

## Face the Music

It was the end of the year already, and as 2017 came tumbling to a tumultuous close, I found myself on a flight between West Palm Beach and Providence, Rhode Island, suspended in the crisp air of a midwinter's night, heavy with the sense that I was hurtling into a new and unknown chapter of being. The year had been anything but quiet. I had quietly recovered from something between full on unrequited love and puppy-like infatuation, regained a level of homeostasis lost after a year of post-college anorexia, quit my first real professional job, taken a vacation, and started another job that was largely turning out to resemble a massive error in judgment accredited partly to desperation, somewhat to educated guessing, and whatever leftover percentage to what I can only describe as something very strange and oddly similar to a weird, asexual, careerist crush. Amidst all this, there was the Trump presidency, a series of vicious natural disasters, the threat of nuclear war, and a strange late summer weekend involving a total solar eclipse and a deeply cynical reformed cocaine addict named Garrett but remembered as Thrasher.

As my friend Jessica describes it, I was stuck somewhere in a "liminal space," suspended between the clarity of my academic past, cookie cuttered into semesters and summer jobs, and an elusive and perhaps never to be realized adult stability that involved boring but reliable things like a husband, a child or two, a place to live, and a job with health insurance that would last longer than one quarter of a decade. In the interim, I was existing in a strange place where my address and state residency were dependent on my employer, where I tried to keep my belongings limited to what I could pack in my car, and where I developed emotions and impulses that confused me, as I could not identify which were genuine and which were the product of feeling like a ship bobbing somewhere in the ocean, marooned between tides without captain or compass and wondering when, if, and ever I would find a reasonable place to drop anchor.

That holiday season, I was living in a small house in a South Florida suburb with two of my coworkers, Mark and Aaron, and their friend, Anna, who shared my bathroom and quickly became my friend as well. Collectively, we have three tan and white spotted dogs of mixed breeding. Milo, Anna's dog, was recovering from hip surgery, and Ralph, Aaron's dog, a victim of extreme anxiety, was liable to chew down the doors if left at home without his master. I was not entirely comfortable with Mark and Aaron yet - Aaron has a tenseness to him, he's high strung, and I couldn't quite relax around him. Later, he became one of my closest friends, and we would meet for Indian food in a strip mall off Southern Boulevard, gossiping and swapping trade secrets over fried onions and tikka masala. But I didn't know that then.

My routine in the house, and at the job, is consistent and relatively simple. To paint the picture - I always woke up congested, and wandered, bleary eyed, into the kitchen to turn on the coffee pot. Usually I could hear Aaron and Mark's phone alarm beeping or sometimes, if they were up earlier than me, their voices muttering to the dogs. I prepare myself for the day in the same fashion: hot drink, banana and peanut butter, riding clothes, tall socks, jackets. It was bitterly cold for Florida that fall and early winter, dipping to the thirties at night, so I always wore layers, a hat, my gloves. The days pass in vivid snippets: riding the tractor in the dark, its headlight beaming through the night, the drag cutting swathes of fresh footing through the area, pockmarked with yesterday's hoofprints like the face of the moon. The red russet color of my horse's mane as the sun filters through it on our mid morning ride, the hard shells of the turtles clustered on the drainage pipes in the canals surrounding the luxurious Palm Beach Point community, spooking the horses and the riders as we pass them by on trails that lace between private lots. There is the shrill, infectious laugh of one of the grooms piercing out from the barn aisle as she works,

Aaron's authoritative, strong voice booming out from near the white board, the thick thud of shavings bags tumbling to the ground from their precarious tower.

Ultimately, these noises and images would fade into mere memories, and shortly after the new year I would move on from that job and that house to a new home and place of occupation, albeit only a short drive away. I would find new paths to run on near my new apartment, store my things in a different cupboard, and inhabit different spaces of personal and professional life, a change that largely seemed to benefit me as a person.

All things change with time. My new job afforded me many opportunities during the year and few months I spent there, opportunities to develop my trade, live in a beautiful part of New York's Hudson River Valley, and explore a variety of my interests outside of my professional career. It also allowed me to learn a significant number of difficult lessons about human relationships, those between friends, colleagues, and family members, most of which I learned the hard way, as those things often go.

I was working for a family business, and all the private elements of the family inevitably entered the professional sphere. Small disputes and miscommunications between the first and second generations trickled down into the staff, causing what felt like a state of near constant mayhem, mitigated only by well-practiced (but often futile) attempts at mind reading and a round robin of communication between our various moving parts.

"Have you told Ron? What about Marjorie?"

"Where's Charlotte? Is Johnny answering his phone?" And then Marjorie's voice would ring out from the office, "RRRROOONNNN!!!!" Met by a gruff but loving reply, "Marj, Marj, I'm here, I'm in the laundry room!" And so on.

The coordination of each day was an extraordinary feat. Charlotte, Ron and Marjorie's daughter, would make a general plan for the day via our whiteboard, a plan which sometimes made sense and sometimes seemed completely unrealistic. Johnny, her husband, would arrive for the morning chores and then usually disappear to work on the house, which was under construction, unless he decided to change Charlotte's plan for the day at the last minute, which would happen on occasion and result in further confusion. He also moved through the barn like a silent tornado, interrupting the careful balance and flow of the stable with a giant's strength, leaving a wake of equipment and supplies in odd areas behind him. Communication nor organization were his forte.

However, there were bright spots in those early months of 2018, even after Charlotte broke her collarbone in a fall early in the competition circuit. I began to expand my interests beyond the world of horses and riding and explored more extracurricular and social activities. In addition to riding several horses each day, I started running seriously and began attending yoga classes several times a week with Jessica. I became less inhibited about men and dating, and hooked up with a short guy in a motel a few times, only to develop a massive crush on a fellow from my yoga studio who was also originally from California. By the end of March, I was jumping a few of the stables' horses, running five days a week, and even had a chance to compete with one of the horses again, which was pretty amazing. And then I went to New York.

Things changed for me in New York. It wasn't an easy summer. It was hot and humid and I trained for a marathon to help me deal with the stress of work. My job description changed by necessity due to staffing, and I started to feel trapped in the same old cycles of managing, organizing, and wishing I was doing something else. However, I did fall in love with the area. I was close enough to friends and family that it was not irregular for me to drive one to two hours on a Sunday night to see someone closer

to New York City for dinner or to stay the night, and I spent hours running on roads flushed with foliage that looped past beautiful farms, trees, creeks, and houses. The farm was essentially right in the Catskills, so I went for frequent hikes near my home, and spent Monday afternoons visiting bookshops in the area. The giant Hudson river, with its old iron bridges and stupendous, golden sunsets, captured my heart. I also had a wonderful, cozy apartment, and I bought a bouquet of yellow flowers once a week from the local supermarket to grace my table.

Despite all this, by the end of the summer my spirits were flagging and I was falling into a thick dissatisfaction with my state of affairs - a malaise occasionally lifted by running or a particularly good day with the horses. The end of summer and the beginning of autumn always seemed to bring about a bit of an existential crisis, and it was during this time that I happened to meet Justin, who was a lovely spot of brightness in an otherwise humid, stressful, and tired time of my life. Meeting someone you think you have a crush on (fast forward: definitely have a crush on) can feel weird, especially when you're also on the verge of a nervous breakdown. I felt like one side of my life was about to hurtle off a cliff, while the other side remained remarkably normal, even if it was normalcy contrived to convince myself and Justin that I was, indeed, a functional human. Oddly, love and romance have a funny way of hauling me back from the edge; it had happened to me once before, in college, when I was in a particularly rough spot of my eating disorder. Bread was one of the hardest things for me to eat, and for months I evaded it, until my would-be college boyfriend served me peach bread pudding on our second date. But I digress.

That fall of 2018 brought some relief and genuine happiness. Cooling temperatures made working in the metal barn more bearable, and the flies became less bothersome to the horses when they were out in the paddocks. My birthday came in the beginning of September, and I spent a wonderful day with a knot of my closest horse show friends, and spent the rest of my Mondays - my day off - that month visiting friends in New York City and venturing up to Vermont to visit Justin. In early October, I ran my first marathon, took a horse I'd been working with for a few months to a small competition to prepare her for the competitive indoors circuit, and ventured to Colorado for a friend's wedding. I remember that trip fondly; the huge Western skies, my tin can rental car, the golden light for her outdoor ceremony. I had a hellish trip home, involving canceled and missed flights and a last ditch late night drive in an expensive and unplanned rental car from Newark to Saugerties, New York, but it was worth it. Those were the days when two days off felt like a lengthy vacation.

This was also a time when, like the changing of the seasons, I began to notice changes in myself and my attitude and approach to life. I felt a strong pull to reprioritize my values and place a greater emphasis on expanding my interests, developing my relationships, and understanding what was unfolding in the larger world. As we packed up the barn to head back to Florida for the winter, I realized that my heart was no longer in it, and I lacked my former motivation. The next spring, I left my job with Charlotte and her family, moved to Vermont, and began navigating the world beyond the equestrian industry. Looking back on the tail end of 2018, I would realize that those moments of doubt and my loss of motivation were the beginning of an emotionally challenging but ultimately affirming journey towards a different life - a life outside of the liminal space I'd found myself in. Giving up my career with horses to pursue a stronger relationship with Justin and a greater understanding of the larger issues facing the world, as well as my potential to contribute, was a frightening but fulfilling choice. I still sometimes miss the snapshots of my past - that cold kitchen floor in the house I shared with Anna, Mark, and Aaron, the satisfaction of grooming a horse till they shine, the way the palms on the palm trees sounded when they rubbed together in the humid Florida wind. I miss the feeling of jumping a horse, the ice cream shop in

the town of Saugerties, and the bookshops I frequented on Monday afternoons. But I don't regret the choices I made, and I don't feel as suspended in the air as I used to, or trapped in an in-between place between youth and adulthood. I still have beautiful snapshots in my daily life, of the Green Mountains, the mirror-like quality of Vermont's lakes and ponds, the blinding whiteness of a fresh snowfall, and Justin's face when he smiles. Things somehow feel a little less tumultuous as 2020 slogs toward its close, despite the fact that it has actually been the most tumultuous year of my lifetime. However, with my feet on more solid (albeit figurative) ground, I feel better equipped to, as they say, face the music - the rhythms and harmonies of life in today's ever changing world.