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Fight or Flight

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Fight or Flight

By

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Runner-up. Thompson Rivers University Creative Non-Fiction
Competition

It is widely considered an integral part of the human condition to see a mountain and want to climb it. The natural inclination to claw one's way through competition and hardship, at any cost, is unequivocal - perhaps I am lacking that fundamental instinct. Every time I am faced with a situation that feels dire, I shed it like a confining exoskeleton and start again, vulnerable and free. This simple fact has always made me feel somewhat estranged from others, and has caused considerable internal conflict, but I like to run.

When I was very young, I experienced a recurring dream about running. The specifics changed frequently, but the core action and emotion were unwavering; I was being chased by something, but it could never succeed in catching me. Contrary to what you would probably think, I enjoyed the dreams, since they felt like games engineered in my favour. As a lucid dreamer, I always had a trick up my sleeve. However far my pursuer pushed, I could always stretch it a little further. Almost as a nightmare to my dream's creation, I consistently remained moments and millimeters out of reach. If I sensed danger, I could develop a sudden ability to fly, or jump astoundingly far. I propelled myself to safety through sheer will-power. Sometimes I would just become invisible. If all else failed, there was a sort of 'emergency override,' where, sensing defeat, I would wake up, stripping my dream's antagonist of any possible victory.

The more I reflect on this dream, the less it feels like an oddity of my subconscious mind. It no longer presents as an erratic curiosity, but more a rudimentary interpretation of my knee-jerk reaction to adversity. It feels like a foundation of my being.

This unburdening, or running, usually manifests in the form of moving. At this point in my life, the process feels like a well-developed formula. I grow, learn, and flourish in a place surrounded by people whom I will also eventually shed. It all starts amiably, but at some point the general climate changes. I start to feel adversity in the form of social pressure, relationships

going sour, or a general dampening of spirit. One, or a combination of these factors slowly reach a boiling point in my psyche, and I pack my life into my car, and move. It appears that I rely on the change of physical surroundings to evolve. Instead of going through slow growing pains, I need to ‘rip off the Band-Aid’ in an effort to reinvent myself, and avoid stagnation.

My first, arguably most life-changing, big move was in March, 2007. My parents had been divorced for years, but the dust had not fully settled. I was thirteen, and growing defiant in my shy, direct-conflict avoiding way. It was a simple teenage argument; there was a boy I liked, and my Mom would not let me talk to him. He lived far away, so my means of communication were limited. I still tried. One day my Mom caught me and gave me an ultimatum: concede to her will, or go live with my father. This was a common and quite frankly overused trick. She considered living with my Dad comparable to exile in Siberia, and an option neither my brother nor I would willingly take.

I had felt a slow burning fire building in me for years. As a quiet, submissive ‘good girl,’ I often fantasized about defying authority and taking a stand for myself. To this day I still struggle with verbal attacks, and feel haunted by every missed opportunity to express myself with cunning, if not cutting remarks. This build-up of something between bitterness and rage came to fruition in the form of a single act. I chose to move. The moment I saw my mom become human was both victorious and terrifying.

The subsequent months were bittersweet; it took a while for reality to settle in for me, as well as for my family. My mom, seeing her fatal error, grew desperate to change my mind without changing her terms. My dad was elated. Up until this point, he had been backed into a legal corner, where, thanks to a questionable psychiatrist’s judgement, he was not allowed to see his kids. For him this turn of events was nothing but gratifying. I personally felt like I had signed

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up for skydiving, and was on the plane, geared up, looking down. I had a lump in my throat and twitchy nerves for three months. My head was still content with the decision, but my heart was scared, digging heels into the dirt as I dragged myself into the unknown. My little brother grew distant. That was the worst part, not the onslaught of emotions from my mom, not even the raw, visceral fear. The deepest connection I'd ever had was fading, a formidable wall growing in its place. I could feel my brother preparing for the solitary burden he would have to bear when I was gone.

The day I left, minutes before I heard the tires of my Dad's car crunch through the fresh spring snow on my front street, my Mom stood at the top of the stairs and asked me not to leave. Ironically, it hurts now to say it, but at the time I did not feel much when I responded with, "I'm leaving." It was far too late. Logically, I knew this was no longer a simple thing we could bounce back from. Emotionally, I was unsure, but followed through anyway. Then my brother took me downstairs, away from my dejected mom. He begged me not to leave him. His nine-year-old face pleading with mine is one of my most vivid memories, and most readily reopened wounds. I do not think I had a chance to respond properly before I was called to the door for a cool exchange between my estranged parents. I probably told him that it would be okay, that I would come back for him, and fight for him. One day he would be able to move as well, and join me in the greener grass of my step family's home. Those things did not happen, but my brother is okay.

This last second decision to escape flung me into a whole new world, with conventions that were strikingly polar to the ones in my old life. I went from being very sheltered, to living quite vulnerably amongst my combative step-siblings. I became an outcast in a small, cliquey middle school. Also, because of my good grades, I did not have many rules at home. It was like being pulled from a warm, restricting, bath, and being thrown into a cold river; I was no longer

impeded by an overbearing parent, but I was learning to swim under harsh conditions.

I sometimes reflect on this obvious turning point in my past. It was a true ‘fork in the road’ if I had ever seen one. I tend to imagine the kind of person I would be, had I not left. I often fear her potential accomplishments, but also pity her lack of emotional intelligence and independence. A considerable amount of who I am today can be clearly attributed to my ‘fight or flight’ moment that day in my mom’s house. I feel stronger because of it. I used to worry that I had made the wrong choice, but even if that could be, it was completely my own.

My late teens and early twenties were filled with lesser versions of this same scenario. I enjoyed shifting from place to place, and surrounding myself with new faces, always collecting lessons and memories. I often felt like trying on different versions of myself for a while, to see how I would like them, and whether or not they felt authentic. From these experiences, I became certain that personality is not as concrete as I was once led to believe. People are too vast to be contained, but we also dislike unpredictability in others. I found that it was far easier to slip into different molds, around different people, than to break one.

About four years ago, I effortlessly filled a mold of myself, and then got stuck there for too long. I had been growing tired from all the constant change and inconsistency around me, often self-created, and found a boy who offered a sort of shelter. He was extremely kind, and a poster child for a good, wholesome partner, but it became stagnant. I had made a bed to rest in, and then started to feel increasingly restless in it. My bones ached, and my muscles craved movement, but his sweetness was so mollifying and suppressive that I could not leave. I was haunted by the possibility that I had found something truly good and worth keeping, and disregarded my visceral feeling that I had not.

I started to act out, almost subconsciously. I did things that, in hindsight, were clearly

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attempts to ruin the relationship, so I could break away from it. Eventually it worked. Just as with the damage I unintentionally inflicted on my relationship with my mom, I created a situation so insurmountable that I knew I was left with a solitary choice. It was not a gentle breakup.

That evening I found myself, emotionally battered and exceptionally numb, at the door of my best friend's house, life in tow. I stayed there for a while, but eventually animosity came knocking on that door too, and I had to leave.

My Dad has always been the one I turn to during these hyper emotional, pivotal moments. He seems to understand my need to run without condemning it. Instead of attempting to ground me in reality, he gently tries to guide the direction of my flight. This time it was west. At the prospect of driving over the mountains, toward my birthplace and the ocean, I immediately felt a fervor that reinvigorated my tired disposition.

I left everything, mostly in ruins, and started making my way to the coast. I said goodbye to more places than people, my last stop being the side of a mountain in Banff. It has always been one of my favourite places. There is a small, steep clearing where you can see the town below, and the stark beauty of Mount Rundle overlooking it. It made me feel so fragile, and so grateful to be alive. On that brisk March morning, I sat there thinking, dreaming, and making peace with my internal wounds until I could no longer feel my pain or my extremities. Back on the road, I occasionally listened to music, but mostly talked to myself, somewhat as a testimony to my loneliness. My reasoning was that I had spent far too long waiting for someone to say the right thing, when I was the only one who knew what consoling words I needed.

I told myself to do better, to feel better, no matter what measures were necessary for that

to happen. I was painfully aware of every positive and negative aspect of myself, but helpless to change any of it. There can be such a fine line between having excessive leniency with yourself, and, via force, becoming something that is entirely not you. It took a long time to heal. I do not think there was any art to it, aside from allowing time to run its course.

It has been almost a couple years since that low point in my life, and I feel that running west was one of the easiest and best choices I have made. I am happy. I enjoy my life, my work, and my time alone is no longer spent brooding. The lingering, dull sadness I had become too well acquainted with is gone. I have a partner who has, and continues to give me a sort of warm love and happiness I did not know was attainable. He brings out the best in me, along with a constant gush of gratitude. I laugh at my former self for being concerned.

People always suggest that running is not an option, and that it is necessary to confront your demons. In the real world I cannot remain elusive, or develop uncanny abilities. I have battle scars from monsters of my past. The wounds, and the painful retreats, always left me feeling weak, and incapable of achievement. I was equally paralyzed between the prospect of never accomplishing anything, and of persevering, only to be dissatisfied with the accomplishment. This sparked a fear in me that I was constantly running in circles. With each 'fresh start' I could feel the repetition of my new boots falling into old treads. This being said, when I look forward, I do not see my past, exactly. Bits and pieces are familiar, but the adventure is novel. All of those collected memories and experiences whisper encouragement to me like past lives. My running has left me with a long, abstract path. It is imperfect, and lacks clarity, but it has never been monotonous, and has always been rewarding.

An inescapable part of the human experience involves learning when to pick your battles – when to persist on a path, despite adversity, and when to choose a new one. The latter is

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commonly thought of as cowardly, but I believe the two are often one and the same. Fight and flight both require courage, and both can be based in fear. Uprooting a life is no facile task, and sometimes staying is just a camouflaged form of indecision. After experiencing the outcome of many moves, I feel validated in asserting that running from difficult situations can be more rewarding than enduring them. Though a steadfast fighter might pity my lithesome response, I see that they are often running as well, by ignoring the circumstances that impede their happiness. The reason I enjoy lucid dreaming, and most likely why my running dream has resonated with me so strongly, is because I cherish control. The human condition is to desire control, and achieving it calls for the discovery of how you choose to run.