

Finding Myself: A Lesson in Taking Chances When Things Get Tough

The Watering Hole

I remember the endless summer days of my childhood, spending countless hours lazing about, enjoying the unstructured time away from grammar school. On rainy days I'd happily click away at the family computer, savoring the earthy petrichor of a summer storm. At night I would sit in front of the TV, eating a slice of watermelon roll ice cream while watching reality shows about people falling off obstacles and red balls for money. But much of my time was spent in the blinding sun of our housing community's public pool. One would think attending a large pool, accompanied by numerous toys, would be the highlight of my summer. But as the summer moved onward, I came to dread that hot, concrete land.

Our mother always took my sister and me there, caddy filled to the brim with floaties, toys, sandwiches, and snacks. She promised us that this is the day she would actually play with us, go in the pool and swim around with us, actually pay attention to us. And yet, I knew that the moment we passed through those tall, iron fence gates, we would lose her again to the denizens of the pool. Those old retirees, either amassing their numbers in the shade and staking out their territory, or creating a maze of beach chairs and walkers for us to perilously navigate through. They sat in wait, watching for their next victim to make its way through towards the far corner. They craved the attention, the gossip, the socialization from someone not of their pack, and my mother always proved to be a bountiful source of new info. When we came in reach, they would strike, trapping my mother once again in endless conversation in the baking heat. Often stuck for up to an hour there, it fell to my sister and I to wheel the caddy over ourselves, set everything up, and wait until she was finished so she could inspect our sunscreen work and we could sit in the sun.

One would think that the farthest corner would leave us safe from these attackers, but no, we could see them waddling towards us from a mile away. They made their presence known from yards away, trapping my mother and preventing her escape, forcing my sister and I to dread their arrival and the subsequent loss of our mother for hours. We would sit, bored and loathe to talk with one another, while she chatted away with fake smiles and a too loud, over exaggerated voice. We would venture to the pool, a cool reprieve from the hot ground. But even there, there was no fun to be had. My sister would busy herself with her new trend of laps, or mermaiding, or catching the attention of the lifeguards. The few children our age who were nearby often kept to themselves in the shallow end. This often left me to my own devices, the sole user of our many toys and floaties. If my mother escaped the conversation and had her once-in-a-blue-moon dip in the pool, I'd have her attention for perhaps a minute or two. Soon, however, without fail, another chatterbox would wage a naval assault, floating over, barely buoyant on strained noodles towards their quarry. Once more, I'd be left to fend for myself for hours, waiting desperately for the ice cream truck to come and bring some joy to my day. And God help me if this was one of those days that the truck just decided to roll on by without a care in the world, not knowing the happiness of a little girl depended on it.



The evening was often capped off with delivered pizza, an olive branch from my mother for abandoning us for most of the day. She'd apologize, talk about how much she hated everyone at the pool, and promise it wouldn't happen again. As if this didn't happen the day before as well. We'd be the last ones out, rolling the caddy down towards our house, the sun only starting to set. I'd sit at the

computer, sunburned from lack of inspection, hoping to get at least a little entertainment before bedtime, knowing the cycle would begin anew the next day.

I enjoyed going with my dad more. Nobody liked talking to him, save for me.

The Color of Her Hair

I haven't seen my natural hair color in years. Last I remember it was a dull, dirty blonde. Nothing interesting, not at all pretty. It was once a nice color though, a golden blonde my mother always compared to spun gold like out of a fairytale, she always told me it was my most striking feature. But all things change with age, and what once was a bright blonde became faded and boring, resembling the color of old, dead wheat. I lived with that boring, detestable color throughout grammar school, fruitlessly tried to dye it back to my original blonde throughout high school, and finally graduated to a rainbow of possibilities.

Now, I do all I can to cover it up. I hide it behind vibrant blues and deep reds. I try some peachy pink one season and turn to a flutter of fall hues the next. It camouflages behind a nebula of purples and violets, becoming something grander, something better. Should I see any hint of that old wheat emerging from my hairline, I rush to get it hidden away once more. To many, I am a different person for every hair color. I have acquaintances as red, rivals



as pink, even some debts as blue. Through these colors, I am once again pretty, my hair is once again deserving of the praise I once had and now desperately seek.

But, as I sit, the familiar warm tingling of bleach sizzling my roots, I wonder if it has become too striking. Do people know me for my interests, my personality, for who I am? Or am only “The girl with the blue hair”? My professors fail to recognize me in the halls, and new coworkers are introduced to me as “x color hair girl” instead of my name. Though I love my rainbow of colors, I fear it has taken the place of a personality trait in the eyes of many. Am I hiding my hair or am I hiding behind it?

A Choice of Ramen

Should you go with them? It's late and you're tired and it's Friday. Don't you want to go home and play games, eat dinner, and finally relax? You've been stuck here all week with screaming children and inept directors and instructors whose names you don't remember. None of them even tried to talk to you, they all either know each other or were focused on their work. Now they all want to go to that little ramen place you wanted to try to celebrate a “successful” first week of camp. How they can consider it successful is beyond you, we almost lost a kid the very first day. Not to mention you barely made it through, not knowing the most basic troubleshooting for your student's issues and barely teaching them anything.

You don't want to go, right? Yea, ramen sounds pretty good right now, but so does your bed. You can go another time, another day after work you'll stop in and eat solo and maybe figure out how to use chopsticks correctly. Hm? No, you don't think they'll miss you. Hell, they've

barely spoken to you all week! They probably don't even remember your name! You'll just end up in the corner forgotten by everyone as they all chat away and become friends. Missing your chance at making any meaningful connections, like usual. They wouldn't care if you sneaked out to your train home.

Well, except for that one guy. What was his name? You think Gizmo was his Camp name, can't you remember his real one? Anyway, he's been asking you all week to join everyone for ramen, pretty adamant to be honest, he even took the time to remember your name. So he can remember yours by the second day but you can't remember his by Friday? You teach in the same room! He's been trying all week to talk to you, why have you clammed up every time? Don't you want someone to care about you? No, you'll just go home and mope, and spend this summer like every other, save for having just a bit more cash.

Well, everyone's getting ready to leave for the restaurant, and your train arrives in a few minutes. Time for you to sneak out: c'mon, head down, quick steps, mumbled goodbyes, you know the routine. Oh, look, he's waving at you. He looks so hopeful, so eager for you to go with them, do you really mean that much to him? How have you, a phantom with an award-winning RBF and a personality to rival a rock, become so important to him that he's so insistent on your presence? He really wants you to come along, doesn't he? Oh, some of the others are calling for you as well? Has he actually asked them to wait for you?

I suppose just one night out with them wouldn't hurt. Maybe they'll stop bothering me for the summer and I'll get out of this relatively unscathed.



Graduation

Four years. 124 credits. 47 classes. 2 co-ops. All of this has lead me to today, where I sit, shell-shocked and dismayed beyond belief. Weeks ago, I was confident in my future and what was waiting ahead in May. I was already planning what dress I'd wear and the color of my hair, thinking on which color best represented me throughout the years. I had been planning the celebration dinner for months: a sugar-fiend's dream restaurant back home I've been desperate to try for forever. I talked about the big day all the time, excited I could walk up to the stage with my boyfriend and celebrate our graduation together.

One week ago, I was hopeful, but things began to change. Spring break was extended and classes being moved to online format. I worried for the fate of my beloved ceramics class and how my job would proceed. But I had hope; surely they wouldn't go further? It couldn't be that bad? Three days ago, I was desperate. On campus housing was being emptied, and ceramics class was doomed to a shadow of its former self. Events big and small were being cancelled and even restaurants back home were closing their doors. But ImagineRIT was still on, so surely commencement would be too?



But minutes ago, I read the announcement over and over in my head. Not postponed, no rescheduling in sight, just flatly cancelled. Years and years of hopes, dashed in an instant. No longer would I be able to walk onto the stage, hear my name called and accept my diploma. A whole event to celebrate, to prove that I did it, that I was able to overcome my difficulties and graduate college. The event every student dreams of and aspires to see, and I will likely never get to see mine. In a month, I will make the long journey home, and likely be trapped in further quarantine there. No restaurants to celebrate at, no places to host a party, certainly no family over to commemorate the achievement. In a few month's time, I'll be thrust into a career, forced to leave my shattered dreams behind and move on. There will be no cap and gown, a diploma sent through the mail, and like that, commencement will have passed, not with a bang, but with barely a whisper.

Quarantine

"Home is where the heart is", they say, and people like to keep their hobbies close to their heart. Right? That's what they do with things they enjoy? I wouldn't know. As I sit here, socially distancing myself away like I do any other day, I realize that I don't know much at all. I don't know what my hobbies are, what I like to do, what I'm interested in. I sit in front of a screen every hour I can, spending so much time doing absolutely nothing. I endlessly absorb nonsense information all day with only a small itch in the back of my mind that I should be doing something more.

I occasionally sit at home and look around, and see that there is nothing else that defines *me*. I have no *real* hobbies, the kind that people can brag about and be proud of. I could say video

games, but that only earns an eye roll and scoff, regardless of my choice in major. The distant pile of yarn stares at me from across the room, taunting my lamented inability to concentrate. I could've learned crocheting, become known for something, have some facet to my otherwise rounded personality. I could say reading, but really, I haven't picked up a book since high school--I'm not allowed to call it my interest anymore. Art, worldbuilding, game development, crafting, all things that I once attempted, starry-eyed with hope that it would be the thing that finally sticks. The thing I would finally stick to. And all things that fell by the wayside once I turned my eyes back to those hypnotizing computer screens.



I now sit, stuck indefinitely at home, and the screens which once enraptured me now bore me. They show my work, my classes, the things I once escaped from using these screens; now, I dread them. I turn away, and behind me I see the discarded hooks, the tucked away canvases, the notebooks of game ideas stowed away for another time. I once again see potential hobbies, ways to waste the days away without feeling like they're wasted. For once, I feel sparks of creativity that, in the weeks ahead, I'll hopefully fan into flames of creation. Maybe I'll enjoy staying home these next few months. After all, home is where the heart is, and I'll have plenty of time at home to find my heart again.

My Mother's Sauce

I stare apprehensively at the massive pot before me, empty and menacing. A plethora of ingredients sit to my left, expectantly waiting for me to begin. It should be easy: mix the dry ingredients, sauté the onions, brown the meat, add the tomato paste, simmer and add wine to

taste. *Should* being the magic word here. It *should* become the meaty, rich red sauce I was raised on. The sauce I could smell cooking all day from a floor away, and look forward to sneaking down and stealing away a spoonful of before dinner. The sauce I was endlessly asked to taste-test over the years and could (somewhat) understand the various elements, assisting my mother as she too grew older. The sauce I was bequeathed every time I returned to campus and treasured during the long nights of study, as I knew my mother had spent her own long nights to make sure I had a piece of home. *That* sauce is what I stand here psyching myself up to make.

“Handfuls...to taste...sprinkling...your preference...”. I reread her notes again and again, desperately hoping to make some sense of their lackadaisical nature. After 21 long years, I’d finally earned the right to this recipe, to try making it on my own. But if I’m to recreate her masterpiece of a sauce, I need numbers and measurements, not estimations and approximations! She’d told me I’d need to figure out the specifics as I go, as she herself had never used a set in stone recipe, always making it to taste. But I don’t know how to cook like her. I can’t differentiate parsley from oregano by flavor like she can--*hell*, I can barely make mac and cheese competently! I want my mother’s sauce, the way she made it, not some half-baked facsimile made by one exceptionally inept daughter.

But that’s what she wanted, wasn’t it? She didn’t want me slaving away over endless attempts to try to recreate her sauce precisely down to the pinch of parsley. She wanted me to make it to *my* tastes, exactly how *I* wanted it. There’s nothing for me to recreate: she never used a recipe, and there’s no definitive



version of her sauce. She gave me the ingredients and a few tips to the basic order of things, hoping I would be able to find *my* perfect sauce. A sauce I would write my own measured and orderly recipe for, and develop as my own tastes change and mature. When she gave me her notes, she did so wistfully, as it meant I was growing up, and she could no longer make her sauce for me all the time. She said it with a smile though, because maybe she knew I'd find my own sauce in time.

Wanderlust

Oh my love, god help us should our wanderlust take us. The places we'd go if our tethers were broken, if we had no further ties to keep us in place. We could shake off the doldrums of this snowy town and travel beyond the horizon. See the wonders of the world, take in the beauty that a picture could only hope to capture. Perhaps the mountains of the Alps, where majestic views stand proud around every bend. Or maybe the peaceful gardens of Japan, sitting in the gentle breeze and taking in the sweet Sakura blossoms around us. A day of romantic Italy, then stealing away before the morning bells. Soaring above the Icelandic Fjords and lounging under a Hawaiian sky, no horizon would be too far my love. And should I yearn for hearth and home, I need only look to my side to know I am there.