Be Wild. Be Bold.

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Abstract

I wake up some mornings and dress in a way that suggests who I think I should be. I move the way I think I should move, and I say the things I think I should say. I perform to present myself a certain way, and I can't help but feel unsatisfied when it does not agree with who I really think I am. This account of my experiences as a school librarian, a student, and a mild type of wild person, explores the different ways I've performed for others and the different types of persons I've thought I should be.
Oh, I have a job now. I'm nineteen, and I just got my first job. I'm working in the library of the school I went to from kindergarten to eighth grade. Mom teaches here. We've been attached to this place forever. The library is tolerable, I guess. But I'm mostly just irritable and unassertive--an exhausting combination.

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It's 9:46 A.M. and the library is finally quiet. Libraries are supposed to be quiet all the time, but the kids that come through them aren't. At least, they don't think so.

“Taylor, Sophie, please be quiet. This is a library,” I say, elongating the key word. Library. It means to shut up.

“Miss Jen, how old are you?”

“Sophie, find a book, and go to class.”

“Miss Jen, did you paint your own nails?”

“Taylor, did you pick a book yet?”

“Miss Jen, do you have a boyfriend?”

“If you two don’t find a book now, I’m going to send you back to class without one,” I say in the most assertive voice I could muster. They weren’t fooled.

“Nah uh,” they teased. “We’re going to stay in here until recess.”

“Okay,” I say. “I’ll call Mrs. Mira and see if that’s okay.”

They smile and start to play with my hair. I need to do something quick. This was a war, and I was losing. I knew the seventh and eighth graders wouldn’t fall for my tricks, but I stand a chance against Taylor and Sophie, two second-grade girls. I pick up the phone from the corner of my desk and tap a few numbers to make it sound like I’d pressed them.

“Mrs. Mira?”

The girls turn to each other, gasp, and run out of the library.

I slump in my chair as the victor, but feel defeated. When I’m alone and the library is quiet, I feel detached from the rest of the world, the real world I thought I’d meet by taking this job in the first place. I consider letting myself cry, but quickly decide against it. If someone saw me, Mr. Garish would know that I lied during my interview when I said I could be firm and authoritative.
Be Wild. Be Bold.

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I spent nine years of my life at this school from kindergarten to eighth grade. It was all I’d known for a while. I followed the rules and did what was asked of me in the quietest, most unassuming way I could. I was barely noticed and often went completely overlooked.

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In first grade, around Christmastime, Mrs. Anderson asked all twenty of her students to bring candy to class the next day to decorate the gingerbread houses we’d construct out of graham crackers and frosting. I was thrilled. I loved candy and any opportunity to prove my worth with my artistic abilities. With a bag of plain M&Ms, I sat through six hours of normal schooling, awaiting the hour we’d spend on our gingerbread houses. I planned it all out—gumdrops and cinnamon hearts on the roof, licorice to outline the door, sprinkles all over, and an M&M walkway to the rest of the world. At 2 o’clock, Mrs. Anderson instructed us to clear our desks. I thought I would burst from the excitement. She called my classmates to the front of the room, one-by-one, to collect a paper plate, six graham crackers, and one small milk carton that would serve as the structure our houses would be built around. I sat quietly, awaiting my turn while everyone around me was beginning to build.

Just outside, parents gathered by the window looking into our class. Mom was there. Though she couldn’t see me from the window, she could see some of my classmates diligently working on their gingerbread houses. When the bell rang and the school day ended, my classmates gathered their sugary creations and eagerly took them outside to show them to their parents. I came outside empty-handed—Mrs. Anderson didn’t call on me. I was sad because I’d missed out, but not embarrassed or ashamed like I would have been for not speaking up later in life. When I told Mom that the teacher forgot me, she nearly cried.

“Speak up,” was her most important advice.

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Mrs. Kang is my boss. Well technically, Mr. Garish, the principal, is. Mrs. Kang is the boss of the library, though. The boss of me. It didn't feel like a real job. Mom was too close and available for it to be a real job. Having a real job meant being on my own and
speaking for myself. And I can't have a real job when my mom is right there. I can, however, have one of those grown-up relationships with a boss I hate. If you consider that grown-up, I mean.

Mrs. Kang showed me around the library. It was a small room, filled with books, connected to an even smaller book-filled room toward the back. She pointed out a desk, a fuzzy maroon chair, and a big fat computer from the nineties. She told me how to turn it on, how to use the scanner, and how to organize the books from the return bin. She smiled and laughed as she bossed me around, like we were buddies or something. Like a library joke would help me to forget how mean and scary she was when I was a student here. A giant laminated sign on the door said: “Read Limit: 55.”

“It’s a play off those speed limit signs,” she said. “But there’s really no limit to how much the kids are allowed to read.”

I laughed like I finally understood the sign. Like I needed her explanation to make sense of it. “That’s a good one,” I said.

Even though I didn't like Mrs. Kang, I was mature enough to hide it. I'd say hi to her every morning, and smile. Smile like it was a good morning. Smile like I was happy to see the children. Smile the way everyone expected, because the world might fall apart if I came to work wearing the face that showed how I really felt. I still resented her for scolding me in the seventh grade when I didn’t do anything wrong, but there was nothing I could do about it now. Standing almost eye-level with her in the library, I remembered how small and afraid I used to be when she was my computer class teacher. I could take her now. I was bigger, stronger. I could spell better and type faster than she ever could. But as she instructed me with new tasks and responsibilities, I was consumed most by the fear of doing something wrong. Whatever power I may have earned from growing up meant nothing at this school, in this library, standing next to her. But I was nineteen. It was my first job. It would be unnatural and wrong for me to have anything better.

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One of my most important duties as the librarian is to keep the books safe. I learned many ways to do this. When new books are bought or donated to the library, I cover them with a clear sticky plastic. This is my favorite task. It is quiet, requires no
human interaction, and at the end of the day, I can look at the piles of books I’d covered and know that I accomplished something. I’d done something important, and although people might not notice it, they would see it every day. With a roll of plastic, a ruler, and a pair of scissors, I spend hours in the library laminating books and artfully keeping air bubbles from forming beneath the plastic. I take pride in my work. I am in control. I am the best at what I do.

Another way to keep books safe is to loan them out for three weeks at a time, and get them back immediately after. A few days before mid-quarter report cards are sent to parents, I print a list of names of students who have until the end of the week to return or renew their books for another term. I expect students to be anxious to avoid a late fee, but only a small handful visit me before the deadline. The rest are sent home with a note for their parents to sign and return with their library books. A few signed notes and books trickle in the following Monday and Tuesday, leaving an entire page of names of children to hound.

“You have to get on their case,” Mrs. Kang instructs. I nod, keeping my eyes glued to the list.

“All of these kids are sitting out for recess today. You have to make sure they do. If they hand in their note and book today, they can play at recess tomorrow. But none of these kids should be playing today.”

I nod again and sigh. Students hate her. They tell me this, because they like me. A few seventh graders visit the library during Science class. They tell me secrets about their classmates and other teachers. I know who they respect and who they don’t. I realize that they respect me as a person, but not as the librarian, an authority figure. But they don’t know the difference, and I’m not going to point it out. I tell them to go back to class, so I can’t say that I didn’t. When they tell me they’re still looking for a book, when they are clearly not, I say okay, and let them continue their conversations in the back room. I remember what it was like to be in junior high. Everything was personal. Teachers were either good or bad. Nice or evil. I want to be liked. By everyone. It’s a demanding trait. Second graders need molding, so I can’t be flexible. If I raise my voice to them, it might sting, but they’ll like me just the same tomorrow. But seventh graders are almost done, and I still just want to be accepted.
At recess, I find one of the loud kids and request their voice on my mission. “Find these people,” I say as I hand him the list, “and tell them to see me.”

I feel like a teacher now. They might be afraid of coming to see me. They might think they will be punished for something. I guess that’s what this is, though. A punishment. I stand outside the library with the list and a red pen. I could have used a blue one or a pencil, but the red one says I’m in charge. Students bounce basketballs and chase each other on the blacktop. Sitting out for recess doesn’t seem that bad now, but at that age, it could very well ruin a day. I can see myself fighting back tears in fifth grade as a teacher singles me out and pulls me aside to serve a recess on the bench. Then, I had no idea there was so much life that came after. That no one really cared enough to remember this when they’re older.

My loud kid returns with the list and a report: “Josh, Kayla, Sharon, and Mason are in the classroom. Elise and Shane said they returned their books. Carter said he’ll sit out for tomorrow’s recess instead.”

I sigh and mull over my options. There aren’t many. A few students return with the loud kid, and take a seat on the bench outside the library. They know the drill. They can accept their punishment. My instructions were clear. I have to find the missing children and force them to the bench. I find a few and explain why they must obey me. But they have excuses, and I don’t know how much longer I can keep telling them that none of it matters.

“You have to sit on the bench this recess,” I say.

But, but, but, they tell me. And they argue and they fight, and they eventually get away with it, because I don’t want them to hate me. Because I can’t tell them that I’m the boss. That they must listen.

When I prove to be too timid for my responsibilities, Mrs. Kang finds Sharon, a fifth grader with an overdue book, a quiet girl who reminds me of myself at that age. Mrs. Kang yells at her, like she’d done something horribly, horribly wrong, and she starts to cry. It’s one book. There are three other copies of the same book in the library.

I’m sitting in class and a girl is trying to make small talk with me. She likes my bracelet. And my necklace. And the color of my nail polish. I say thanks and
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compliment her shoes, because I think she needs it. She asks if I completed the homework assignment. I nod. There’s a silence that she expects me to fill now, so I say, “it was pretty interesting,” when it wasn’t. Not at all. But she laughs and agrees that the first chapter was way better than she expected, but she can’t say much about the rest, because she worked overtime this weekend and had absolutely no time for homework.

“Do you work?” she asks.

Really, I want to say, don’t feel obligated to continue this conversation. I don’t mind sitting here in silence. Really. But I can’t say that. I know I shouldn’t. So I say, “I work in the library.”

I hate telling people this. It means too much. Now she thinks I’m quiet. Now she thinks I’m smart. Now she thinks I read a lot of books, and I prefer ginger ale to margaritas, and if I were to wear a dress to school, it would have sleeves and fall just below my knees. Even if it were all true, I’d hate to have her think that of me.

“I can see that,” she says. “You seem like the librarian type.”

I want to prove her wrong, tell her that I’m temperamental and moody, that I like fast cars and loud music, that I once considered becoming a raging alcoholic to cope with my disappointment in life so far—but it isn’t in my nature, so I just smile.

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It’s seven a.m. on Monday morning, I’m tired, and I don’t want to be here. Mrs. Kang asks how my weekend was, and I say it was nice when it was dreadful. I want her to see me as simple and good, the way I was when she knew me earlier. I’m responsible. I’m level-headed. I’m going to college to earn a degree that I’ll need to secure the career that I’m specifically working toward. None of it is true. Not all the time, anyway. Even if it was, I’m not sure I’d be happy with it.

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Every few weeks, I’ll take a good look at myself in the mirror. I’ll get in real close until I can see all my pores and that little brown speck beneath my left eye. I’ll probably still look plain—the way I assume most people see me—and I’ll vow to change that before I return to the mirror again. Be wild. Be bold. Wear your fire on the outside.

But I’ll return a week later to look myself in the eye and settle for myself as I am. Because maybe it’s more right to accept it than to fight it. Because maybe that’s what
makes me special. Then I'll walk away, I'll know it's not true, and I'll come back another
day to challenge myself again. Sometimes I forget that it's a process—this type of
change doesn't happen in one night.

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One night. One night is all I need to write a great paper. To construct an essay
that will make up for all the time I sit in class with nothing insightful to say. I'm wrong, of
course, but at the time, I really believe I can build a better me with words. Except for the
soft hum of my computer, my room is quiet. I crouch over the keyboard, willing a
profound, enlightening sentence to escape from my fingers. My brow is furrowed, and
there’s a lump in my throat that I can’t swallow. The pressure to prove my worth in one
sitting is immense. I type one sentence, breathe, then type another. My teacher will
realize that I’m greater than I seem. I type a few more words, delete them, type again,
delete again, and settle for the next few. One day, I’ll write something good enough to
be guarded and protected in a library. Four or five more sentences are carefully typed
onto the document before I collapse under the weight of it all. I didn’t see it coming.
Suddenly I’m much smaller, and all that’s left of the fire I had is a flame big enough only
to burn down the rest.

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I spend hours convincing myself that one homework assignment is just one
homework assignment. In the grand scheme of things, I say, one ten-page paper is
hardly important. A drop in the bucket, that’s what they say, right? I push aside my ideas
of perfection in every sentence, every word, and decide this time to care less. I type as
furiously as I can, fighting perfectionism and the urge to slow down and write something
beautiful. I break a sweat around page two when I begin to doubt the Grand Scheme
argument. But I am tired, and it is late, and the research I’d compiled on cinnamon and
cassia is thin. I convince myself there are no other options.

In her office at the end of the week, my teacher says, "I know you are capable of
much more than this," something I assume she says to every shipwreck. She continues
by saying that I should consider dropping her class if I wanted to maintain my GPA. I
take this the worst way possible and leave. All I could do now is give up. I drop all of my
classes this semester, because it seems easier than fighting through them with a broken heart.

A few months later, I quit my job at the library when I refuse to return the contract that says I’ll be back the next semester.

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During the spring, I take a course on Philosophy. I learn the different ways I relate to the world, the importance of codes and standards, and the magnitude of a single decision. In the fall, I take a few more courses about online communities, Astronomy, and writing about work-life. I learn that there are places for people to escape to when this world isn’t enough. I step outside for a minute and think more about the Grand Scheme and the Bigger Picture and the way those only seem to matter if all the little things are in order as well. I learn that I don’t know or care much about science, but I can sit through an entire lecture on relativity with a certain look that says I do. I learn that there are real and valid reasons for this. For all of it.

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I’m sitting in the living room, trying to read The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life by Erving Goffman for class. My sister is watching a show on TV about New York City detectives. I should probably go to a quieter room to study, but I decide against it. I convince myself that if I don’t challenge myself this way, learning won’t be interesting. Also, being around other people helps me to feel more like I exist. I read a few lines:

At one extreme, one finds that the performer can be fully taken in by his own act; he can be sincerely convinced that the impression of reality which he stages is the real reality (17).

A clue. A detective stumbles upon a piece of evidence that may lead her to the culprit. She takes the information to a lab where it is carefully tested and examined. I read more during the commercials.

When the individual has no belief in his own act and no ultimate concern with the beliefs of his audience, we may call him cynical… (18)
A single strand of hair is the final clue that leads the detective to the door of a man who murdered two people. He smiles, because he knows he’d been caught, and his performance as the grief-stricken neighbor is suddenly transparent. More commercials.

_A cynical individual may delude his audience for what he considers to be their own good, or for the good of the community (18)._ 

In the end, the man is on trial. His mother is there, too. She’s crying. On the witness stand, she confesses that she knew he was bad, but he seemed only to need compassion. The kind of compassion a mother can provide. The man smiles, because he’d fooled everyone, and his mother ruined her life trying to be someone she thought he needed. Then the screen fades to black, and the show ends.

“I knew it,” I say. But I didn’t. “It was so obvious.”

My sister laughs, because something is funny or because she knows I’m lying. Then I laugh too, but I don’t know why.