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Expository Writing

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Just Listen, Please

I've always wanted to try being the narrator of my own story. To reflect on me, say, a year ago, and paint a picture from the perspective of an observer. I'd look back and chuckle softly to myself, thinking about how naive yet charming I was back then. I'd think about how much I had grown. How much I still have yet to do. How much I... you know what, how about I give it a try...

The chairlift stops and Jacob's attention shifts. Snow-capped trees sway gently in the wind, powdery pieces of snow sifting down through their branches. His skis tug firmly on his ankles and the tops of his feet. With a shake and a rumble, the lift starts again.

Ah, Saturday: Jacob's weekly escape to the trees. A busy senior year meant that weekdays were often filled with fears of college admission, tedious school work, and the lethargy that comes from spending hours in front of a computer screen. But, with his own season pass and equipment, he could cap off those crazy weeks with the sweet gift of skiing. Here, high on the snow covered mountains, the wind carries his thoughts out of his head and into the vastness of the atmosphere. Look, here's one now:

*I wasn't even able to get that scholarship application submitted. I just felt so empty. I don't think I could work even if I wanted to.*

The lift passes over the crest of the hill and his skis make contact with the snow, gliding gently across the smooth, white mat. Today he'll try something a little bit different: all the way

on the left side of this mountain lies terrain only accessible by a low-capacity T-bar. That T-bar is closed now, but an open nordic track cuts directly across the mountain and to where that lift would normally drop its riders. Just past that point resided a very special reward: natural, untouched powder on some of Jacob's favorite trails in the northeast.

*But I had already finished all of my homework, cleaned my room, organized the files on my computer. A little lull in productivity after all that work isn't anything to worry about!*

He glides down a little while and spots the entrance to the nordic trail. Now is where the real work begins. He shoves off of one foot, balancing on the other while pushing down and away with his poles. Push, glide, repeat. His breath, fast and tight, fills his ears and the sweat starts to build. He's totally—

*But that application still needs to be submitted. Whether I'm up for it or not, the work needs to be done.*

Immersed. He slowly glides to a halt to catch his breath, basking in the winter wonderland around him. Everything is white save for the sky: snow buries the grass, covers the branches, cleanses the soul. The world stands still. Here is peace, here is calm, here is—

*Maybe I should be working on it now. I mean skiing just doesn't feel as good as it used to, maybe it would be better to put the time towards something productive?*

He picks up the pace again, determined to reach his goal while his legs are still fresh. He—

*But this is supposed to be my break, right? What happens if I can't enjoy it? Will I go back to work just as exhausted as I was before?*

He can feel his destination growing closer—

*But I'm trying to optimize everything, aren't I? I can't do that. No one can.*

His heart starts—

*But I'm still trying.*

But he pushes—

*So do I just have to accept that the burnout is out of my control?*

And—

*Or is there something I can do to move past it?*

Will—

*Is it even worth asking that question?*

You—

*Oh but now's not the time to even be thinking about this, right?*

WILL YOU JUST SHUT UP FOR A SECOND? Please! I'm trying to build a moment here. It's one that's really meaningful to you, I promise. You'll love it. Didn't you listen when I said that "his thoughts flow out of his head and into the vastness of the atmosphere"?

*Where does that desire really come from? If I dig a little bit deeper...*

No, you can't hear me. You won't even stop to look around.

*I want to do my best in school and work, sure, but it's more than that.*

Your mind is a thousand miles away by now.

*Maybe it's because... No that doesn't sound much like me. But maybe, maybe I worry that if I stop – if I stop moving forward...*

You'll never find the strength to get moving again, right? If you stop producing, stop, stop improving, stop trying, that'll be the end? And so you only take breaks so you can work more in the future. Forget a satisfying life, you're looking for the maximum life, right? The perfect life?

*I feel a little ridiculous thinking that's the reason.*

It is ridiculous, isn't it? And yet, here we are: a narrator waxing poetic about something that his subject didn't even stop to enjoy. Carefully choosing and choosing again the perfect words to craft the perfect scene, thinking that maybe if I just pick the right conjugate I might make up for all that time you spent ignoring what was right in front of you. You think and think, hoping to find that one trick you missed the last time you failed to be perfect. You're not naive. You're not charming. You're not even present. No, I know what you are. You're lost in your own head.

I can't say that this brain of ours is any less of a maze now, but I can say this: I've found a way out. In fact, you're about to find it too. Just a little farther. Through those last few trees, you're almost there. That's the trail you were looking for! Pop your skis, take a seat in the snow. Look around. You see the sky through the canopy? It's blue. Just blue. And white clouds drifting through the sky. Just white. They look as soft as the snow beneath your feet. And the trees! Their branches and needles intertwine in so many ways you can't even keep track of them. And a broken trunk crosses the trail, caught halfway down its fall by another tree on the opposite side. The brown and the white and the green contrast wonderfully, don't they? The snow coats it all, and I'm sure that trail below will be a real thrill when you're ready for it.

But oh, look at the mountains! They extend for miles, you can see them can't you? We always loved a good mountain view, with the frosted trees and the naked peaks and the wonderful scale of it all, didn't we? I love this moment. You don't quite know why yet, but the realization will come. And when it does, it will be like you're seeing those greens and blues and whites and browns for the first time. Like you're finally able to understand and appreciate a great work of art.

But I'll give you one little hint, a push to send you on your way: there's something more here, isn't there? Something that you haven't noticed quite yet. Can you hear it? No? You can't hear anything? Not even that little voice in your head?

Wonderful.