he wants to say, that he will make no sense whatsoever. There is a chance that he could be misunderstood, or, worse, simply not understood at all. And then Tommy has another thought. What if he’s wrong? What if he’s completely off base and has missed some sort of mark that he didn’t even know he should have been aiming for? Was sin what had trapped him? Was sin what he wanted salvation from? What if this thing, this peace, these words, this testimony, were to fly out of him and get shot on sight? What if he were to lose all of this? The silent moan of having pressed mute to the whirrs and roars and everything else—gone. Does that happen? Would the Lord let it happen?

“This is harder,” Tommy tells the group, “than it seems. Harder than you guys—than you guys make it look.”

Mark looks around at the other faces. Despite his advantage in years, he is still in the grand scheme of things just as fresh as they are. What he really has on everyone here is a degree, and a serious amount of training, and knowledge. That’s really the only difference. His calling has trained him for patience. The other guys have been given it over time.

He smiles. “Tommy, you don’t have to share tonight if you don’t want to.”

Tommy blows some smoke through his nose, shaking his head “no”. “No, no, I want to. I—believe me, I do.” He’s tracing lines in the air with his cherry. “I just, you know, I don’t really know how to talk about something like this. I’ve never done it before.” He pauses, looks around. “Or any of this, really.”

When he goes to sleep in his mom's basement, he stares at the ceiling above with his childhood blankets, littered with NFL logos, pulled to his chest, and he almost can't believe the peace he feels. It's real, and textured. He can rub it like the pilled fabric of the sheets. For the first time in his life, he feels like he's here, like he's a part of something, anything. Even when alone, he can feel it in his mind, and in his heart, or whatever, but he can't really put words to it. How pleasantly odd this feeling he feels, of knowing that there's a place where he can put all of himself.

How do you share that? What are the words for that? Where is the beginning, and what is with it?

The guys in the room glance at one another. They're waiting, eager. Tommy has a presence in the room that they can all sense. Like sitting near a heavyweight champion. Though they've lived, though they've mostly married, though they all have jobs and hobbies, they know that their lives and Tommy's life are incomparable. They are satisfied as they sit, uncomfortable where they stand. But eager. Tommy has spices from the east. What else exists?

Tommy is stalling, and he knows it. He knows that he can simply shout all of these words, get everything off of his chest in some grand Pentecostal quake, and that no one would bat an eye. In fact, they'd probably be right moved, he thinks. He holds smoke in his lungs. Drafts linger on his tongue. But he would flap his tongue around in the circle, and then nothing would have changed, only the words. The thrums of his shouting would only unstitch all the quiet. He is here. It's an uncomfortable comfort, allowing yourself to belong to something. He never wants to open his mouth again, actually, never wants to see anything outside of what he sees when he is about to go to sleep at night. He wants a retreat, a retreat from the wilderness.

He flicks his cigarette. It was so very cold on top of the mountain. Come on down, sinner: come down unveiled, for you are not the only one here. That was what he had heard.

They're all starting to look around at one another. Mark has his eyes closed, but he's not asleep. Several mouths move in silence. Lips are shifting down at their corners, pulling the eyes with them. They're trying so hard to listen and to understand. They want so

badly to know. A few of them are nodding their heads in tiny, barely noticeable bobs, almost like a tremble. Jared is still moving his lips, mouthing something to himself. He's making eye contact with Tommy from behind those knees. Jared didn't go to prom; he'd gone to some all-night event at his church instead. Now he is a man. He looks innocent. They all do. They are sheep on the edge of a city. They know after all that there is a world.

Tommy realizes that he hasn't said a word in at least a minute and a half as he rolls the filtered end of his cigarette between his thumb and forefinger. He drops the butt into the mug. It pings like a muffled coin.

Jared speaks. "Tommy, look, we're really just happy that you're here, you know?" He blinks at his own words. "I mean, you know, not that you're *here* as in part of our group, but here as in like home. You know?"

Mark smiles and turns back to Tommy. He leans back in his chair, closes his eyes again. When he opens them, he is smiling. "If it's all the same to everyone else, I think we can really just wait until Tommy's ready before we have to hear his story. Or, Tommy, if you don't want to share, that's fine, too. We'll all get to know you, I'm sure, in time. It's fine." He shoves himself backwards and clamps the chair down, the recliner shouting from its gears as he pulls the plunger. "You're only new for a little while."

Mark reaches for his Bible, which is on a table at his side. "Okay," he says. His voice is louder, more commanding. Everyone snaps from their reveries. "Last little bit of Galatians 3; who wants to read?"

For a moment, a trailing moment whose residue stays in the basement air, the group is still looking at Tommy. Their eyes are open. Everyone is paying attention to him, though there seems to be no pressure; they're paying attention to everything and everyone else, too. None of them seem to be worried about missing anything. No one is talking. Their eyes show that they are all empty, empty without being empty, empty in the same way a home is empty: waiting and prepared. Everything is arranged, and set. Someone will read. They will all sit together, and wait.

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Wheat

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