

Little Things

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On a Wednesday evening in October of last year, I was as happy as I'd ever been.

Why, you ask?

I'd been a bundle of nervous energy all afternoon, obsessing over a grade I'd received that seemed too high to be accurate, waiting for a second email notification that would show me the real score. In the meantime, I decided to allot that night's spare time to the annual Haunted Legends campus tour. Lured in by the promise of free items and an hour or two of good storytelling, I arrived early to the starting station and collected the tickets that guaranteed me a bag of donuts and a long-sleeved shirt along with my spot in one of the tour groups.

I had time to kill, now, before the walk began, and I soon noticed a second booth near the one I'd already visited. Upon closer examination it was a kind of advertisement for some new movie, a strange mixture of World War II fiction and horror I hadn't heard anything about before. Answer a bit of trivia, the attendant explained, and you could win a prize.

"What was the code name of the government program tasked with developing and testing the atomic bomb?"

"The Manhattan Project," I answered, which earned me my pick of the logoed knickknacks spread out on the table. I waffled for a moment between selecting the last remaining T-shirt (many sizes too large, just as I would have asked for) and an ink pen shaped like a syringe before it occurred to me that the people who answered incorrectly had been offered pens anyway. Somewhat timidly, I asked the attendant, "Could I have a pen and the shirt?"

"Of course," she told me, to my delight.

Prizes in hand, I stepped out of the way of the other students in line at the booth and looked thoughtfully at the pen. I had picked up a similar item from Student Health several weeks earlier, but wondered afterward, over-thinker that I am, if I'd chosen the wrong color. And now, like a strange gesture of reassurance, a pen of the very same red I'd regretted not selecting had come into my possession. Feeling an unusual and disproportionate cheerfulness building up in my mind, I put the shirt and the pen in my backpack and joined the group to begin the tour.

I was mostly silent as we followed the guide to each location, but inside I hummed with a vitality I hadn't experienced in months. As I happily devoured the batch of donuts I'd been given, I found one, just one, that was different, made of regular dough instead of the pumpkin-flavored batter the rest were composed of, waiting at the bottom of the bag like a little gift. It was a mistake, but it was

even tastier than the rest, and somehow the unexpected pleasure of it was what put me over the edge.

In one silly instance of a TV show I love, a character eats food so delicious he cries out, “I’m so glad I was born, Mom!” That’s how I felt, if you can believe it. I could have leapt or sung or maybe even cried; on that evening, I was really and truly grateful for the privilege of existing. I thought, *This is the kind of day that makes it all worth it.*

Little things. The mere possibility of a good test grade. A pen shaped like a syringe and two T-shirts. Donuts, and one special donut out of the lot. I can’t tell you how long I’d waited to feel like that again, but that’s all it took, somehow.

I’ll give you one more example.

The spring semester of my sophomore year at Vanderbilt was the hardest I’d ever dealt with. I was bored in my classes and physically sick with stress over a couple of them. All around me, I would see others enjoying a night out with a group of friends, partaking in cultural and religious celebrations, or throwing themselves into clubs or campaigns or research projects they couldn’t be more passionate about. Socially isolated and without the reassurance of the naïve dreams I once had for the future, I thought about the way I’d sought after, in vain, the things I’d always heard were supposed to give life meaning.

Career goals? Hobbies? Community? Romance? A clear sense of purpose? Wholehearted spiritual beliefs?

Reaching the end of the list with every box still unchecked, I found myself wondering if I had any good reason, any fair justification, for being in this world at all.

I’m grateful to say that through all that time, no matter how tired and discouraged I felt and in spite of the pessimism that had infected my view of life, I never once thought of ending it. Even so, I couldn’t ignore the haunting sense of emptiness, of futility, that had fallen upon me. I kept on through the semester, with no recourse but to force myself to finish my schoolwork and fulfill my other responsibilities, even if I couldn’t be sure they would ever amount to a thing.

But through the worst periods of anxiety and drudgery there was one thing I could always be excited about, something I always had to look forward to eventually. On a weekday evening, perhaps after an excruciatingly difficult exam or on the heels of a weekend spent doing nothing but studying, I would hurry back to my dorm room and greet my roommate, my one precious friend, with what was often my first genuine smile of the day. We’d run to Rand and wolf down a mediocre meal as quickly as possible, to leave time— an hour, maybe two— for a few episodes of our favorite show, *Diamond is Unbreakable*. Tuesday, usually the most painful weekday thanks to its four hours of organic chemistry lab, nonetheless offered me the best of nights. My friend and I would bring back dinner from the cafeteria as soon as the line opened at 4:30— an entree of tortellini and two rolls each— and eat it all as we watched. As trivial as it sounds, the anticipation of an hour or so spent like this was sometimes the one thing that could get me through a miserable week.

For the longest time, I felt stupid about it, the way I'd already begun to feel foolish in high school for being excited to get home and eat an ordinary dinner or having enough money for a chocolate milk from the school vending machine. As a child, I found joy in the crunch of leaves under my feet and the feel of the creek's cool water on my hands as I dug red-brown clay from its bed. I could spend all day, every day, with my sister acting out the frivolous stories that sprung into being and ran wild in my head, without ever once worrying about wasted time.

But now, having reached adulthood, and especially as a student at an elite university, I felt that I should hold myself to a higher standard. I was supposed to have something bigger, *better*, to derive happiness from, something worthy and productive. I might enjoy sci-fi novels or chicken noodle soup or pointless hypothetical conversations, but those were meant only to be fillers.

Supplementary materials to accompany the one or two or even more Big Things that surely should have manifested themselves by now.

But nevertheless, a TV show and one friend's company and two rolls were what I had.

What's my point here, you wonder?

Last summer, prompted by my parents' concerns over my mental health, and with no small input from a therapist, I took some time to think things over. And you know what? I figured out something critical. In spite of the areas where I felt lacking, I had countless smaller wellsprings of contentment to tap into if I could only bring myself to give up the notion that they weren't important enough. The Big Things like careers and friend groups and finding one's soulmate add richness to life, but they have no inherent right to define it. Make no mistake; I still believe that it is right and good and valuable to pursue them. But in the meantime, before they come to fruition, there is no reason that life must be any less meaningful or special or worthwhile.

It seems obvious now. Maybe it is, and always has been, to everyone but me. But somehow it took me forever to figure it out—to realize that part of the emptiness I felt inside me was a space I'd carved myself without even knowing it, that slowly but surely I'd been conditioned to see a cavern where there was only a little hole. So I want to say this now, to shout it out from the rooftops and whisper it into every dusty corner, just in case there's anyone out there still staring into the chasm with tired and desolate eyes. Because if you just keep waiting until the day when some grand something comes along to fill it, you'll end up wishing your life away before you ever get to enjoy it.

Nothing in this life deserves a monopoly on happiness. It doesn't belong to promotions or weddings or a baby's birth any more than it belongs to warm laundry and snowfall and helium balloons. No matter what the movies tell you, it is no less righteous to fall in love with strawberry ice cream or Christmas lights or the way the rain looks when it drips off tree leaves than it is to fall for a pretty girl. No matter what society tries to pound into your head, you don't need to find some all-consuming passion to have a good enough excuse for living. You could just as well choose

to keep going for the sake of the next time you'll eat donuts or the upcoming episode of a favorite show. Any little reason will do.

Let the world make its demands. I may never fulfill them. I don't know where I'm going or who will be beside me when I get there. I haven't figured out what all I believe in or what to do about it. Often I feel lost, often I feel lonely, often a vague sadness lies across me like a blanket of creeping vines.

But tonight I'm going to eat chocolate pie and work a crossword puzzle, and that's enough for me.