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Bednar

Journalism

But Where Do I Follow the Yellow Brick Road?

I remember it suffocated me. Standing there with my stomach in my throat, my feet on the damp ground, and my body closer to the depths of hell, the darkness enveloped me in its abyss.

Choked with desperation for adventure and a growing resentment towards adulthood, I sat on a wooden bench in the Information lobby at Natural Bridge Caverns and clutched an info brochure. Next to me, a man weathered by the anxieties in his own life wore a green bandana on his head and a canteen fastened to his belt. He is prepared for his journey. In my mind, he is forty-seven, a father of two, divorced, and taking a 'leave of absence' from his mundane desk job at IBM. Like me, he is hoping to find direction and a sense of purpose somewhere in-between the crevices of the earth and in his own consciousness. Natural Bridge Caverns seems like the place for self-discovery. A new kinship is formed with the man in the green bandana and I wish him luck on his trip. I like to think he wanted the same for me.

I am eighteen years old and I have no idea what I want to do next. This sentence has been haunting my thoughts since school started again in January; each word emphasized. No, the right word would be *stressed*. Every time the thought crosses my mind, I drown in a sea of anxiety. *I am eighteen years old and I have no idea what I want to do next.* I need air! *Eighteen years old.* Why do I keep thinking this? *What's next, Caitlin?* I need change! I look around the room and kick my feet together, secretly hoping that maybe I will be transported to some far away paradise that would instantly feel like home. Sadly, my worn out, mid-cut hiking boots, which have about five years worth of mud, dirt, and nature caked on them, are not ruby slippers. I take my focus off of my feet and hope no one witnessed my embarrassing plea for help.

"Hi there, sweetheart. Can I help you?"

Can you help me?

“Hi, good morning! And yes, um, I actually called a week ago and registered for the Hidden Passage Adventure Tour. I just brought all of my things with me in a pack in case everything else was rented out. I have a helmet, a head lamp—well a flash light duct taped to my helmet—a pair of knee pads, a water bottle, um my hiking boots...I feel like I’m forgetting something. Am I forgetting something? Oh, yeah. Gloves! I have gloves. But I don’t have a harness...or descenders, but I’m assuming y’all provide them? And rope but--” Jesus, Caitlin, learn to shut up.

“Yes, we provide the typical equipment needed for spelunking. Are you caving alone—well, along with a professional caver—or with a group?”

Alone. It’s my graduation present, kind of. I have this theory that once I get to the bottom of the cave, immersed in darkness and surrounded by ancient earth that has been there and will be there longer than any of us ever will, I’ll figure something out. Maybe I’ll be a poet. Maybe I’ll be a surgeon. I have steady hands even after four cups of coffee. My family always says I should be a lawyer because I argue with anything that breathes (and of course I argue against their case). And here is my problem once again. I see too many possibilities for my future and I can’t choose just one without feeling like I’m cheating myself out of life. *I am eighteen years old and I have no idea what I want to do next.*

“Alone. I’ll be caving alone.”

That November during my senior year of high school I realized that I wasn’t going to get accepted into the college of my dreams. Okay, to be fair, I never had any dreams about one specific college or future, so I confidently embraced that as my main problem. However, I continued to ignore it. I considered it a character flaw but come on, who truly knows what the hell they’re actually going to do in life? High school became a nuisance for me once my friends started getting acceptance letters and new furniture for their dorms while I still roamed the halls aimlessly, sporting an albatross as a backpack. I was a straight A student, I took AP classes, I was in National Honor Society (basically a group of people who all knew how to bullshit the form required to become a member, but somehow it was college-application worthy), and many teachers told me I had a “bright future,” but I was never anything extraordinary. I was normal and I liked watching *It’s*

Always Sunny in Philadelphia instead of analyzing six different film adaptations of *Hamlet* for extra credit. Sue me.

My two best friends at my high school were robots. Stacy was a straight A student, took AP classes, was a member of NHS, *and* the captain of our dance team, *and* a regular volunteer for her service project, *and* she received a Gold Award, which is basically an Oscar for Girl Scouts. Sarah was a straight A student, took AP classes, was a member of NHS, *and* she was Secretary on Student Council, *and* was the Audra McDonald of Stony Point High School Theatre, *and* won prom queen. I wasn't jealous of them, but I was envious of their sense of direction. Stacy became a World Famous Kilgore Rangerette, Sarah received an internship with Disney and I can't be sure, but I have a feeling many of their teachers told them they had "bright futures," too, so there was no way my college application looked half as lavish as theirs. *What will be will be*. I thought. That's all I ever thought during that November until when school started again in January. *What will be will be*.

I breathe in the crisp morning air through my nose and it tastes like syrup on my tongue. It is ten thirty-three on a hot July summer morning and even the trees look like they are melting. My helmet (with a flashlight duct taped on top) condenses every ounce of heat trying to escape from my body. My wool socks under my hiking boots make my feet feel like charcoals, and my jacket and pants are no longer clothes but bandages used in the process of mummification. I look down into the chasm that I am willingly about to be lowered into. I see nothing but earth and then it fades to darkness.

"Don't worry, it's 70 degrees Fahrenheit year-round and the humidity rate is a constant 99 percent. Once ya get strapped into your harness and are lowering down by rope through a 160-foot well shaft, ya won't need that jacket down there in the cave. Ya can leave it up here and I'll have one of the staff members take it to the Information lobby for ya."

I am completely and utterly afraid. I have the same feeling I had when I was ten and my six-year-old sister fell off a chair and split open her skull. I am suddenly aware that I am terrified about what could happen next. Keep it light, Caitlin. You can get through this.

“I don’t think I can do this. 99 percent humidity? My hair will frizz and I’m going to be rebirthed from the earth as a Furby. But maybe we should just take a hike instead, it’s a beautiful day.”

Shit. Where did this unexpected fear come from? Why am I chickening out now? God, it’s hot. 160-foot well? Crawling around in a cave for three hours with a stranger? All for what? *I am eighteen years old and I have no idea what I want to do next.* OKAY. I get it.

“Are ya sure ya don’t want to do this? It’s really not that bad once ya get over being under ground. You’d be okay, ya know.”

I remember why I begged my parents to let me do this alone. I remember why I spent half my graduation money preparing and paying for this trip. I remember why I want it to mean so much to me. I’m desperate and I want adventure. A trip to Europe or a cruise probably would’ve been less petrifying, but it would’ve taken months of planning. Those trips can wait but right now, I can’t.

“No, I’m alright now. Let’s go.”

I looked at my calendar. It was one of those quote calendars that had inspirational sayings for every day. Ripping them off was my favorite way to start the morning. January 17th, “If you do not think about the future, you cannot have one.” –John Galsworthy, English novelist. I sat there staring angrily at the black, bold letters as if they were being branded onto my skin. Why was I so mad? Why did I feel a sudden pit of anger towards John Galsworthy and his wise, yet unwanted advice from my inspirational sayings calendar? I analyzed the quote more and more until I laughed and thought, *Hey, Johnny, what if I don’t think about a future because I don’t want there to be one option left? What if I don’t want one, but a lot? What then, smartass?* I cheated and flipped through many months of my calendar in hopes of an answer or at least a funny quote about living in the moment (you would think “Carpe Diem” would be in there somewhere but, nope, nothing). I didn’t find an ‘answer’ or anything that would successfully fulfill my need for vengeance towards Galsworthy so I just scribbled *asshole* on January 17th and left the paper on my desk.

I remember it suffocated me. It was like all at once my future became this daunting vacuum that was sucking me closer towards its impenetrable obscurity and I was clawing my nails into the carpet. I couldn't stop thinking about Galsworthy and his words that are pure genius. It's true. If you don't think about the future, you really can't have one, or any. I began to try and envision myself in future careers or away at college but I would get too invested in each scenario and be back at square one. Then I realized what I wanted was a spur of the moment adventure. I pulled out my laptop, winced at the sight of my cracked screen (life lesson #79: clumsiness and electronics are never compatible), and googled Natural Bridge Caverns. I had gone there with my Girl Scout troop in seventh grade for a hiking trip and we also went 'spelunking' in a cave spot that was barely underground. I was a novice but I loved the thought of a challenge. Climbing around underground in the dark trying to avoid bat shit and white roaches all in the hopes of being 'adventurous'? It sounded like Kansas to me.

Terrified, thrilled, and 230 feet below surface level, I am in the undeveloped heart of the Natural Bridge Caverns. I had repelled down the 160-foot well shaft easily and complete darkness hijacks my vision. I am blind. I blink multiple times and funky electric looking worms appear in my vision. I blink again and they look like lightening bolts. I think I see Jesus. I am terrified. I feel smothered by the unknown and scream for reassurance that I am not dead. I hear a voice and look up. "You're okay. I'll be down in four minutes."

We had been exploring the cavern for about 3 hours. It is almost time to loop around back to our entrance spot. Everything in the cave is dark except for two luminescent beams of light shining from our flashlights. That's how it is the entire escapade: crawling, mud, two lights, and silence. It is terrifying but it is happening and I am okay with not knowing where we will go. A thought creeps up on me and for a second I think it is a white roach in my head. *I am eighteen years old and I have no idea what I want to do next.* I close my eyes and the lights go away. *So what? I'm in a cave where a human tooth, arrowheads, and spearheads dating from 5,000 BC were found!* Those informational packets in the lobby are actually entertaining to read. I don't know

what I'm going to next or where I'll be in ten years or two months but something inside tells me that it's going to be okay if I just take a breather.

We reach the surface and the crisp hot air now travels effortlessly through my lungs as if there is satin lining my respiratory system. I stare down at the dark cavern I was just pulled from and thank it quietly so no one will hear me. Everything is peaceful for a moment and over the horizon there is a city of emeralds. It is one forty-two in the afternoon and I don't think about what I will do next but the trees still look like they are melting.

Authors Afterward

So, while I was writing this piece, I recalled how I felt when I was pulled from the cavern. I was happy to see sunlight and to be out of the cave called Hell, and free from a creepy middle-aged man named Keith, but I was still disappointed that I didn't have the self-discovery my naïve eighteen-year-old self so desperately wanted. I tried to write my personal narrative as frank as I could without sounding like: hey kid, sometimes life doesn't work out the way you want it but that's what you get, so deal with it. But that was kind of the point. I don't think my experience is a conventional significance in my life but it has allowed me to be okay with still feeling lost sometimes and it gave me an understanding that maybe it's supposed to be like that. And I guess we never really have many momentous events in our lives that provide great stories, so we have to figure out ways to tell them like they were. I don't know what I'm actually supposed to write here but I think I'm doing it wrong because I feel like I'm signing a yearbook. These things are so awkward; I don't know how to end this. H.A.G.S.