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*Diary of an Anxious Malcontent*

“Dear Journal, I am Emily May. I am ten years old. I am not sure what I am going to be for Halloween”: so began the first page of my first journal. When I began keeping a notebook in the beginning of fifth grade, I envisioned myself a modern Anne Frank: a regular girl, nobly and honestly chronicling the nuances of her world. Of course, I was far from grasping the gravity of Anne’s legacy from the suburban Long Island bedroom I shared with my sister. Despite the unfathomable tragedy of her circumstances and fate, her voice was so clear and conversational, I felt like I was reading letters from a friend. At ten years old I knew what kind of girl I wanted to be: brave, adventurous, profound in her insights. I knew I would be a writer, and reasoned that daily journaling was an integral part of the practice. Anne was a figure perfectly suited for emulation, and with my Garfield journal filling up quickly by seventh grade, I decided it was time to begin archiving my life’s work into a Word document on the behemoth family desktop.

I saved each addition to the transcription onto a floppy disc, which was kept tucked inside the cover of the lined notebook. Typing the entries -on weekends or over school breaks- was grueling work. I wondered if I should preserve instances of incorrect punctuation to honor the integrity of the text, or would edits enhance a future reader’s experience? How would I include drawings and other non-text items into a Word document? What about when I wrote really big to make a point?

While editing, I attempted to shield the monitor from the prying eyes of my brother and sister while they waited to dial up our new AOL connection, drumming my fingers on the safari-animal mousepad. My older brother didn’t care about my notebook’s content, and just wanted to

make me shriek by trying to read it. I'd once caught my younger sister reading my journal, and I didn't speak to her for a week. I was fiercely protective of the conversation I had with myself in those pages; I was unguarded and free to express the anxieties I wanted to keep a secret. I wanted to be a nineties Nike girl, a Spice Girl, a girl who was made of only power and strength, who simultaneously excelled at playing sports and wore platforms, who never worried about boys or her nose. My journal would keep those vapid concerns to itself. And to be alive in the world, even in the abridged state of childhood, was so astonishing and rich and worth recording, that I had to write it all down. It would be years before I read Emily Dickinson's observation that "To live is so startling it leaves little time for anything else." But I felt that at ten, with a caveat: I have to make time to write about it.

In seventh grade, I moved to a new state and started at a new Catholic school consisting solely of gray hallways and teachers that matched. Our uniforms were stiff polo shirts and punishingly starched plaid kilts. We were not permitted to wear make-up, nail polish or any earrings but the tiniest of studs, hoops being the Devil's accessory of choice. I had always loved school, and now I dreaded it. At twelve, I had an acute sense that my days were being wasted by the joylessness that defined them. I rejoiced like a freed prisoner every Friday afternoon and cried like a convicted woman every Sunday night.

"I just read my old journal," I wrote that year. "I realized how much I've changed in two years, but it's nice to know I'm the same also. I like to stop and wonder while I read my old journal. It made me realize how precious time is. In twenty, or even ten, or five years, will these entries mean anything? What's the point of writing if I won't remember how things around me sounded, how they smelled, how they looked? Will it matter at all? Will I remember my blue blow-up chair or my lime-green bookshelf? Am I a completely different person than I was now

than I was in fifth grade? Did I think other thoughts, and breathe other air? Did I have a different mind? I read the entries from ‘long’ ago, and it’s so different. Maybe in 2 years I’ll be different. But I don’t want to! I like myself! Why can’t I stay the same?”

My journal became the primary and vital vessel of my tween angst. “Today in reading Mrs. Kelly said the phrase ‘submissive as a plowhorse.’ If I keep trudging through the day, I’ll become depressed.” “Everyone in seventh grade is going out with each other. I don’t like any of the boys at all.” My mom would include a daily motivational note with my lunch – “Life is what you make it: make it great!” – which I glued into the pages with each day’s entry. I’d received a quote of the day tear-off calendar for Christmas that year, and favorite installments would also be taped in. (“*Ships are safe in the harbor, but that’s not what ships are made for.*”—John A. Shedd.) These collaged additions presented an obstacle in my archiving, but I decided to let my future editor take care of it. I had more important things to worry about—I had writing to do.

Perhaps delusions of grandeur are a common tie between all young diarists. In her book *The Folded Clock*, Heidi Julavits recalls in her adult journal her childhood vision of record-keeping: “I imagined the diaries published at some future date, when my literary fame might bestow upon them an artistic and biographical value. I believed I was born to posthumous greatness.” I too believed that my journals would eventually reveal themselves to be a unique record of the time in which they were written, that I was doing future generations a great service by recording the life of a girl in the 1990s. I believed that my unique observations on the nature of being (“church was so boring”) would be illuminating of the human experience for generations to come.

While I abstractly imagined chronicling my world as a service, the draw to record seemed too strong, too innate, to resist. Even then, the world revealed itself as too layered and varied to

go uncommented upon. I was compelled to begin a journal at age ten to enter into an honest conversation with myself, to draw a roadmap that would always lead back to who I was, and who I remain. I poured my anxieties and observations into my journals (which evolved from Garfield to the infinitely more sophisticated marbled composition books that I purchased at CVS with my babysitting money). “I want to be pretty, skinny and smart,” I wrote at twelve, “but I’m ugly, fat and dumb,” (which was undeniably influenced by the stacks of late-nineties teen magazines I was mainlining at the time, and collaging into my journals). In less self-hateful moments, I recounted mundane daily events and squabbles with my sister, and recorded (with samples applied carefully to the lined pages) my entire nail polish and lip-gloss collections. Later, I obsessed over older, unattainable boys and recorded my cross country race times and grades. I weep for the trees wasted upon the vacant objects of my affection with whom nothing ever really occurred, despite the leaves upon leaves of lined paper I filled begrudging them for complimenting another girl’s sweater. In college, the requisite beat poetry obsession inspired sloppy, abstract lamentations about unsuccessful trysts and the end of culture that feature no proper nouns but a lot of exclamation points. Hilton Als wrote of “... half living life so I can get down to really living by writing about it.” I knew what he meant. And in my bottom drawer, the hidden stack of notebooks kept growing. Each October, I would make a note: *I’ve been writing in this journal for two years. I’ve been keeping a notebook for five years.*

Throughout my nearly three decades of keeping a journal, I’ve sampled a host of other people’s published missives to themselves. Perhaps I want to compare, and of course there’s an element of voyeurism involved: what do other people secretly dream of and worry about when they’re whispering only to themselves? When I’m reading someone else’s journals, my own entries have the tendency to take on the flavor of the prose I’m reading. As a young teenager, I

tore through the fictional exploits of Louise Rennison's heroine Georgia, who punctuates her endlessly amusing tales about boys and the friends she secretly finds extremely annoying with perfect comedic timing (and what fourteen-year-old could turn down a book called *Angus, Thongs and Full-Frontal Snogging?*). Georgia's hourly entries in her diary and her British slang inspired me to tirelessly record the manner in which my friends were complete prats. I spent the summer I turned eighteen with Andy Warhol's methodical reports of what he ate and who he saw the night before at Studio 54, devoid of emotion or introspection. While poring over the doorstep-sized collection of his entries in my attic bedroom thick with August heat, I stopped recording and investigating my emotional state, and instead delved into the day-to-day details of my own life, which was woefully lacking in appearances from Bianca Jagger. In *The Folded Clock*, Julavits reminisces and mines beauty from her experiences as an endeavor in meaning-making; as I read, her explorations gave me permission to treat each of my experiences as worth meandering through, to regard my internal state and the events surrounding them with reverence and care.

My first year in college, I came across the Joan Didion essay "On Keeping A Notebook" and read with fearful recognition her summation of innate journalers: "Keepers of private notebooks are a different breed altogether, lonely and resistant rearrangers of things, anxious malcontents, children afflicted apparently at birth with some presentiment of loss." At the time, I was dealing – or not dealing— with a depression that seemed to surpass routine late-adolescent ennui and border on complete despair. I also longed for a more adventurous life, more exciting friends with access to better parties where I would have the opportunity to make reckless decisions: I needed something to write about, a dramatic plot to fill my pages and to provide meaning to my life. I longed for my own Studio 54, a space and time to build a narrative from

glamorous mistakes and the subsequent redemption arc. Instead, I was cautious and lonely, dreading the long, empty weekends with no classes to fill my time, only pages: “What if there is no meaning of life. What if it’s one big mistake in assuming we’re here for any reason at all?”

I was an anxious malcontent, surely, which was why I couldn’t just relax and attend parties arranged around the beer pong table and get drunk enough to talk to people with whom I had nothing in common. I was a lonely rearranger of things, which is why I felt the need to commit my experience as a ten-year-old to the archive at age twelve. “When does life begin?” I asked the empty pages. I was afflicted with some presentiment of loss, which was why in middle school, I printed out AOL Instant Messenger conversations with my friends and love interests and glued them into my composition books, and why as a teenager, I was more comfortable writing about a life I wanted than attempting to live the one I had. (“I don’t believe in love but if it were real it would be a person as a book you’d never want to end and everything would be a new page you’d want to read over and over.”) Fearing life’s ultimate truth of ephemerality, I recorded it all in a futile plea for permanence: “Read this after I’m dead,” I wrote in the inside cover of the journal of my nineteenth year.

Of course, all of these afflictions are the things that made me a writer.

My mom recently sent me my old journals. The last time I looked back on those teenage notebooks, I was still barely out of adolescence, and mortified by the dramatic whiner I found on those pages, the person who postured herself as too cool to believe in love but was naïve enough to think that life has a Meaning. Perhaps only time allows for compassion toward the melodrama and self-seriousness that color our transitions from childhood to adulthood. An integral element of adulthood is realizing that even the deepest loneliness and despair evades no one: it’s a teenage indulgence to feel that she doesn’t fit in, and that her loneliness is unique. Are obsessive

journalers and writers self-absorbed? Of course. We're telling stories about ourselves to ourselves. But really, I think we should be everything-absorbed. One's gaze is bound to occasionally land on her navel while she's attempting to take in everything. While I feared there was no meaning to life, I felt I could find one if I kept good enough records, if I could spin my experience into something that others could read and relate to. It was up to me to make my own meaning; I decided the meaning was in the attempt to move through the world freely and fearlessly. To do that required a complete knowing and acceptance of the self. This would ultimately come in the form of the ongoing story I wrote to myself, in the unescapable patterns and themes – the self – that would be revealed in those dozens of volumes.

In the stack of journals that now fills up a large cardboard box in the back of my closet, an accidental bildungsroman softly hums, rendered from gel pens, glue sticks, ribbon and newspaper, poems and postcards from friends, watercolors. Through quotes I meticulously copied at various stages from Tennessee Williams, Gary Snyder, Amiri Baraka and Allen Ginsberg, Subcomandante Marcos, Destiny's Child, Lester Bangs, Dashboard Confessional, Carlos D. from Interpol, Pablo Neruda, Van Morrison, Patti Smith, Luc Sante, *The Growing Pains of Adrian Mole*, Bush-era *Rolling Stone*, Joanna Newsom and a hundred others, I attempted to parse the world, and locate a truth within the crosshairs of their voices. A thread the length of a life zigs and zags through the discoveries of love, sex, self. "I saw a sign for something that helps you secure your future and I really can't imagine anything worse," I wrote at eighteen. At twenty: "But seriously, how the fuck am I supposed to live the *Tao*?"

Reading through the journals, I realize my terror over losing what is kept there is justified: a note my sister wrote me with sand taped to it from our favorite beach after we'd left for the summer, the last time we'd go there as children: "I found this in my backpack. I love

you.” What lives in those pages is a life. The record of being nineteen, and the transformation over that year from questioning the point of life to realizing that “life is a gift of experience... there is nothing to do but live.” And write.

A few days after my recent birthday, I began a brand-new journal, an addition to the countless empty notebooks I’ve started in the past two decades. My new notebook is neon yellow with starkly blank numbered pages, jarring in their bright whiteness. I always feel the urge to introduce myself to a new book; I hope we get along. I recently peeled the immaculate leaves apart during a work meeting to fill them with hair aspirations and dress designs. While I no longer fear being Didion’s anxious malcontent, I wondered: is this the journal of a woman in her thirties? Or am I still that ten-year-old, only with more notebooks filled?

Both, of course. Through my journals, I remain closer to and even *more of* that ten-year-old. I have empathy for her, and even the teenager she became. If I can nurture a compassion for all my former selves, I can do the same for the people around me. “Who’s going to ask me to dance next year in sixth grade?” I asked my journal at age ten. Now, my heart aches for that ten-year-old, for her nervousness and having to rely on anyone else’s approval at all, as it aches for anyone who ever feels shy, or alone, or stares at the gym floor during a slow song. All of us are ten somewhere; we all worry if anyone’s going to ask us to dance. Everyone’s thoughts, emotions and experiences can span volumes; journalers just have the luxury of proof. Our notebooks tell our histories, unequivocally in paper and ink, and from those we carve a narrative, constructing something like a self. These histories are clunky and humiliating, but legitimate in their woes and their triumphs. The journal serves at turns as an undeniable mirror-- *I’ve always been this way or I’ve come so far* -- and a damning conscience -- *I’ve let so much go*. Our younger selves are easy to ridicule with their grand ideals so far in the rear-view. But who can



sneer at the wide-eyed worldviews of the uninitiated? In our journals are the better worlds and selves that we believe could exist, even if only in those pages. In my journal is an anchor: a record of who I was, and who I have always been.

I still write under the covers at night, although I no longer hide my journal under the mattress of the bottom bunk with my sister just above me. At thirty, I whispered to the page: *I've been writing for twenty years*. At ten, I probably thought that by thirty I wouldn't have anything left to resolve in my journal, and that all my pre-existing volumes would be acclaimed bestsellers. And in my new neon journal, I'll write a note to the ten-year-old who started writing, that the journals have been distilled into real pieces that people read, and that her life *did* start, and it's still astonishing and worth recording. And that I've long since abandoned the floppy disc transcription and I hope no one ever reads my journals, but I'll tell her I'll meet her, and all the rest of us in between, on the next page.