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### The Stillness in Time: A Reflective Narrative

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## The Stillness in Time: A Reflective Narrative

There are a lot of places I haven't driven to in my own car. Many of them I've been to before and just never bothered going back. I doubt I would think twice about driving to most of those other places, but something about lurching the wheel and flying into this parking lot felt strange. Wrong, in a way.

The only memories I have of this parking lot took place on a bus. Headphones in, maximum volume, shuffling through my Pandora stations and enduring the ads. I look at the mural on the wall, recognizing the shapes that had escaped my memory in the years that I hadn't been here. Then, I realize I'm in the wrong parking lot.

All of the good stuff happened by the back lot. I park my car so that I can see through the gigantic windows to the newly renovated library. I would have loved it if they'd expanded the library that much when I was there. I recall sitting between the stacks of fiction with Aubrey, whisperingly excitedly about our most recent reads. We would pull out our books in math class and, as discreet as we were, get caught with them under our desks. Normally a teacher would ask "who are you texting," but Mrs. Woodring couldn't stifle her laugh when she realized what we were doing. She said: "In my nine years of teaching, I've never had to confiscate book from a student."

I shift my eyes to the tables in the back center of the space. Those were the tables where we met for Opus in ninth grade. (That was after Mrs. Pizzi retired and we could no longer use her classroom.) As some sort of veterans of our school's literary arts magazine production, Aubrey, Justin, and I took it upon ourselves to read every submission aloud and keep Ms. Iatarola (Mrs. Pizzi's replacement) from corrupting the system we had going, however inefficient

it may have been. Although we'd never admit it, we loved the endless work. We loved staying 'till six to alphabetize the names of the writers and artists, approve or veto submissions, and size the images just right on the pages. We knew no one would buy a copy, but that was never the point.

A sting in my eyes brings me back to the present. How is it that I've come so far and these are still the moments that I miss the most? In ninth grade I dreamt of getting a better job, buying a car, dating, and graduating high school. Now that I've accomplished all those things, what's bringing me back here?

I never imagined that it would be like this. I think of the masks sitting in my glove compartment, the hand sanitizer in my cup holder, and my full tank of gas that I haven't put a dent in after three weeks. There is so much and so little occupying my mind right now as I think of what consumed my thoughts back then. I almost wish I could go back.

I try to make myself feel what I felt when the Opus deadline was the heaviest thing weighing on my mind. I close my eyes and convince myself that there's a poster in front of me and we are advertising for submissions. I pretend that I am writing in bold letters "SUBMIT TO OPUS—email your poems, short stories and artwork to [pizzi@gmail.com](mailto:pizzi@gmail.com)," but I didn't leave enough space at the end so I have to squish the last three letters together.

That didn't make me feel any better. I shake my head to clear my thoughts and try again. I take myself on a mental tour of the school. From the front lot where I got off the bus, to the aux gym where I waited for class to start, to my 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, and 9<sup>th</sup> grade lockers. I envision myself walking into my favorite class: French with Ms. Cooley. I used to cut P.E., asking if I could go to the bathroom, and walk all the way there just to hang out in my gym uniform.

I remember Dan, Carson and I; about to present an ad for a made-up invention. Carson was clearly the best French speaker of the three of us, Dan admittedly the worst. I was a solid middle ground between them, so Carson and I did most of the talking. Ms. Cooley laughed her way through our presentation. We were some of her favorites, so we got A's anyway.

I project down the hall, past the courtyard where we would eat the pizza that Mrs. Pizzi ordered on the days we stayed 'till six. I remember Sam B. throwing a water bottle onto the roof and, impressively enough, landing it right side up. I remember walking a safe distance behind the vice principal as he dragged Joey P. by the ear to his office for starting a food fight.

Mentally entering the building again, I see Mrs. Miller's room at the end of the hall, bookended between Mr. Dannin and Mrs. Clipford. Whether I was spending the morning there perusing her tiny bookshelf (because, apparently, the library wasn't big enough for me and Aubrey,) or I was in class with Justin sitting to my left and Carson to my right, or I was in there for my free period to gossip with Jenna and Ms. Miller—that room was my home for the final year of middle school.

Mr. Dannin was a substitute math teacher for the year, therefore Justin and I made it our mission to mess with him. Not in the popular, flirty, pick-me way that was common in our school—we were too uncool for that. We would rush to finish our work, then sit there and laugh at jokes he couldn't understand, ask him questions he didn't know the answer to, and make fun of the way he swung around chairs to sit in them backwards and help the girls who would swoon over him in class.

Mrs. Clipford was a different story. We didn't need to make fun of her (and god help anyone who did,) because her hot temper was funny enough. I recall her spitting insults at the

problem students, one of whom took it upon himself to notify the principal. What followed was the equivalent of a class action lawsuit to our 15-year-old minds.

If you continue around the bend and up the hall where the 7<sup>th</sup> graders lurk, you'll find the cafeteria. I've heard that they painted over the many murals in there, some of them reading slogans like, "We Rock!" and "Snap, Crackle, Pop!" This is where Aubrey and I would get our daily chicken patties and cartons of Wawa chocolate milk. We would sit with Justin, Kammie, Emma, Sierra, and Kendra, (many of whom were also in Opus-- but nowhere near the status that Aubrey, Justin, and I held.) We laughed loudly and wholeheartedly through every lunch period without caring who was looking or what they were thinking.

It feels like I have little to show for the time that I spent there. It seems like as soon as I set foot out the door, all my tee shirts, my collection of fried earbuds, my pins, my backpack, even the pictures... all disappeared. Although, every once in a while, I come across an artifact that survived the yearly purges and deep cleans of my bedroom.

My 2018 French Club tee shirt sits in the bottom of my drawer, and my 2017 Opus tee shirt hangs in the back of my closet. The CDs I've collected over the many trips to the mall, simply for lack of anything better to do, still live on my shelves. I still have my sketchbooks, old pairs of shoes, the flowers I painted on my bedroom wall, my writer's notebook from Mrs. Miller's class, and piles of other trinkets that haven't occurred to me until I started writing this narrative.

I've been coming here a lot more recently, as I've been slipping away into old habits. The bands I would listen to, the shows I would watch, the way I would dress are all resurfacing in my life. As I went through it, it felt like hell. I think that's something everyone who has made it

through middle school can agree on. But, as I look back, I see it as some of the best years of my life. Which is why now, as I feel that I am going through another period of personal hell, I am much less worried about my ability to make it through. Sometimes it even excites me a little to know that the parallels between then and now indicate a turning point in my life, and I can't wait to see where I end up.