

Little Pinned Hats

Kristina Vierma walked off the basketball court with an uneasy feeling in the pit of her stomach. She sat on the sidelines with the rest of her dance team, but felt very far away from each and every member. Still, it may not have been far enough. *This is exactly why I didn't try out for cheer in middle school*, she thought to herself, ignoring the story her roommate had told too many times before. It was only halfway through the basketball season, but she was already pondering whether or not to quit the team. Dance at Southwestern University was not what she expected. The ambivalence was new to the college freshman, because if anyone knew dance, it was Kristina.

Although it was only her first year in college, dance had already been the epicenter of Kristina's life for fourteen years. She was signed up for ballet at the tender age of four, a luxury her mother dreamt of having in her youth. After growing up in a large, single parent household (and subsequently being left by her own husband) Kristina's mother longed for her daughter to see life through the pirouette; to understand the three-hundred and sixty degrees of opportunities, available through hard work and opportunity. While her peers were coddled and labeled "Daddy's little girl", Kristina practiced moving from fourth position to point, and dug her nose into Harry Potter books whenever she had the chance. She learned how to be proactive and disciplined through dance, all the while learning patience from J. K. Rowling—the wait for each new Harry Potter installment is a lot for a young girl, after all.

Then, shortly after turning eleven, Kristina moved to Liberty, Texas. The town had no ballet studio, and no dance team at the local school. As luck would have it, the only option available was a military style drill team. This program paid some attention

to one's poise and high kicks, but demanded that they come with a "yes ma'am" and a smile. A girl's behavior outside the team was monitored just as scrupulously. Even after becoming captain a certain fear loomed over Kristina's head like a flock of birds. Squawking every once in a while, reminding her how disobedience was dealt with. One member of the drill team was kicked off after she was caught drinking. When a picture of the transgressor getting wasted in a field was sent to both the coaches and captain Kristina, she was never seen or heard from again. The team would speculate about who took the picture, which one of them was present, but no one dared admit it was them. Snitches get stitches after all, and a gash would not make a welcome accessory to little pinned hats.

The threat of being caught red handed by a dance instructor was not the only reason Kristina tried to keep on the straight and narrow. Liberty is a town built on conservative values, a place that encourages young ladies to act like the classic Texas debutante. She also was in a race to keep up with the strong female role models in her life. Her older sisters both graduated as valedictorians, and when her father did come around, he never forgot to point out the other accomplishments her siblings made. The eldest is a doctor living in the U.K., while the other is an engineer in Spain. Kristina responded with a plan to major in psychology, a phrase she hoped would eventually sound as good to her as it did to the rest of the family.

Ironically, Liberty made Kristina to feel shackled. While she subscribed to the right-wing opinions and enjoyed the dance team, there was a dissonance that could not be shook or shimmied away. This feeling told her that all her grand dreams waited outside the town, and the only logical plan of action was to leave. Southwestern

University seemed far enough away, and after a bittersweet goodbye to her friends on the drill team, she was ready to see what else was out there. She dropped her current Harry Potter book in her backpack, and together with all her other essentials drove to a slightly larger community known as Georgetown.

When the prospective Gryffindor met her roommate, it felt like a match made in heaven. They were perusing the same major, they were interested in participating in the same organizations, both joined the dance team, and they established their circle of friends together. The girls were attached at the hip, but Kristina quickly started to feel as if they were not having the same experiences. The camaraderie formed from surface similarities almost immediately dissipated as reality reared its ugly head, free of any makeup or glitter.

Dance practices were neither lengthy or numerous, and between the cheer and dance team, there was only one “coach” (Kristina consistently provided air quotes around this title, as if she saw them around the man himself). The “coach” would consistently spend most or all his time with the cheer team—partially because he knew nothing about dance—while the dancers were relegated to the other side of the gym and forced to direct themselves. This struck Kristina as odd, and she would day dream of high kicks and the fear of demerits while the rest of the team discussed what to practice that day. If direction was provided, the steps would look suspiciously similar to the cheer drills. Then, when game day rolled around for the SU basketball team, the dancers would present whatever juvenile combination of moves were agreed upon by the halftime performance. For Kristina, it was, in a word, sad. She had no wand to wave or

spell to cast to turn this troupe into something other than a waste of time. By the middle of the season, she quit.

No longer was it good enough to pursue only the things she knew. In search for something to call her own, Kristina turned her attention to the Greek system. A few sororities had made efforts to recruit her since the beginning of the fall semester, but it would soon be time to pick a side.

“You look like a Tri Delt,” one girl said at a mixer, “but you act like an A.D.Pi.” This was rather useless information, but typical of the comments she had received up to this point. It was not until winter break was far behind her that the right niche began to emerge. One very stereotypical and seemingly impersonal question during recruitment, “What organizations are you interested in?” put Kristina back into a sea of dancers and cheerleaders. Except this time, there was another girl in this group who had quit dance. In fact, there was a second girl who quite cheer around the same time that Kristina hung up her dance hat. It seemed there was finally a place for her. A realm not of quitters, but revolutionaries. Strong, independent women who don’t need no “coach”. As Kristina put it, “You can still do the things you love even if you’re not on a team, but sometimes a team will make you hate the thing that you love.”

Even before arriving at Southwestern University, Kristina expected to join a team. However, she thought of a team that would break in shoes with choreography and check each other’s eyeliner before a performance. She expected to represent her team with the letters D A N C E, but ended up identifying with the letters A Δ π much more. After joining, something changed within Kristina. Not all at once, but dramatically.

“Conservative ideals are still very much a part of me,” Kristina explains, “[Ron] is my favorite character because J. K. Rowling makes him very racist and classist, but he is one of the good guys. And you only realize that he is sexist or racists or whatever very subtly, because he grew up in that environment and he doesn’t see that as abnormal. Then, in the end he has this whole revelation where he realizes [he is wrong]. I like the idea, you having these beliefs engrained in you doesn’t mean you’re a bad person, but you must realize that they’re a part of you.”

Over the next three years, Kristina dropped psychology as a major, realizing that she was much more suited for communication studies. She set goals to one day work for Buzzfeed. She has gravitated towards left wing ideology and reports feeling more accepting of and connected to others. She is now dedicated to ADPi the same way she was to dance, and has found a group of friends that not only support her, but understand her. She definitely has not forgotten where she comes from, but she has a whole new definition of the word “Liberty”.

In the beginning of her college career, Kristina felt like she was placed somewhere with a sorting hat. Hundreds of facts about her and other students were collected, then spit through an apparatus that somehow told her where to go. While this may work within a world of magic and wizardry, this is not reality. The road through college will diverge into many different paths, some so traveled they have pot holes, while others require a machete to cut through the foliage. The fact is, Kristina tried on a lot of hats. Beginning with the little pinned hat that was so obviously part of an act, and ending with cap so suited to her, it can only be seen as a gleam in her eye.

Author's Note

What a piece to write. I wanted to have time with Kristina in her room, but she was not too keen on the idea because a friend visiting from out of town had made a mess of the place. I remember thinking that this might be a blessing. "What a gem," I thought, "it's going to be so fun to try and show that organized (or maybe even anal retentive) characteristic in the story!" But, as you can see, it did not turn out that way. In fact, nothing about this article turned out the way I expected.

Every moment of the interview I got a little closer to a part of Kristina, closer to something that was both worth writing about and lush with elements of her character. However, I think I might have focused too much on allowing her to direct the conversation and tell her own truth. It may have been advantageous for me to include more directed questions.

Nevertheless, I think I captured my version of Kristina's story well here. To me she has this subtle candor, where she is honest and forthcoming if prompted, but also concise. It might sound like I made her out to be a hero, but the story arc I used as the bones of the narrative naturally ends with redemption (that's one reason I chose it). I hoped to bring out her personality by retelling her story with an in your face metaphor that contrasted the occasional, brief peaks into her mind. This is how I see her interacting with the world, and this is also how I wanted her to interact with the page.

I have acted with honesty and integrity in producing this work and am unaware of anyone who has not.