

“Do you need a new journal, Anna?” my grandfather inquires as I step onto the scale first with my backpack and then without. It is fourteen pounds. My backpack is always fourteen pounds.

“Yes, please!” I answer with an unabashed grin, selecting a little green-marbled composition notebook from the pile, smiling down at its pristine cover as I think of all the journaling I will do. I give a hasty, “Thank you, Papa!” before I’m already hurrying off to stash my journal in the front pocket of my backpack; anticipation for the coming hike thrumming through my veins.

My excitement carries me to the trailhead as I jot down a few quick phrases. It is traditional to, on our annual family hikes, keep a journal to read together at the end. I am determined to fill my journal this year; I shut my journal with a harsh snap. I step onto the trail with a bright smile on my face; the crunch of leaf litter is the sound of companionship, and the rocks I clamber over greet me like old friends. The words are not my friends; they are too analytical to be anything but impersonal rivals, so as the miles slip by in an aching blur, I do not write. I am far too busy finding a rhyme for sixty-six so the ants can keep marching to write anyway.

That evening, sitting around the campfire with nothing to do but wait for the mountain pies to finish cooking, I remember my journal. I take it out of my backpack. I flip past my singular entry from earlier and stare at the second page. I berate myself for not writing during the breaks. I should have, but I didn’t. I could write about it now, but I do not want to. I do not want to write because it’d be tiring. I am tired. If I were to write about what’s happening now, I’d leave careless gaps in my narrative, yet I do not want to fill those gaps by dictating the day’s happenings. I’m sure I could do it; I am sure that I could draw myself to not only raise my pen but lower it; if I only tried hard enough, maybe I could; with enough will, perhaps I could overcome the mental block that prevents me from writing. That pristine second page remains untouched. I close my journal and set it to the side, not wanting to meet its mocking eyes.

I pick up my journal. What calls me to write is the conversation happening around the fire now. My soon-to-be aunt says something that I think would make a lovely attempt at teasing so I write it down hurriedly. Everyone else puts little jabs in their journals, and I should too, I think. I write in jagged, fragmented thoughts that fill hardly half a page, but the framework is there. It is not the precise writing I’d grown to idolize in my fellow hikers’ journals, yet there was still limitless potential hidden there. I use words like ‘exclaimed’ and a boldly capitalized ‘WELL,’ and while in hindsight ‘parroted’ would have been better than ‘repeated,’ it is not all bad. In hindsight, I do not know what teasing truly means; in hindsight, I am a stranger to commas or proper punctuation; and, in hindsight, I truly put my heart into that second page. I spread the guts of my dying motivation onto a third page as I dictated another stippling sentence, and then I closed my journal, put it in my front-pack pocket, and locked it out of my thoughts and my words. I preferred talking anyway, so I left my heart there to rot and did not write anymore.

As everyone else read their lengthy journals, I sipped my slushie with unprecedented focus. Every journal that was read aloud seemed so precise; they were analytical, fun, formatted, and had dozens of filled pages each. My cheeks burn with shame as I listen, a tight-lipped smile plastered on my face as I think of my own three insignificant pages, worthless in comparison. I

cannot remember if I read my measly entries or not. I'm sure I did, but they were not worth remembering.

With the bitter taste of fresh failure sharp on my tongue, I swear that I will do better on the next hike; I have been saying that for years, though, and I never do. My words are hollow, and despite my desire to write even half as much as my fellow hikers, to finally fill my journal cover-to-cover, change is not that simple. This is not some fanciful epiphany that instantaneously made me feel motivated to fill journals with all the lost moments of that hike, but on the next hike, it is a little easier to write in my journal. I do not think my affinity for them has changed much--I am still too in-the-moment to give a proper account--but I write words this time. I am far less attached to my journal being like everyone else's than I used to be. My entries are infrequent, though. I sit next to the fire, thinking of all the lost moments, of how I should write, and of why I cannot; I have not changed, but I have grown. Suddenly, tragedy hits and I am stuck in a van for seven straight hours as we search for lost campers. They were meant to meet up with us but never did. I have nothing to do but worry, and nothing to fill my time with but writing, so I do both. I paste my paranoias over the little, lined pages and fill them with dozens of easy words: thoughts. They are raw, emotion words rooted in emotion thoughts, and I think emotion words might be better than proper ones.

The campers are eventually found, and the moment I have other things to occupy myself with beyond pointless worry, I stop writing. Once we're back at camp, I try to write, but the words simply won't flow as they did before. Without the overwhelming emotions of earlier urging me to write, all desire vanishes, and I'm left staring at a blank sheet once more.

The next time I'm presented with the prospect of a hike, it's a short one. It's a quick couple-hour hike with an easy goal of 1600 ft. of elevation... easy. Racing with the sun as we are, we stop for breaks infrequently, but when we do take a break, I write in my journal. It is not perfect, but I like my words. I like how they don't feel burdened by the pressure of being perfect words. I filled three pages, top to bottom, during that short and strenuous hike, and there is a certain irony to it because I wrote them right next to those previous three pages. No, I did not get a new journal; I was committed to this one and would continue to be so.

This summer we went on another backpacking trip, and after weighing my pack--fifteen pounds--I was offered another journal to replace my old one. I kindly refused. When we reach the trailhead, I unzip the front pocket of my pack and the weathered green-marbled cover of that pocket-sized composition notebook smiles up at me. It no longer taunts me, elusive as ever, instead greeting me with the weary countenance of an old friend. I take it out, flipping past the previous two hikes, and turn the page. I stare at the blank sheet, at the empty lines, and I hesitate. I feel myself slipping into old anxieties. Maybe I should have written, written about our eventful drive here, or written about any number of other irrelevant things. Maybe I should just write. I scribble this dismissive line in my journal, *'If I have time I will tell about our drive here, not right now though,'* before smiling. I am free. If the only way to not lose my emotion thoughts is to not stop writing, then so be it. Every break, however brief, I have my journal out, I do not

stop writing even while I hike sometimes, and somehow the words are easier now than they once were.

I read my journal, pride reverberating in my chest as I read my emotion thoughts out loud, declaratory. They are not structured, they are not analytical or precise, but they are mine. They are driven by my rushing thoughts and are filled with something raw and personal. I filled the pages with casual banter, with kindhearted teases, with whatever was lurking in my mind at the time... I flip back through that journal now, past those three shame-filled pages, past those three simple but honor-filled ones, and then my magnum opus, my sixty-six pages all written in vivid red ink, and I find a trail of how I got where I am, of the years it took. This is my journey; this is my journal.