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When it Rains in Portland

Seasons are a beautiful thing. My favorite season has always been fall, but growing up in Southern California I never quite experienced it. Other than football, Halloween and a small deviation in temperature, fall didn't deviate much from summer, spring or winter. Weather didn't change much throughout my childhood in Dana Point either; I could be found at Salt Creek beach any day of the year, the only thing that ever changed was the thickness of my wetsuit. I saw leaves falling from trees or lying on the ground once a year, in my family's annual screening of, "A Charlie Brown Thanksgiving," my baby sister's favorite seasonal show. I always wanted to dive into a pile of leaves, following Linus's example, basking in the youthful joy of the season, but never saw a pile worthy.

When I first moved to Portland, I realized what a true fall season was. Walking through the streets was walking on nature's buried canvas. Trees and their leaves prevailed throughout the city as vibrant shades of red coated the grey sidewalks, followed by vividly shaded leaves of yellow, orange and green, painted the streets. Winter's presence was foretold by the standing hairs along my neck, thrusting upward by the brisk air which grew cooler as days blew by with the leaves in the wind. I was enthralled by the artistry of the season. Fall was gorgeous; Portland was beautiful.

The infatuation I had for the season of fall never left, but I did underestimate how much it rained. Rain drowned out the beauty of the landscape. It made the vibrant colors of the leaves

blend together in giant piles of wet, dirty nature. It masked the beauty of the trees, usually highlighted in sunlight, by putting them under dark clouds and continuous rain. The rain made the cold air of fall, which was enjoyable on its own, unbearable as a combination of wet and cold.

Luckily, it didn't rain all the time in fall. Constant downpour is more common in winter, in Portland at least. Now, a full year into my life in P-Town, I stay busy as an undeclared sophomore at Portland University, coasting off of my parent's financial control of tuition, while partying my ass off. I didn't ever want to go to college; after high school I was done with organized education. Straight memorization of insignificant details and minutiae about Europe's history, or some pointless science experiment, wasn't the most effective way for me to learn. I forgot all that I crammed into my fatigued head immediately after my last AP exam. My parents made me attend Portland University, despite the copious hours I spent preaching to them that in order for me to learn, I needed to experience life. I couldn't experience life sitting in the back of an overcrowded classroom full of overpaying, inexperienced youth, waiting for their first opportunity to sneak out the backdoor to resume their mindless partying; nor could I understand the ache of losing a loved one through reading a novel written about someone else's experience. But, through personally experiencing raw moments of real life, whether through travel or just simply living, I knew I could grasp much more. There is a great deal that can be learned about the people and art of Istanbul by simply visiting for a day or two, and I could educate myself even more about cardiopulmonary resuscitation by watching it unfold in real life situations, rather than reading about both in a textbook. My love for nature and the world's natural beauty was formed over an appreciation for raw moments of real life, such as a Portland leaf falling

slowly in the sky. Despite my thoughts on organized education, my parents didn't listen, and here I am in the back of Human Bio pretending to give a shit.

“Turn to page 347 and begin reading the short summary on the effects of an accumulation of abnormal white blood cells,” professor Who Cares proclaims to the class.

While turning to page 347 of my \$100 textbook, consisting of 600 pages of utter nonsense about the human body that I am required to know for a test in December, a buzz from the phone in my pocket sends chills through my quad. A text from Cole reads, *Yo, we're outside SRH going to Chris's if you want to come.* Of course I want to come. Slings my textbook into my backpack, I glare down the professor, waiting for him to turn around, so I can slip out the backdoor. When he finally looks away, I slip out of class with my skateboard in hand.

Cole and Grant appear just down the staircase of the SRH building, acronymed SRH by the university as a cooler way of saying Science and Research Hub. Grant, a light skinned, curly-haired, 20 year-old, has been my best friend since Freshman year of high school. He claims to have made the trip up to PU with me for the sake of keeping the relationship strong through college, but it's mainly because he didn't get in anywhere else. Cole, a reserved book worm, had been my roommate the year prior, and we have been close ever since, due in part to our overwhelming love for the outdoors and weed. As I come down the stairs I let out with a howl, “Woaahhhhhh wutsup rippers!”

“Ayy bud, done with class?” Grant responds with a mischievous grin.

“Haha, good one. No. Class will be going on for around...” pausing, I lick my lips and look to my phone, which reveals the time to be 4:15, “around another hour or so.”

Cole looks to me with concerned eyes; I can see the judgement on his face. “You’re going to fail that class, Will,” he says with a sigh.

“Failure is essential to true learning Cole, lighten up.” I respond with a smirk on my face.

Laughing, we begin to ride and skate off campus towards Chris’s. Chris’s is the nickname we coined for our favorite smoke spot. It earned its name due to its location on an old, abandoned, or at least seemingly always empty, street, right along the Willamette river’s edge, called Christians Street. PU is located on the Northwest side of Portland, near Forest Park, and we always ride from the park down along the water’s edge, to Chris’s.

Yelling out over the quickly passing brisk air, I ask, “Grant, why are you riding a bike? Where is your carver?”

“I left it at home, I have been feeling pretty sick lately and my back usually starts to hurt when I skate.”

“Back pain again, huh?” yells Cole in response. “I have never heard someone complain about back pain so much from a cold.”

“It’s not my fault my back hurts, your mom has been very demanding over the past couple of weeks, I should really stop going over there late at night.”

“Shut the fuck up Grant!” shrieks Cole angrily as Grant pedals just out of reach, turning on a speaker in his backpack.

“I’m going to play the usual, is that kosher?” Grant replies, while being cut off by his own profuse coughing.

“Of course,” I reply, as the callous yet clever sound of Joey Bada\$\$ erupts from Grant’s backpack. I start to lose focus on the ride as my mind is absorbed by the music. Joey is a young rapper around the same age as us, but instead of going to school, he’s making millions off of doing what he loves. Jealousy rises within me as we make it to Chris’s. I release a sigh.

We sit down on the curb of the street facing the river, surrounded by a vast congregation of leaves in a myriad of shades and colors. The image of Cole and Grant sitting along the curb looking out over the water, encircled by leaves, perfectly captures the essence of fall. Using the camera on my iPhone, I memorialize this timeless view of my two buds in my camera roll. I love moments like these.

“Again with the pictures Will,” Grant says with a grin. “You are going to have to start paying me for my modeling, this face isn’t cheap you know.”

“Your face isn’t cheap only because of the loads of money you gave to your dentist to fix your teeth last summer. You have the Hollywood smile, but you could use some work on the rest of your empty head too,” Cole adds. Grant shakes his head, pretending to be offended.

“The aesthetic of you guys on the curb surrounded by leaves looked cool. Check this out,” I expound, handing him the phone. “Fall is so beautiful, man!”

“Fall is beautiful? Hell, I’m the only thing in this picture with any beauty. Why are you giving a season all the credit, look at that jaw line for crying out loud,” spouts Grant, recklessly tossing back my phone.

Catching the phone mid-air, I reply, “Well you and your jawline need to get used to the pictures. I’m going to print out all the photos I have been taking this year and put them up in the den next to the Hendrix painting.”

“In the den? Why?” He asks.

“Don’t you think it will look cool to fill the wall with pictures of us and our lives?” I answer. “All we do is play video games in there anyway.”

“Maybe. It just seems like a lot of pointless work to me.”

A leaf sublimely floats down from the trees, softly landing on the ground in front of me. I pick it up and focus on its stem. My eyes follow the stem’s path up and through every inch of the leaf’s dying red hue. Its small branches remain clearly visible in the lost leaf, dry and distinct, like cold blue veins on a dying body, vividly glowing through pale skin.

“If we covered the whole wall, I think it would look really cool. Especially since the iPhone shoots in 4k now, it will look like Will’s a professional photographer or something.” Cole adds.

“Yeah!” I answer. “Besides, Portland is too elegant to not photograph - even with you in the picture. Look at the shimmering water of the river, and how the glowing orange reflection of the trees stain it’s dark, reticent beauty. Isn’t it picturesque bud?”

“Jeez dude? When did Mr. I Hate Education start using such big doucheey words? What are you an art major?” Grant taunts. “Put that leaf down, you sound like a goon.”

“No,” I respond with a grin, dropping the leaf in the breeze. “I’m no art major, but somewhere along the last 19 years of life, I learned a word or two. I assume that is what makes me a goon?”

“Yes. Goon.” He responds and reciprocates a smile. “Don’t pull the intelligence card on me. We both know I came to school to have fun, not to read an entire dictionary just to understand what you are saying. Is that okay with you professor?”

I appreciate his sarcastic grin for a second, as Cole pulls a few joints out of his bag and proclaims, “This will lighten the mood,” sparking a Bic and releasing the smoke from his lungs, coughing loudly for all the world to hear. I ignore the coughs and hit the J with even more intensity, letting out my own smoker’s cough merging with Joey Bada\$\$’s sophisticated expression; the two almost seem to go hand in hand.

“You think that smoking has something to do with us all getting sick?” Grant asks while grabbing the J.

“There is no way. I have smoked almost everyday since coming to Portland and I only get sick during certain times of the year,” I proclaim. “Besides, weed can’t give you an illness, it just gives us our cough.”

“Ladies love the smokers cough,” Grant replies with a grin, allowing time to pass before taking another hit.

“Then why are we all relatively sick right now?” Cole chimes in.

“It’s fall. Flu season. I’ve been getting sick during fall for most of my life. Even when I lived in Dana, I got sick when the weather stayed exactly the same and the leaves remained in the trees.”

“So we know it’s not the leaves getting us sick, not even this one,” Grant says sarcastically, before taking his second puff and passing left with an even more impish grin on his face.

Time always passes very quickly at Chris’s. I have always thought it was the good company and laughter that made the hours slip by, but I am sure the J’s helped.

While we sit, the sun increasingly slips closer to the horizon behind us, before finally setting just below the trees. The crisp air flows from the dark horizon, swallowing all of the warmth around us in one brisk gust. Chills creep down my spine. This golden hour has always been my favorite part of the day, something about the energy in the air changes in those briefly fleeting moments, when the world stays bright without the unremitting glare of the sun.

Looking up at the pink clouds in the bright blue sky, I smile and proclaim, “The world is incredible!”

“It is. Don’t you think it’s sad that it takes three J’s and an incredibly high mindset to appreciate it?” Cole replies.

“We don’t need weed to appreciate it; I appreciate living here all the time,” Grant says.

“Weed just opens up your creativity to think in ways that help you appreciate the beauty and nature around you,” I contribute, before hitting the last bit of the J and dropping the roach onto the ground. “It’s not like we’re unappreciative of the world and our lives when we are sober.”

“True, but I always appreciate a good sunset at Chris’s with my eyes half baked more so than I do in the library writing an essay. I like to think that is why I smoke,” Cole answers.

“I smoke to enjoy things more than I can being sober. Music, food, sex, sunsets...” Grant continues. “It’s all the same.”

“It definitely enhances all of those things, but I smoke for moments like these,” I add.

“What do you mean?” Cole asks.

“Moments like these where we actually talk. It’s not that we don’t talk when we aren’t high, but I feel as if our generation has become consumed by false interactions. Everyone we

meet only cares about social media, appearances, and accolades. It's rare that any of us ever actually look up from our phones and talk to one another. Hell, even at parties, where we supposedly socialize and meet girls, most of the conversations are superficial small talk, or trying to figure out the name of the girl you are dancing with in between each song change. Sometimes there is no talk at all." I declare, as Cole lights another J. "When we come to Chris's, or when we smoke with other people, we always have deep conversations like these. People express their opinions, tell stories, ask interesting questions. We actually get to know one another and what we care about. That's why I love smoking, for moments like these where we forget everything else and just talk."

"I can't argue with any of that. Will, you are simply a genius, and I love pot." Grant replies with a pat on my back and a smile on his face.

"Grant, you need pot, it's kept you shut up about your back for about two weeks now." Cole responds.

"You're not wrong, but you also aren't right. My back is killing me right now."

"Really? That is such an odd pain to have at our age. Did you throw it out? Maybe you lifted something too heavy for that weak-ass frame of yours," I quip.

"Ha ha. Very funny. Your attempt at having any comedic value is rather saddening Will."

"Very true," I reply, "Let's head back, rain clouds look like they are coming in."

"You read my mind," Cole declares.

Standing up, we all walk to our boards, and Grant to his bike. He slumps over, resting his head on his handle bars, and lets out a whimper as Cole packs up his bag. His face grimaces and

his stance contorts into an awkward position. The pain is visible in his posture, something isn't right.

"Guys, I'm actually in a lot more pain than I thought. I don't think I can ride back."

"Are you sure?" Cole asks.

"Yea, I don't think I can lift my leg over the seat."

"Okay," I reply. "Should we call someone to come get us? Is it that bad?"

"No, it's fine. I just can't ride the bike."

Cole, with a perplexed look on his face, turns to me and says, "You ride the bike and pull Grant home on the skateboard. I'll stick behind him so he doesn't fall."

"Okay..."

"Does that sound good Grant?"

"Yeah, just get me home."

A sickening realization of the seriousness of the situation begins to rise within me as I pedal Grant home. His silence makes me consider the severity of his pain. I avoid the leaves piled on the side of the road to keep the ride smooth. My worry that something horrible is happening is growing; I can't help but wonder how such pain can come out of seemingly thin air. He barely ever complains about his back, usually less than Cole mocks him for it, but now he can't even ride a bike, so something serious must be at hand. I look back to make sure Grant is holding on okay. He meets my gaze with a look of distress consuming his expression and posture. Even my smile doesn't seem to affect his condition.

When we finally roll up to our apartment, Grant's pain is noticeably worse. As he steps off the skateboard, his back tightens and the rest of his body follows in concert, making his movements clearly slow and agonizing. His face has grown pale, exposing his weak demeanor. It's obvious he's in excruciating pain. Cole and I slowly move him up the stairs and into our apartment, where we lay him down in his bed. Cole leaves the room to get water.

"Are you okay here?" I ask.

"Yes."

"Do you need anything other than water?"

"No."

"Okay."

Cole enters the room and hands the water to Grant, "Drink this slowly, no reason to stir up your stomach if you do have the flu or something."

"Okay."

"We're going to give you some time to rest, give us a call if you need anything."

"Thanks," Grant replies in a whisper, too weak to fully project his voice. The sound of rain falling onto the roof of our apartment vibrates throughout the rooms.

Before reaching the door to Grant's room, I turn and say "Remember that time in Mrs. Crandall's class when I fell off the carver and broke my knee?"

"Yes."

“You and Swan left school with me and stayed in the hospital by my side all day,” I start with a smile, “I’ll never forget that G. You have always been there for me, and I’m here for you now guy. Let me know if you need anything, I’ll be right outside.”

“Thanks.”

“No problem,” I reply while closing the door. “Love you duder. I hope this passes quickly like the flu and that there isn’t anything actually wrong with that skinny framed back of yours.” I close the door and take a deep breath.

Cole and I spent the next couple hours in the living room watching Narcos. I have never done coke, but it has always fascinated me. I could never understand the difference between coke and caffeine, nor can I understand why one is legal and one is not, if they are both addictive. Grant has done coke before, he considers it an almost sobering feeling of focus and energy. I don’t like addictive drugs; they scare me.

“I think his back will be fine tomorrow,” Cole says during a commercial break. “He might have the flu or something. Joint and muscle pain is common in the flu, even in the back. He might just be too weak to handle it. It is Grant after all, a slap on the wrist hurts the guy.”

“I hope so, but I have never seen him in so much pain. I think he might have actually hurt his back. He could barely walk up to his room,” I reply.

“Maybe. Maybe he hurt it lifting or something a while back and now a cold is making it worse.”

“Yea I don’t know. Lets just hope it’s nothing severe.”

“I hate being sympathetic towards Grant,” Cole responds, “If this was me in pain, he would have made 50 different jokes about how much of a pussy I am by now.”

“Probably, But you know he just mocks you to get under your skin. If you were in excruciating pain or needed help, we both know Grant would be the first one by your side.”

“I guess,” Cole answers.

Cole turns from the conclusion of our third Narcos episode to find Grant in the doorway of his room, rain thundering down just outside the window behind him. “What are you doing up? Is your back still hurting?”

“Yeah,” Grant replies. “I couldn’t really sleep because of the pain. It took me a little while to get out of the bed fully too.”

“Do you need anything?” I ask, while standing up and walking towards the kitchen for more water.

A long pause brings an awkward silence to the room. I turn to face Grant and see the cause of the silence. “I think... I think... I need to go to the hospital,” he says with a stutter between tears, trickling down from his light blue eyes.

Seeing the agony in his eyes, the effort it took him to get out of bed becomes clear. The gravity of the situation hits me in the face like an F on a test I actually studied for, as I see his pain growing with each tear falling along his cheek. I walk to Grant and put his arm over my shoulder. “Alright bud, let’s get you there. Cole want to grab your keys?”

“Yeah,” he responds while grabbing his keys off the table and heading towards the front door, “I’ll pull it up close while you get him down the stairs.”

“Okay. Grant can you make it down the stairs like this?”

“Yeah, just go slow.”

We gradually move down the staircase and into the car. Rain continues to fall to its demise on the overcrowded concrete, as puddles the size of small lakes start to dominate the streets. I avoid the small lake in our parking lot to keep our shoes dry and gently move Grant into the passenger seat of the Cole’s car. “We will get you there soon ripper, try to stay stable and relaxed in the car. Can you put your seatbelt on?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, let’s go,” Cole says as I close the door on Grant and get in the back seat.

The waiting room of a hospital is one of the worst places on earth. It reeks of hospital smells like plastic, medicine, fear, and death.

“I hate hospitals,” Cole says to kill time. I turn and look at him, giving no response. He continues, “Look, it’s almost ten o’clock and there are a ton of people in here. Don’t you think we’re going to be sitting here for a while if Grant just has back pain? There are probably people here with more serious injuries than him.”

“If Grant is in urgent care for any reason or level of pain, I think they will treat him accordingly along with everyone else. You saw the look in his eyes. He looked dead inside.”

“So do you think we will be here for a while?”

“Yes.”

“We should go get something to eat then.”

“Look Cole, I don’t think you understand the seriousness of this situation. Something could be very wrong with Grant’s back. You can leave to go get food if you want, I am going to stay and wait for the doctor.”

“I’m not misinterpreting the seriousness of the situation...”

“Shut up then,” I say, cutting him off. Cole gets the message and turns around in his chair.

Time passes, but not like it ever has at Chris’s. Time begins to move slower than it ever has, even slower than Human Bio class time, as the anticipation for the doctor grows more intense within me. I sit in the uncomfortable chair for hours, waiting for a doctor to tell me what is wrong with Grant’s back, so we can go home. A wall of rain from outside can be heard over the hospital’s sounds. It eventually lulls me to sleep.

I awake to the doctor standing over me and tapping my arm. His broad shoulders and overwhelming height intimidate me and send a chill down my spine.

“Hello. Are you.. Uhh.. Are you the friends of...,” He starts while looking down at his clipboard in a confused manner.

“Grant Williams? Yes we are.”

“Ah... good, yes...,” he continues. “Well, we already informed his family down in Southern California of his situation, and they insisted we tell you as well. You are not going to be allowed to see Grant tonight, because he needs to catch up on a lot of rest for his treatment tomorrow.”

“Treatment? What is wrong with him?” Cole demands nervously, cutting off the doctor.

I shoot Cole a glare as the doctor continues, “I’m so sorry to say this, but your friend...” He pauses and looks us both in the eyes for dramatic effect, “your friend has Leukemia. He receives his first chemotherapy treatment tomorrow morning. I would suggest visiting him one to two days after this, so he has the energy to hold a conversation. After that he will be sent down to Southern California to continue his treatment with his family. Luckily for your friend, we caught the cancer at a very curable stage, but he needs to start chemotherapy right away.”

Not believing what we just heard, Cole and I both sit in silence, staring at the doctor with blank expressions and soaring emotions. I feel sick. But then I feel tricked. Sadness consumes me, but it disappears quickly. I don’t know how I feel. I don’t know what to feel.

Reacting to our inability to respond, the doctor continues, “Look, your friend has a very treatable type of cancer, but he needs all of the support he can get from his friends and family. I suggest you boys both go back home and get some rest. Try calling him tomorrow. I have more work to do now, so do you have any questions for me?” Both shaking our heads no, we stare off into the distance in shock, watching as the doctor walks back through the double doors and out of sight.

Avoiding eye contact with Cole, I grab my jacket and head out into the thundering rain towards the car. Cole follows ten steps behind, silent. While we drive back to the apartment, Cole’s detached facial expression says it all. I can’t believe Grant has leukemia. Leukemia. Cancer never seems like a real thing, until it comes out of nowhere and grabs one of your best friends in a strangle hold, by the blood that keeps him moving.

My thoughts race quickly as Cole drives the car home. *How could this have happened? What did Grant do to deserve this? Will he get through this? How do I tell my parents without crying?*

I have so many questions. I try to stop thinking about all of it, but his face keeps appearing in my head. *Sweet, sarcastic Grant. Will he be okay? Yes. What if he won't be? Is there a God? Why did God do this? Is there no God? If Grant dies will I ever see him again? No. He can't die. The doctor said his cancer is curable. But what if it isn't? I can't just go home, how will I sleep? How will Grant sleep? I need to go back and be with him. No. He needs rest. The doctor said he needs rest. What if the doctor is wrong?*

I can't stop my scattered and fleeting thoughts, rushing by like the murky water of the Willamette River. It seems like weeks ago that we were sitting down at Chris's and the guys were mocking my overly eloquent description of its beautiful waters. Cole and I don't say a word. The ride becomes unfathomably long. I am stuck in my own aggrieved head, while my best friend is stuck in a hospital bed. We are both alone.

Rain pours down onto the roof of the car. The sound drowns out all the noise of the road, all the colors of the trees, and all the beauty of the fall city, sending the last orange leaf of fall to the ground with a sheet of rain.

We pull up to the house and I get out of the car. Cole doesn't move. I stand in the rain and look at the light of the hidden moon, shining through the luminous clouds in the distance. Cole stays in the car. I walk up the staircase to our apartment with the headlights of the car casting my silhouette along the wall. Shadows from thousands of raindrops follow my example.

It creates a picturesque image, but why would I take this picture? Grant wouldn't even be here to mock me for it.

I sit on the last stair at the top of the staircase, looking down at the running car, as a puddle forms around me. My clothes grow more and more wet with every passing second. My hair is drenched. Cole stays in the car. Sheets of rain blur his presence out of sight. Tears of my own begin to follow the path of the rain down my cheek. I sob along with the night sky.

I don't know what to think, but I keep picturing Grant and his devilish smile. *This can't be true.*

As it rains in Portland, I reflect. This experience has given me what I thought I wanted: the experience of actual life. A lesson I could not learn in a textbook or lecture. But what did I really gain? I learned that actual life can be unfair and difficult, that experiences are not all that I thought they were, and that they can be much more. Experiences bear meaning and lessons, bestowing knowledge and maturity - but they are not always the lessons that you need or want.

Life is not as beautiful as it appears to be. It can be rough, brutally so. Loved ones can be lost just as easily as an early turned leaf, detaching in the chilly breeze, and softly descending through the Portland fall sky. Not everything is as elegantly and seamlessly pieced together as a picturesque view of a Portland sunset in the middle of fall with a joint by the river, and your best friends laughing by your side.