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## Lincoln Logs

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## Lincoln Logs

By: William Connor Drake

It's a matter of tone. I use so many, I'm not sure which one fits.

I was standing outside between classes chugging a cigarette.

Someone called, "Hey what'd you get on that paper?"

I ignored it. I don't know anybody at school.

"Hey! What'd you get on that paper?"

I turned, and this older guy was smiling at me. We share a class

I say, "Oh what's up man? Yeah I have no idea, did you get it back?"

He walks closer, "83 percent." Shakes his head.

"That's not bad, a B, c'mon man."

"Yeah. but i'm trying to get a 3.7, 3.8."

"Damn, seriously? Good for you man, that's ambitious."

He smiles, puts his hand through hair, looks to the side, "Yeah, some people are telling me too ambitious."

I laugh, "I don't know man, I feel it either way."

"Yeah, but," he nods, "Are you a friend of Bill's?"

Big smile, I stick out my hand and say, "Hell yeah, the name's Connor."

"T. Nice to meet you. Yeah, I've seen you over at Gesu every now and then."

"Oh really? I'm always late to that one, and nobody smokes, so I don't stick around. How long you got?"

“Two and a half, you?”

“A little over two.”

The conversation shifts from there. A little more of, “Yeah, I’m stressed but three years ago I was just trying to not blow my brains out.” Either one of us could have said that. We talk about random stuff: meetings, how he runs marathons while being a smoker, and professors.

“Yeah, man, I’ve got a 3.02. Fucked up a couple semesters.”

“Using?” K asks.

“Yeah but no. I got a 3.8 my first semester sober, then two 2 points on twelve credits. I’m bipolar 1, you know?”

He nods, “Yeah.”

“So I had to drop out last semester to get electroshock therapy.”

“Oh really. How have you been doing?”

“Good man, for sure. Stayed sober and everything. Last seven months... lot of blessings, you know?”

“Yep, yep. I got two felonies on my record, right?” His voice ascends, “Now I’m at JC frickin’ U, stressing about law school!”

“I feel that! Alright man, I got to get to class, see you around.”

That’s one tone, one audience. Easy, casual, nothing I could have said would have turned him off. No way to surprise or shock.

After class, I went to my parents’. My mom’s a lawyer who works from home, and I witness Wills for her.

A nun came over. Sister N. She was good friends with my grandmother and grandfather. Knows my mom’s side well. She also worked at my grade school, Gesu, so she is familiar with me and my siblings.

“Oh Connor! So good to see you, oh my Lord! Look at that hair, how are you doing? What are you up to?”

“I’m good, Sister, I’m good. I’m studying at John Carroll.”

She smiles, “In grad school?”

“Undergrad.”

“But... how old are you?”

“I’m 23.”

“Did you work... or are you double majoring? Oh! In a program to complete your Master’s?”

I glance at my mom who won’t make eye contact. “Well, I did defer for a year to backpack across New Zealand. But I’ve had to drop out three times since then. I have some of the troubles of my Uncle Billy.”

“Ohhhhhhh, my dear. Dear Lord, dear Lord, dear Lord. Well... God will provide.” She looks down, distraught, shaking her head. Then, looks at me.

I give her a fake smile.

My mom jumps in, “Okay, Sister, sign here... now you Connor.”

I scribble a signature. “Alright, I gotta get to class. So good to see you again!”

That’s another tone. Quiet, cautious, not wanting to lie nor tell the truth. No matter how I put it, even delicately, it’s going to get the classic mouth wide and eyebrows up. Most of the time, silence follows.

Around five, I went over to my parents to eat lunch. My dad was home, sipping his 5 o’clock beer. That’s the only beer he has every day. Just one? Bizzare to me. We talk while I cook and eat.

When I'm done, I say, "You wanna go outside?"

"Okay, I'll be right back." He leaves to go get his pouch.

I go out to the garage and light my cigarette. American Spirits take a while, so by the time he comes outside, rolls his skinny cigarette, then repeatedly relights it, we will finish around the same time.

The timing doesn't matter because we typically go for two or three.

I start, "Okay, I've got a story for you. Nothing big. But I thought it was really cool."

Exhaling, he says "Alright."

"So, I was right by the door today at 265..."

"265?"

"Vietnam."

"Oh yeah, how's that going? Teacher still a prick?"

"Yeah, but I like him."

He begins, but I cut him off, "Dad hold up, let me tell you this. So I sat right by the door, my bag was packed, so I go out right away. The hallway was empty... and... I got this wave of relief... and I was like, what the hell? Why am I happy about this? So I started to remember what it used to be like walking down a hallway. Like a year ago, you know? Hands in my pocket, unwashed clothes, head down, blasting Long Time part II. And I would be walking with speed, you know? Not looking up, weaving, dodging, just trying to get down that freaking hallway as fast as possible... cause of... cause I was so paranoid."

I look at my dad and he is looking back. I can't describe how he looked, I'm not a good enough writer. Mesmerized?

No.

Engrossed, in it, rapt. Something like that.

I've got him hooked. I love it when I can do that. And my dad is an easy fish. "I was walking down the hallway. Remembering that, right? It was... It was..." I shake my head.

Dad goes, "Yeah—"

I cut him off again. "Dad. Now, I was walking casually. Stopping for water! Making eye contact. Being like damn that girl is hot. Or damn that dude is jacked. Just easy, easy, easy. It was so freaking cool dad."

"I bet, Connor, I bet." His face changes again. That almost brooding look. He was thinking, processing.

"I mean, talk about change. Like Dad, a year ago... I mean for years how hard some basic shit was, you know?"

"No, I don't know, I don't know, Connor." He looks up at me.

"That's why you got write this down. Not just this. That's why you need to write a book, *I Wish I Wasn't Bipolar*."

We laugh.

Again, another tone. My dad is enraptured by what I have to say. That's not the average. None of these are.

After a couple hours in the library, I hit a meeting. On the way, I picked up P. He relapsed a few months ago. We went to dinner afterwards with five other young people.

The whole time, I was getting a read on P. More importantly, how to transition that into something useful.

Like, I couldn't tell him what was on my mind. I couldn't say, dude, you're not confident, I don't care what you think, the insecurity is bleeding out of you, so lose this attitude. That would do no good. Instead, I played it well.

Standing outside BW3's, I flicked my burnt butt.

Without an ounce of sarcasm, I say, “Alright man. This is so important,” I light, breathe in, exhale, “that I’m burning my last cigarette.”

Start with a compliment.

I look right at him. “When you texted me, I knew you’d give it a go. If anybody else that went out contacted me, I’d assume that they were using. Just feelin’ good, you know? But you, you would do something about it, right?”

I look at him, and it stuck. His heads nods, but it’s his eyes.

I give another kudos, “So you say you’re back to help others and to learn. To help others and to learn. I respect that I really do. That’s a good mindset.”

P starts, “Yeah man, it’s li—”

“Shut up. Shut up for a second. Let me finish. You’ve been talking all night.”

“Yeah, sorry man.”

“So dude. That’s my point. You’re arrogant. And I’m not saying you can’t use that. That’s a tool. But to learn... you have to listen. And to help... I know you hate this... but you need time. This attitude isn’t going to work. Just look at you. Look at you right now. Eyes low, chin raised. Nobody is going to take you seriously. But still, man, just show up. Stick around. Because right now you’re listening, and you being around... that helps me man. But whatever mindset you have right now, it’s not going to play. It’s just not.”

That stuck too. He gave me a hug, and said, “You know me better than anyone in the program.”

Another tone. Direct, confrontational, in his face. Yet, subversive, holding back, wheeling around to get my point across.

Which one do I use? Casual, cautious, confident, or direct? Who is my audience? Someone who's been there, someone uncomfortable, someone enraptured, or someone who needs to hear it but doesn't want to? Add in JCU students, my young professional high school friends, coworkers, and every other demographic and individual.

When I got home at midnight, I went up to the attic to write. It was going to take a couple hours to quiet down because it had been a long day. My mind moves fast. Benzos and pot are what worked best on the anxiety disorder, and I can't take those anymore.

I wrote out my day. Get it on paper, out of my head. After a long day of blessings, I wrote, "This could one day be normal. This could one day be a faraway dream."

And then I remembered walking down that hallway. No impulse to bite my fingers, stomp my foot, or punch the wall. Not even a clenched fist. I choked up at the thought.

Between tears of gratitude or fear, I wrote, "I want to write about this. What it was like. What it's like today. And everything in between."

So I did write. I am.

I'll figure out the tone later.