

What I Found in the Dark

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By 2014, my senior year of high school, my entire life had been plagued by inconsistency. This ongoing change began with my home, and managed to work its way into every remaining avenue of my life. School was stressful, and my social circle was less than endearing; this lacking in my life catalyzed an intense uneasiness because everything that I ordinarily took refuge in had moved far out of reach.

It began with home: I loved it. There, I was wrapped in routine, and structure. I could count on my room to smell like coffee every Saturday morning, and then bay-leaves and gravy, the next. My father spent every weekend that he wasn't working, molding me into a jazz buff, and snuggling up next to me on our couch. The tree in the front yard was drizzled in white christmas lights every holiday season, and my mother never missed a chance to plant her favorite flowers in the front yard... but then school began.

In 2011 I started my freshman year at McNair Academic; a school who's name was substantial in our small state, and even more significant in our even smaller city. At McNair, I was challenged to be college ready and bound, to pass state-administered standardized tests, to juggle 6 hours worth of homework, and extra curricular activities. McNair pushed it's students to be better than everyone inside, and outside of their building, so that our school would remain #1 in the district, #2 in the state, and #52 in the US.

My pursuit of an above-par education required me to study at an institute that was over an hour away from my little suburban home; it required me to commute to Jersey City. Making my

way to, and from school was hard. Cautious driving and terrible traffic made it difficult to walk through my front door before 7pm; I was lucky to ever be home before sunset. Eventually, traveling from city to city became too much of a chore. The commute interfered with my intense workload, and ultimately my health. I wasn't getting nearly as much sleep as I should have, and my weakened immune system left me consistently sick. By sophomore year the commute had become too much, and I was pressured to choose between my prime source of happiness, and my educational endeavors. The thought of leaving McNair made me feel defeated, and as a direct result of my pride, I chose to move in with a relative that lived in Jersey City, and continue my schooling there.

I adjusted poorly to this change. December rolled around, and by then home had become nothing more than an idea. I spent months haunted by the memory of my own bed, and what it was like to wake up to the smell of coffee. I missed the sound of Stan Getz's jazz sax through my father's Bose speaker, and the taste of bay-leaves and gravy most Sunday Nights. I wanted to see the tree in the front yard drizzled in white christmas lights, and my brother skimming through sports magazines at the foot of the stairs... so I decided to go back.

My longing for home developed further upon my return to it when I realized there was nothing to go back to. The autumn mums in my front yard had died, and the smell of my mother's cooking had dissipated. The holiday decor that transformed my house into something to marvel at, had collected a blanket of dust in the far left corner of our basement. Everything that dazzled, everything that sparkled, everything that made me feel warm when I closed the front door behind me had suddenly become something to remember, and no longer something to

experience. Everything that I had looked forward to being comforted by had disappeared in my absence. Ordinarily I would go to my friends about my feelings. We had grown together, suffered and relieved together. My experience with my peers had not been much different than anyone else's. In times of distress I sought shelter in them, and like the loyal army they were, they protected me. But my friends were far too consumed in the newness of college to help me the way they wanted to. So I decided not to worry them, and repress my discomfort instead.

Everything was harder without them around. Ordinarily we would be curled up in the couches next to the big windows at Word Cafe, or patrolling the fall festivals before it got too cold for goose-down coats. I missed sitting under small stages and listening to our friend's bands perform. I wasn't used to laying in the grass alone. All the beauty in my life that bloomed from the people and routine I knew had been chopped by obligation, and I had no idea what to do.

Once I realized there wasn't much to do about how quickly everything was transforming, I took my camera out much more. My camera by my side supplemented for the absence of my friends, and it's ability to capture a moment gave me some control over how fleeting they were. Eventually, we found some flexibility in our finances, and my father arranged for me to begin Black & White Photography classes in New York City; it was surprisingly therapeutic. It gave me an opportunity to spend more time with my father, and get out of the house that was stifling me. The darkroom was soothing because there I couldn't see much. There was a faint red glow that highlighted the peaking edges of every object in the room, and a brief flash of very dim light that would kiss the blank paper I had mounted to a scale. When I had my headphones with me, I listened to the quiet, raspy singing voices that belonged to Bon Iver, and Matt Berninger. When I didn't have my headphones, I listened to the waves of chemistry that washed over developing

photographs, and splashed against the plastic tubs. In those small secluded labs I was allotted a few hours to focus on one thing at a time, and to alleviate the stress that had burdened me. I found refuge in the darkroom. I had an opportunity to slow the feeling of how fast everything was moving, and to revisit everything I was afraid I'd lose.