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Essay 1

The Unspoken Rules of Life

I used to be a pro at Life—The Game of Life that is—the board game for children ages 9+. My younger brother and I took advantage of every chance we had to play during the summer before my sixth grade year. We would sit down across from one another on our living room carpet, pull off the top of that white rectangular box, pass out the paper money and other game pieces, and hurry to put all of the houses and bridges on the game board. Then play would commence just as it was explicitly written in the instruction manual. It was so simple: just spin the rainbow-colored wheel, go the number of spaces that you landed on, choose a career, get married, buy a house, have some kids along the way, acquire a few life pieces if you landed on the right spaces, and before anyone knew it, someone had moved their van through the entire board and won. It was usually me. How could I lose? Life was so simple.

But real life was an entirely different game. I had no idea what I was doing. Even though I could not see my pile of colorful bills diminishing, or everyone else’s vans spaces ahead of mine, I still knew when I had played the game wrong. My chest would sink in as my stomach tightened, and I would begin to kick myself for obviously making the wrong move. Then I would frantically try to think of a way to turn things around, but often a ten was not spun when I needed it the most to move forward. As feelings of defeat consumed me, my heart knocked against my chest like it wanted to run away from my body, and a familiar lump formed in my throat that would soon fill my airway completely.

Unfortunately, there were no directions for me to study before I attempted to navigate through life. It was my turn to make a move, and I had no idea what to do. All my family wanted from me was “a few words.” They made it seem simple enough, but I knew it was much more complicated than just “a few words.” I’m jumping ahead of myself though. Let me back up. I woke up that morning and put on the only black dress in my closet. It was not even completely black. It had a purple and gray floral design on it, and I hoped it would be acceptable. But, of course, the only rule that I knew to follow, I couldn’t. At the age of seventeen, I felt like I should have known what this day required of me, but I had no idea what to expect or how to prepare for such an occasion. This would be my first funeral, and the word funeral at this point was nothing more than an abstraction. The death of my cat was the only other loss I had experienced before this, so the death of a loved one was new to me. My great-grandmother passed following a 54-day struggle in the hospital after a heart attack, and I knew this day was supposed to be an important part of the mourning process. However, all I knew at this point about funerals –what ever they were – was that I did not like them.

Next thing I knew, I was sitting in a chair, looking forward at a casket, and then back down again at my watch. I wanted out. All of the crying, the smell of flowers over that of musty funeral home, and the sad look in every one of my elders’ eyes was too much to take all at once. They all looked lost, and these were the people I looked to for guidance. Worse, they all looked like they were losing. Before the priest went up to speak, I could see my grandma and great-aunt scanning the room for someone to remedy the situation to some extent. I sat in that chair and stared at my lap as my heart raced, praying that it would not be me.

It was.

“Kayla,” my grandma said, “Kayla, would you want to say a few words about great-grandma?” Everyone was looking at me. I started to panic. I couldn’t breathe. I managed to mumble a few words though.

“I don’t know. I wouldn’t know what to say. I’m sorry. I just… I just don’t know what I would say.” Once I heard my own words ring around the room though, I knew that I had made the wrong move. My grandma assured me that it was okay, but her eyes gave her away. I had let her down. Her mom just died, and I couldn’t say anything. Really? I felt like such a horrible person, but I just couldn’t find the words. My words would not have done her justice. I would have gotten up there and mumbled something filled with distracting words like “um” and “like.” I would have let them down either way, and no one else volunteered to speak. At least that is what I attempted to tell myself, but I guess I could have tried. However, it was too late. The priest walked up to the altar and began to speak. I do not remember exactly what he said about her, but I can vividly remember rehashing the previous events in my head, feeling guilt, rather than sorrow, and that lump in my throat was already forming as my dad leaned over to me and whispered in my right ear.

“You should have said something.” The lump grew. I choked out a cry. Tears streamed down my face, and I looked down at my lap to watch the droplets fall onto and stain my out of place dress. My mom tried to comfort me, figuring that I was mourning my great grandmother’s death, but I was just mourning my own shortcomings in life. I wanted to be better for my family, for my deceased great-grandmother, and for myself. My life seemed so much harder and more complicated than it used to be when I was younger and played board games. Back then, I was not aware of expectations, and by consequence, I was not aware of when I had not met them. I wanted to disappear from this world where the right answer was never clear until later on. I guess that I just wasn’t prepared for the complications of life. I had been playing Life all along, when I should have been playing death. I experienced life everyday. For the most part, I knew the rules. In any situation regarding death though, the right choices regarding behavior tend to be unspoken until the wrong ones are made. And the wrong decision always seems grave. Unfortunately, death often takes one by surprise, and to torture us further, it is surrounded in gray expectations.

Life was treating me pretty well about a year later though. I spent that summer living up at our summer home on the west side of the state and working at the beach store in Pentwater, Michigan. I didn’t know many people at first, but my boss’s daughter Melissa and I soon became close friends. She would invite me out with her, and I began to feel less lonely as I met more and more new people. Mitch was one of those new people that I met, although met feels like the wrong word since we had both been working around one another for the past few years. He was a park ranger in the campground adjacent to the beach, but I didn’t really get to know him until that summer. Anyway, just as summer was ending, I developed the biggest crush on him. He said what was on his mind and made me laugh, and I could tell he was the type of person who would be there for me if I ever needed him. Right before I went off to school at U of M, he kissed me too. I wanted him to be mine, but like I said, I was off to school. I was probably insignificant to him. I figured that the end of summer would equal the end of us.

Two weeks later I’m 200 miles away from that summer place of ours, adjusting to my new classes, and texting him on occasion still wondering if that last week of summer meant anything to him. One night I texted him, and he didn’t respond. I didn’t think much of it, and later that night he replied that he would tell me when he could the reason for the delay in response. We texted one another goodnight, but I had a feeling it was not a *good* night for him. I knew his mom was sick. He referred to her disease cryptically as a “family medical problem” that summer. As I tried to fall asleep that night, I recalled our mutual friend Melissa telling me a few weeks ago that his mom had breast cancer, and I tried to prove that I was just as good –if not better – of friends with him, by acting like I already knew as the dots connected to that “family medical problem.” I felt horrible for his family, but I did not realize how sick she really was. The next morning though, I found out. I was riding the bus down to central campus when I got this text: “Sorry my mom passed away last night. That’s why I didn’t text you back.” I couldn’t breathe. It seemed like the bus once loud with chatter had suddenly fallen silent. Then I realized I had to reply, and I began to panic. What was I going to say? What was the right thing to say?

Later that day we talked on the phone, and he told me in a distant, seemingly broken voice how he never saw it coming and about all of the events leading up to that moment. I decided to say something generic but with sincerity: “If you need anything- I know everyone says this, but I mean it. If you need anything, I’m here for you.” A few days later, I remember seeing his status on Facebook stating the date of the funeral, but my memory fails me in recollecting if he mentioned the funeral directly to me. Without thought, the word funeral conjured a mixture of uncomfortable feelings that accompanied the first and only funeral I had ever attended –my great-grandmother’s. I do remember debating whether I should go or not in my head for the next few days. I had many reasons for not going from the lack of car with me at school and the distance of the drive to my abundance of new college homework and lack of black dress. I honestly figured that I was the annoying freshman with a crush on him, and that my absence would be met with indifference on his part.

With all of my reasons, or better yet excuses, it is impossible to say what my true motivation was for taking the easy way out once again. Yeah, you read that right. I didn’t go. Worse yet, I thought that was okay. I know now though. It was not. That’s a lie though. Well, not completely. The truth is that I still don’t know. My choice not to go haunts my current relationship with Mitch more than any ghost, but would my choice still eat away at me if he wasn’t my boyfriend now? I guess that I will never know, but I do know that my decision felt wrong even before he shifted our conversation to this topic as we walked back from the bar one recent winter night.

Flakes of snow were swirling around us and feelings were stirring up inside. I took a deep breath to fill myself with composure, but composure left my body with what looked like a puff of smoke into the cool air. Within a few strides down the snow covered streets, my vision blurred further as the tears overflowed and poured down my already wind burnt cheeks. He took his hands to my face and tried to wipe them away, but it was too late. The tears stormed down my face in full force. They had finally escaped. He pulled me into his chest, but I fought to escape from his grasp. I felt the words building up, and like the tears they were hard to keep inside. I spun around to face him so that I was walking dangerously backward down the icy road.

We were supposed to be happy now, “in love,” but I could not help but look back. I should have known that it was against the rules to go back, and maybe I did. But I went anyway. Accusations and heartache started to spill out of my mouth uncontrollably. I rambled quickly and mumbled these words that I had been fighting so hard to leave behind. It seemed unfair of me given the life he had endured recently, but I couldn’t stop. As I spoke, I could see his own pain in his eyes. And my heart started to race and my palms grew sweaty, as I, a girl just full of words, was speechless. There was nothing but a lump in my throat that was consuming my airway. I could feel myself losing the upper hand in this game as he said: “You know last year was hard for me. I thought you were over the past.”

“I am. But… but… but…” For some reason, I still resented how he didn’t date me when I wanted him to last year, or how I felt like he was using me when it was convenient for him back then. Maybe my anger would be understandable given normal circumstances, but my grudge always seemed to ignore the biggest factor in all of what I deemed his shortcomings over the past year.

“My mom died last year.” He was always reminding me like I might have forgotten, and every time he mentioned it, I wondered if he thought I was so dense that I had.

“I know.”

“You didn’t even come to her funeral.”

He had never said that before though. I felt like he was accusing me of a crime. Fittingly, my guilt rose as if I had just committed one. I had obviously broken the rules. I knew what he was saying. I should have gone, but at the time I had no idea what to do. Immediately, I started to make excuses for myself. I was young. We didn’t know each other that well at the time. We weren’t dating. We had hung out maybe seven times. I had other obligations. The funeral was on the other side of the state. With each excuse, the ones I spoke aloud and the others I told myself, I knew even more that I was in the wrong. I knew that I cared about him then, and I knew that anyone would want their friend there. Even worse, I had promised just days before to “be there for him,” and I still didn’t go. I just couldn’t go.

I worry that my decision not to attend was motivated by selfishness. Perhaps, I just did not want to deal with the hassle of figuring out how to get there, take my mind off my studies, or put myself in an uncomfortable situation, but I probably would have expected him to do all of that for me if it had been my mom. I thought that I was just some girl he hung out with a few times though. I didn’t really understand that most people go if they know the person on any level from acquaintance to best friend. I definitely did not understand how he would resent me one day, how I would regret it, how such an event sticks with people. He will always remember that day, and he will always remember that I wasn’t there. That will never change. Perhaps, he will forgive my misunderstanding someday, but by misunderstanding I almost feel worse. In addition to feeling wretchedly horrible, with that rationalization I feel plain stupid. I couldn’t have prepared for this situation just like I cannot prepare for any death. No one ever sees death coming, but it often becomes such a big part of one’s life. We all meet death eventually. If not someone else’s, we meet our own in due time. Death seems to define life, but I still do not know exactly how to deal.

The Game of Life didn’t prepare me at all for the challenges I would face in my actual life. The game that I played as a child included all of the great parts of life- graduating from college, getting a job, getting married, buying a house, having kids, and many other great life achievements. It never prepared me for failure, or death, or failure in the face of death. It didn’t prepare me to make a speech in front of countless relatives who knew my great-grandmother way longer than I did. It didn’t prepare me to decide whether or not to go to my eventual boyfriend’s mom’s funeral, and it definitely did not prepare me to face the after-math of either of these situations. The guilt resulting from my lack of speech at my great-grandmother’s funeral was resolved in knowing that no one else had the courage to get up and speak either. My guilt as a consequence of not going to the other funeral will probably always reside inside of me. If others knew to go, could go, and went, then I wonder why I did not. The lack of transportation, the lack of knowledge, and the lack of experience with death in my life seem to make for valid evidence in regard to why my choice is forgivable. But they do not do anything to make me feel like any better of a person. I still feel like the loser.