

A Time To Be Serious

Since Oliver Fink is seven, he's allowed to get the newspaper by himself.

He looks down and counts five concrete steps. The steps lead to a path and the path leads to the road. By the road, he sees the newspaper wrapped in a plastic bag. He hesitates and listens for cars, but remembers he's seven and only six-year-olds are afraid of cars.

He looks to his left, but the evergreens block his view. He wonders why the needles hang around in this heat. He wonders if the needles know it's July and if they don't know—are they dying? He wonders if that's one of the questions he should ask his Pappy.

A car zooms by Oliver and the trees.

He jumps back into the grass away from the sound. He waits for the needles to stop moving then creeps back toward the top of the concrete steps. He looks down, sees the newspaper.

Oliver lowers one foot down at a time, wiggling his sneaker until the tip touches the next step. He reaches for the newspaper and holds it in his hands. He wonders who puts it in a plastic bag, why it's in a plastic bag.

He looks down at the black pavement. Globbs of tar bubble in between cracks in the blacktop. Oliver presses his foot until his knee bends, then lifts—his footprint. Etched in black, the design from under his sneaker forms a star. He wonders if real stars are shaped the same and since he's seven, Oliver decides he can come back at night to compare.

His hand shades the sun from his forehead as he looks down the road. A mirage shimmers over the two yellow lines that disappear into dark pools. He feels the warm wind on

his face, the sunlight on his skin. In the distance, the patina-steeple of a stone church float above two used-car dealerships, a Blockbuster video sign.

The blonde hairs on Oliver's neck stand up. He hears the faint purr of a motor behind him. His eyes widen to fleeting pupils. He spins and clambers up the steps, reaching the top just as the car speeds by, followed by two more.

A bead of sweat slides from his hairline to his chin and drops on the front page of the newspaper. A man with big ears and white hair is smiling. Oliver tries to read the title, but the 9 and 11 scramble with the big words. He wipes the sweat away. The paper stays dry.

Plastic, he thinks.

He holds the newspaper like a football and starts running along the flowerbeds that line the house. He imagines defenders diving for his legs and dodges them, making sound effects with every juke. He runs past purple and white butterfly bushes growing from the hair Oliver's grandmother snips off her head and spreads throughout the flower beds. He stops and looks for rabbits, then spins and keeps running.

In the backyard, the shadow from the oak tree stretches to the house and covers Pappy, Oliver's grandfather. Pappy's hands work over the white table in the middle of the yard. A laundry line with clothespins stretches from one of the branches to the house. Past the tree, you there's Pappy's shed and behind that, the alleyway where the neighbors park.

Darrell Fink fiddles in the shade with a dial thermometer. Nylon suspenders sag below his shoulders, allowing his jean shorts to fall well below his waist. Darrell is concentrating, peering through thick-plated glasses that hang from the tip of his nose. The plastic lawn chair creaks as Darrell shifts his weight. He has a belly of real size, protruding over his belt, creating a

small topography. The back of the thermometer rests on the curve of his stomach, along with a screwdriver, a magnifying glass, and a tube of superglue.

Oliver dashes toward Pappy, stomping to slow his speed. The clomping noise frightens Darrell, who fumbles the thermometer. The tools on his belly drop to Oliver's feet.

Oliver holds out the newspaper. Pappy scowls, cursing in Pennsylvania Dutch and pointing at his tools. Oliver falls to the ground and collects the items, returning them to their place on Pappy's stomach.

Oliver smiles. Darrell goes back to concentrating.

Oliver stares at the liver spots on his Pappy's bald head.

"What are those spots on your head for, Pappy?" Oliver asks.

"They're not for anything. What took so long?" asks Darrell. His voice low, as he tries to keep his hand steady, now positioning a small silver battery with tweezers, somewhere inside the thermometer.

Oliver watches Pappy pull the tweezers without the battery. Darrell then points to a long, metal pole on the ground. Oliver stares at Pappy's finger, then retrieves the pole.

Darrell attaches the thermometer to the top of the pole. He turns it over and grabs the screwdriver.

"Pappy, why do you need a battery if the thermometer works from the sun?"

"Is the sun out at nighttime?"

Oliver doesn't say anything even though he knows the answer.

"The battery stores the sun's energy, so when it gets dark out we can still tell the temperature," says Darrell.

"That makes sense," Oliver says, trying to picture what the sun's energy looks like.

“Science always makes sense.”

Darrell twists his hand in the back of the thermometer, while watching the red arrow in the front spin to the top. Oliver follows the whole process. He wonders how Pappy knows how to do all these things.

Oliver sees spit bubbling from the spaces in between his Pappy’s teeth. He leans closer, thinking about how Pappy knows these things and rests his hand on the pole.

The pole flings from his Pappy’s hands and flails in the air.

“Hey now!” Darrell hollers.

Oliver acts fast, grabs the pole and uses all his strength to stop it from crashing. The thermometer bobs, thuds the ground. Oliver steadies the pole and sets the thermometer back into his grandfather’s hands.

“Quit touching!” Darrell snaps, then cranes his neck, crowding so close, Oliver can see Pappy’s gums, his missing tooth back right, “There’s a time for work and a time for…”

Darrell doesn’t finish his sentence and stares because he knows, Oliver knows the ending.

Oliver gets goosebumps and pockets his hands. Then eyes Pappy, whose concentration returns to the red arrow. Oliver looks at the spots on Pappy’s head, at his wrinkles, at the way his lips get too wet after he talks. Darrell shoots a look at Oliver, who shoots his look to the sky.

Oliver is scared of his Pappy. Maybe not scared, but respects him so much that his hands sweat when he’s around him. Pappy always says there’s a time to play and a time to be serious, but you have to learn how to be serious in order to play. He says it so much sometimes he doesn’t even finish his sentence. Either way, Oliver never understands what he means, even though Oliver nods his head whenever Pappy says it.

“How do you know how to do this stuff, Pappy?”

Darrell mumbles something and tightens the arrow back in place.

Pappy's hard of hearing, Oliver thinks.

"Pappy! I said, how do you know how to do this stuff?"

Darrell sets the thermometer on the ground, making sure the pole stretches away from Oliver's legs.

"You have to read. Read about it, then you know how to do it."

Oliver reads, but he doesn't know how to fix a thermometer. He thinks to tell Pappy that the picture books his teacher lets him borrow doesn't mention thermometers. But Oliver decides not to bring it up because he remembers what his Pappy says about "stupid questions".

He tries to think of a smarter question, but his focus skips to the red pickup truck turning up the alley from the road. Rust wraps around the truck from its fender to the bed. A Jack Russell terrier props itself up in the passenger window. Its black nose presses against the closed window.

As the truck makes its way down the alley, the driver throws his hand out of the window. Darrell raises his in return.

"Pappy, is that your friend?"

"That's what *he* says."

Oliver doesn't know what that means, so he nods his head. He watches the truck disappear down the alleyway, behind Pappy's shed. He hears the truck's brakes squeak and the front reappears parking past the shed.

Oliver can see the dog in the window again. Its white paws on the sill, its bark mute behind the closed window.

Oliver thinks of all the radios and old televisions and loose wires in Pappy's shed. He wonders why he can only go in there with his Pappy. He wonders how old he has to be to go inside by himself.

Darrell says, "Go get some sun tea from Grammy."

Oliver looks back at the truck and at the dog and then at Pappy, who is staring at him. Oliver dashes to the house. He sees the ramp Pappy installed over the steps. He picks up speed, runs up the ramp and pushes through the screen door. He smiles and waves his hands, imagining cameras flashing around him as if he had just won a race.

As he enters, the screen door slams behind him. His grandmother jumps and drops a carrot and the peeler on the floor.

"Jiminy Crickets, Oliver!" His grandmother yelps.

"Sorry, Grammy. I forgot."

He hurries over to her, lifts himself on his toes and kisses her cheek. He picks up the carrot and the peeler, placing them on the table.

"Well, you put my heart in my mouth."

Oliver makes a face.

"You just have to remember to remember about that door."

"I know." Oliver turns toward the refrigerator.

"Don't say you know, if you're not going to remember."

"Okay," Oliver opens the refrigerator door. His eyes ascend the shelves and he sees the jar of sun tea at the top.

"What are you watching?"

"All My Children. Are you hungry?"

Oliver puts one foot on the bottom drawer and uses the middle shelf to house himself up. He reaches for the sun tea with one hand.

“What in God’s name!” His grandmother yells, “Let me get it for you!”

Oliver lowers himself and his grandmother grabs the jar off the top shelf. She moves to the cabinet, grabs a glass.

“Three glasses, please.”

“Is one for Pappy’s friend?”

“Something like that.”

Oliver carries a tray out of the kitchen, as his grandmother holds the screen door open. He slinks down the steps making sure to keep the tray even.

“Hello, Johnny,” calls Oliver’s grandmother from the doorway.

“Jane,” the man says, holding up two fingers and smiling.

Oliver shoots a glance at the man, and wonders what color his eyes are. The man’s circular glasses make it impossible to tell. Leather face, slim build, dancing teddy bears on his t-shirt.

The tray begins to dip, the glasses nudge toward the decline. Oliver slows his pace, straightens the tray.

He looks back at the man and sees military patches stitched on his leather jacket. His long black hair in a ponytail, his hands in his back pocket, a cigarette box poking out. Oliver wonders if boys are supposed to have ponytails.

Oliver approaches the men like he’s on a tightrope. Some of the shade has retreated, part of the table exposed to sunlight. Oliver decides to put the tray on the side with the shade.

“Hey there, killer,” the man says with a big smile.

Oliver sees gold flash from inside the man's mouth. Oliver doesn't know what he should say, so he just looks at the man's teeth.

"It's an expression, son," says the man, bending at the knees.

"Oliver," Darrell says, "This is Johnny Ziggler," and leans in the lawn chair until the plastic whines.

Johnny Ziggler extends his right arm. His sleeve slinks and shows a smeared tattoo from his wrist to his elbow. Oliver wonders if it's a turtle. Oliver shakes the man's hand and decides it's a turtle riding an octopus.

"That's the chopper I flew in the war," Johnny said, smiling big again.

Oliver stares and runs his fingers over the ink.

"Yup. Flew until '67."

"You didn't see time," Darell says, folding his hands together on his belly, "You went loony and tinkered away with me. Don't try to inspire the boy."

Oliver knows about tinkering. He imagines the room that leads to the attic on the second floor inside his grandparents' house. The door's always shut. Except that one time. That one-time when Pappy was playing with the door in between his toes. Oliver was low to the carpeted floor, a perfect view of everything from the top of the stairs. He saw the hanging wires and the naked televisions and radios with their antennas awry. He saw the lamp that jutted from somewhere by the door and hung above Pappy's hands working, tinkering with something. Oliver remembers Pappy's tongue pointing out of his mouth, showing his cavities as he tinkers, then—a loud hiss, sparks fly, Pappy spotting him, Pappy hollering, "I'm tinkering!", Pappy slamming the door with his foot, smacking Oliver in the face. Then later that night, when Oliver was connecting a Hot Wheels track from the living room to the cellar, he remembers hearing that same hiss, then

Pappy holler. He remembers watching Pappy run down the stairs, blood down his arm, yelling “Jane!” “Jane!”

Grammy took Pappy to the hospital and he came back with nine and a half fingers.

Tinkering is dangerous work, Oliver decides.

Oliver looks at Pappy, showing Johnny the back of the thermometer.

“Forgot my Goddamn glasses,” Johnny rubs his face, then grabs the glasses hanging from Darrell’s nose.

Oliver looks at Johnny's truck. The dog is no longer in the window. Oliver wonders if Johnny keeps the rust on his truck like when race cars have flames.

“Alright, well come up then,” Darrell says.

Darrell moves his tools from his belly to the table. He pushes down on the arms of the chair, shaking all four legs. Johnny offers a hand, but Darrell snarls and in one last push he’s up on his feet.

“Johnny and I are going upstairs quick,” Darrell says, moving the thermometer out of the shade and into the sun, “Stay here and watch the temperature, the red arrow. We need to see if it works.”

Johnny slaps Darrell on the back and Oliver hears Pappy say something about needing to give children tasks as they walk into the house.

Oliver stares at the thermometer. He stares at the red arrow, but it stays still. Oliver wonders how long until the arrow starts moving. Maybe if he holds it toward the sun it’ll work faster.

He cups the thermometer between his hands. The pole begins to wobble. Oliver decides the thermometer is close enough to the sun. He slouches down in the white chair.

He draws his hands back and notices the way his bones twinge underneath his skin. He wonders how many bones are in there. He begins to count but decides there's no way to check his answer. He focuses on his fingernails. Some have white tips, some freshly bitten with dry blood scabbing near his cuticles. With his front teeth, he starts at his pointer finger. He bites a few times flattening the nail, then pries off the tip.

He spits the nail in the grass. Why does blood taste like nickels? Oliver wonders.

Oliver remembers the thermometer. He straightens up so he can peek over the table.

The thermometer points above 10.

Oliver can't believe it. He scoots the chair closer. He plants his knees in the chair and his elbows on the table. His head balanced between his fists. He focuses on the arrow. It doesn't move. Oliver flexes his eyebrow, then the other, then both of them. The arrow doesn't move.

Oliver looks at the sun. He keeps looking until his eyes hurt and a black circle flashes making him dizzy.

Oliver rises from the chair rubbing his eyes. The sun beams on his bare feet, the cool grass underneath. Oliver sees the house. It changes into his enemy's hideout. Thousands of cameras. Swords sticking from the window. A laser beam scanning the yard for his location.

Oliver dives to the ground and crawls across the grass. He rests his back against the aluminum siding, when he reaches the house.

He breathes through his nose, wipes sweat from his cheek. Oliver wonders why he can feel his heartbeat in his belly when he thought it was in his chest. He creeps around the edge of the house, hiding from the gaze of the camera and crouching below the swords sticking out from the windows. He peers around the corner. He sees the door. He listens for a minute but hears nothing.

On the other side, Oliver knows his enemy's generals are discussing their plans. Maybe they already have his grandmother. He remembers his training, his wife and dog. He quivers through an exhale. He closes his eyes. Surprise them, he thinks. He moves his thumb to his mouth and starts flattening one of the nails. He tastes blood.

Oliver jumps in front of the door. He pretends to pull a pistol from the back of his pants and fires three imaginary shots. The bullets are explosive rockets that swerve around his grandmother and explode all three generals so only their beards are left. Oliver nods to his grandmother and blows at the tentacle of smoke rising from the barrel of his pistol.

Oliver remembers the thermometer.

He sprints back to the white lawn chair and with his elbows back on the table, he leans in—94! Magic!

Oliver focuses on the thermometer, and there it is. It happens. The arrow is nudging closer and closer to the next little black line. 95...96...97...Oliver counts aloud as the arrow ascends. This is how it all works, he thinks. Science happens even when you're not around to see it.

Behind him, Oliver hears the screen door creak then Pappy's voice.

"Just make sure you get that back to me. You're always making me chase you."

"You exaggerate!" Johnny says.

"Pappy, look!" Oliver yells from the white chair, his arms waving, "The arrow! I saw it go all the way up from zero!"

Darrell and Johnny move to the table and Darrell investigates the back of the thermometer.

"You guys missed it," Oliver says.

“You only miss what you don’t know is going to happen,” Pappy says.

Oliver doesn’t know what that means but he’s too excited to see what could happen next to ask about it.

Pappy’s shadow stretches over Oliver, “Now, you didn’t touch nothing right?”

Oliver shakes, no and pockets his hands.

“Good. A half-hour is all it needs.”

Johnny steps forward and claps his hands, “Alright, Finks. I’m headin’ out. Supper’s soon. Nice meetin’ you, Oliver!”

“Nice to meet you.”

Johnny turns and starts to walk back toward the garage, toward the alley. He raises his hand in the air, “Take care.”

Darrell sits in the white lawn chair.

“Now what?” Oliver asks, “Do we put the pole in the ground? Or dig a hole to put the pole in?”

“Just wait a minute. You get too excited,” Pappy says.

Oliver and Darrell hear Johnny scream. It echoes against the house.

Oliver has never heard a scream like that before. He takes off toward the alley.

He runs past the oak tree, then past Pappy’s shed.

The grass turns to asphalt and Oliver’s bare feet tiptoe.

He stops, hearing sobs and looks up.

Strands of hair stick to the tears running down Johnny Ziggler’s face.

Oliver remembers the dog.

Its white paws hang dead in Johnny’s arms.