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When You're Gone

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“When You’re Gone,” by Caleb VanDyke

Instructor’s Note

Not all of the “literacy moments” that shape our lives happen in classrooms. In fact, for Caleb VanDyke, one word influenced him to think more about others and less about himself. In “When You’re Gone,” Caleb frames a cemetery scene with a scene in which he is riding in a car and reading a poem. The poem triggers the memory that he depicts in the remainder of the narrative. How does Caleb’s Literacy Memoir balance description and analysis so that the narrative is both vivid and reflective? What theme does the memoir convey that might be significant for a reader? What words have influenced you in ways that changed your perspective about yourself or about others?

Writer’s Biography

Caleb VanDyke is a freshman Pre-pharmacy major from Michigan. He enjoys creative writing in his spare time as well as reading anything to do with mythology. When he isn’t reading, he enjoys playing videogames, learning new facts, and practicing a variety of interesting tricks.

When You’re Gone

“It isn’t the fact that you’re dead that counts,
But only how did you die?”

-Edmund Vance Cooke

I slowly finish reading the words from the poem, “How did you die?” The rain outside pounds against the roof of the car. I raise my head and gaze out the window. The world passes by in a black and white blur. As my eyes become unfocused at the stream of water flowing across the window, I think back to a memory, a memory when my brother and I took an ordinary bike ride to a cemetery. That

day, I read a word on a grave. And that word changed my perception on life.

The wind swept through my hair as my younger brother and I pedaled to Assyria Cemetery down the road from our house. He was working on a merit badge for Boy Scouts that required him to go there. He was geocaching, trying to find a hidden box using a Global Positioning System and Latitude and Longitude coordinates. I followed because I was afraid of what might happen to him if I was not there. It was a hot summer day, and the wind gave little relief on my sweaty skin. “I should have stayed at home,” the thought flashed across my mind, leaving as suddenly as it had come. I did not know that the graveyard on this day would change my view of the world and my view of how I should live.

We parked our bikes at the entrance and began following the instructions my brother had earlier printed off. Eventually we arrived at the “final” destination, and spread out looking for the box. I glimpsed the gravestones as I passed them, reading the names. I imagined what each dead person did when they were alive and how their friends remember them. I tried to picture their lives, their desires, their heartaches and their missions. Then I saw one that caught my eye—one tombstone in the cemetery made me stop and think. The grave was a dull gray stone, but the grass around it was lush and vibrant. The grave stood alone on the edge of the cemetery under a small tree that offered little shade. The tombstone was not ornate and it did not have a long story. Only one word was engraved on it, “Mother.”

“Mother,” was the word that some person decided to put on that stone. “Mother,” was the word that someone thought that this person’s life was all about. The grave did not a name or a description of that person’s life. Suddenly, the only thing that mattered was that the person lying beneath the dirt was a mother to someone. As a lump formed in my throat, the world seemed to go into slow motion. I took a deep breath. The grass slowly rippled with the cool breeze. My heart beat within my chest. The birds became silent. The hum of cars diminished. Tears started to

flood and sting my eyes. I read the tombstone again, “Mother” Tears slowly dripped from my eyes. I used the back of my hand to wipe them away, but more replaced them. I envisioned my own mother, and all the things she had done for me.

I thought back to my childhood. I was stricken with scarlet fever, my skin burning to the touch. My forehead slicked with sweat. I lay on the couch while my mother stood over me, placing a cool rag on my head to ease my suffering.

I thought of the time that I took the part of a shepherd in the Church’s Christmas play. I remembered staring into the audience and seeing my mother, exhausted from her night shift. But she was still there, smiling at me—proud of me.

I thought of the many times I would fail when my brother succeeded. When I would need help with Calculus or Chemistry. I remembered my mother sitting beside me encouraging me and helping me understand.

I thought of all that she had done for me, how would she be remembered when she died? What would her children put on her tombstone? What memories would she leave behind?

As I thought this last thought, I could not keep trying to hold back my tears. I blinked and they poured from my eyes. I ducked my head, as they slowly cascaded to the ground, soaking into the dirt where they landed. The breeze whispered high above the trees and dried the tears from my face. The birds resumed their singing. The steady thrum of cars slowly brought me back to reality. As I stood there staring at that one word on the stone, the last of my tears fell to earth. “Mother”

“Caleb! Let’s go back I can’t find it anywhere!” my younger brother yelled to me. I breathed in deeply, detecting a hint of salt in my mouth from my tears. I wiped my face with my shirt to dry my face and make my eyes stop glistening.

“Be right there!” I called back, my face turning toward my younger brother. I gazed back at the tombstone. I thought of the impact that one word had on me. I cried because of a word written on a random grave on a hot summer day in a cemetery down the road.

After another moment lost in my thoughts, I turned and strode to where we had parked our bikes. My younger brother was already on his. “See you at home.” He shook his blond hair out of his eyes and sped off down the road back to home.

After glancing over my shoulder at the gravestone, I whispered “See you,” then slowly followed.

I rode slowly down our road, contemplating what happened to me at that grave. I pondered what my mother had done for me. How she impacted me. She had given so much of herself to the good of others—to the good of me. She endured my tears and my tantrums. The sicknesses I had and my joy, she was my mother.

When I think of that moment, when I rode down the road pondering about the word on the grave that changed who I was. That word reminded me of my mother, how she acts and how I will remember her when she is gone. It changed me, made me who I am today. After that ride, I tried to make her job easier, and become someone that would make a difference. I wanted to follow her example—not by caring for myself as much. But by caring for others. I wanted to make a difference in someone’s life—like the difference my mother made in mine.

The car slowed as it came to a light. The world slowly came into focus. I breathed deeply as if I had been holding my breath for a long time. A few years later and that tombstone still lingers in my memory. I glance at the poem again. That poem reminds me of that day, when I stumbled upon a grave with the word “Mother” written upon it. While pondering over the connection to the poem, I realized the true significance of that day. The tombstone, “Mother.” “Mother” made a difference in someone’s life—her child’s. It wasn’t that she was dead that made her important or remembered—it was how she influenced

someone or changed their life for the better. The word “Mother” did not describe her as she was now, dead—it described what she did while she was alive.

My gaze turned out of the window to the gray clouds. The rain had dripped as it ended and we neared our destination. The heat blew into my face, carrying the scent of lavender from the car’s air freshener. Leaning back in the soft velvet-type seat, I close my eyes in contentment. In that moment, I whisper, “Thanks mom, for everything.”