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Schuyler Diess

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The Art of Quitting

by Schuyler Diess

For three short years, my parents' lives revolved around my existence. They complimented every scribbled drawing and misspoken sentence. Even pooping was rewarded, usually with a single M&M. A few months after I turned two, my parents started telling me I was going to be a big sister. They made the whole thing sound great and as time went on, I grew more excited to meet the little sister who would magically emerge from my mom's stomach. Nine months later, when I held her for the first time in the hospital, I looked up at my parents confidently and said, "I think she loves me." After taking another moment of consideration I continued, "I think she dreams about me."

Muriel was only home for a week before this loving illusion shattered. As older siblings have for generations, I raged against the idea that I must share my parents love. All this new thing could do was cry, poop, and cry some more. She definitely couldn't recite all the lyrics to "Part of Your World" or run laps around the house in just a tutu; two skills I had grown quite adept at in my three years. Her existence alone demanded an attention that mine no longer did. I found little ways to punish her for this. I dumped water on her face during baths, pinched her in the middle of naps, and used moments alone to give her Crayola makeovers. I used to take her little hand and rub it against my face saying, "She's just so cute and plump and juicy." My teeth were locked around her fingers before anyone had the chance to rescue her.

When these efforts didn't gain back my parent's affection, I changed my methods. I quit doing things that separated me from my sister and attempted to revert to infancy. Most significantly, I quit using the toilet. If she didn't have to bother, neither did I. After a few attempts at this, my parents, completely fed up with my behavior, told me I was a "big girl" and I needed to go clean out my own underwear. I disappeared to the upstairs bathroom in a stomping fury. When I didn't return for a while my Dad came upstairs to check on me. He opened the bathroom door to find me furiously scrubbing away at my underwear with his toothbrush.

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When I was around five-years-old, I took interpretative dance classes with my neighbor and sister. We dressed in home-made, sequin-covered leotards and strut across the dance floor with our arms flailing in the air. We were given suggested dance moves but they were left up to our own interpretation. Muriel strayed the farthest from the suggested moves. She preferred to dance her own routines at least ten feet away from everyone else. Our recitals consisted of about thirty children stumbling their way across a stage, all of them waving their arms in the same general direction. My sister decided to proclaim her individuality in the middle of our summer recital. Everyone had already made their way across to the other side of the stage when Muriel slowly made her way to the middle. She stopped there, turned to face the audience and kicked her leg into the air with as determination as her body could muster. Serious as ever, she turned and finished her walk to the side of the stage where we waited for her.

When I turned 7, I graduated from interpretive dance to ballet. It was through the same dance studio, but had much stricter policies. There would be no missing class, no dance move interpretation, and most definitely no unruly leg-kicking. I enjoyed the classes at first. I felt glamorous and important in my professional, sequin-free, leotard. However, perfecting the leap can only stay interesting for so long. One Saturday, me and a fellow classmate caught a case of the giggles during warm-up and were asked to leave the room and cool down. As an aggressive suck-up, this punishment wounded me to my core. I tried to continue but felt self-conscious, missing the free-for-all style of interpretive dance. I began skipping class and faking sick when everything else failed. Before long, my parents recognized ballet as a waste of money and allowed me to quit. So began my longest running streak: quitting extracurricular activities. I quit them like it was my job.

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My elementary school provided Suzuki violin lessons to any child who wanted them. Our instructor, Mr. Jonas, taught us with the frustrated kind of passion reserved for elementary school music teachers. He spoke through

clenched teeth when we carelessly swung around our baby-sized violins, but conducted us with pride as we screeched out “Hot Cross Buns” to a crowd of wincing parents. I loved violin. It provided a nice break from classes and I got to wear my favorite velvet dress at every recital. In fifth grade, I graduated to touring group, a great honor for any young violinist. We practiced two days a week after school and got to play in different venues all over Denver. The year I joined, we played the national anthem at a Rockies game and my parents told me my face was on the jumbo screen for at least five seconds.

While I relished the prestige, I usually reserved the half-hour after school got out for an episode of *Dragon Tails* and slices of apples and cheese. I was reluctant to sacrifice this ritual for violin practice. I attended diligently for the first few months, but found myself livid that Muriel got to go home and indulge in something I was missing. I began sneaking onto the bus behind her, with one hand over my face so my teacher, Ms. Mandy, couldn’t catch me. From there, I counted on my parents’ forgetfulness to keep me out of trouble. I got away with it until my parents got a call from Mr. Jonas who suggested I finish out the year but not return for the following one.

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Like every middle-class child in America, I took my turn at pee-wee soccer. I played with my elementary best friend, Sarah Berger. She was as tall and gangly as I was short and stubby, and our friendship revolved around our mutual love for bullying each other. I grew mosquito-bite breasts at the age of eleven before they abruptly stopped their progress a year later. Sarah loved to poke me as hard as she could right in the nipple and watch me wince. I like to think she played a role in their stunted growth. But I could always get back at her by encouraging other kids to call her cheese burger or copying her every move to a breaking point.

I competed against her fiercely, at practices and games alike. Even when it became clear that she didn’t care, I couldn’t stop myself. At the end of every practice a sticker was awarded to the player that showed the most effort or initiative, same with games. The game sticker was a more coveted prize but an abundance of practice stickers equaled several game stickers in worth. I’ve wanted few things in life as much as I wanted those stickers. I spent down-time during practice dribbling a soccer ball back and forth across the field. At the end of many practices my coach would ask who everyone thought deserved the award and they would all mumble my name with half-hearted glances in my direction. They all disliked me. I would have hated myself too at that point.

One girl had even more disdain for me than the rest. Chloe’s blonde hair, pretty face, and lack of pre-mature breasts gave her a sense of entitlement that even I couldn’t obtain. Her parents had the kind of money that breeds an instant resentment from others. I understood that both mine and Sarah’s parents disliked her family, which only fed into my own dislike. By the end of my first year, Chloe and I despised each other.

Our coach, known to us only as Tim, tried his hardest to inspire in us a love for the game, not a need to win. My parents loved his philosophy but I was genetically bound to a fierce love for competition. Having suffered for years from the same condition, my Mom tried to push me in the other direction with friendly coaches and Montessori school, but I was my mothers’ daughter. Between my love for the glory of stickers and my need to destroy Chloe, I became unstoppable. I gave my all at every practice, often overexerting myself to the point of embarrassment. I loved to win, especially if it was by my hand.

A year later, my coach quit and so did my enemy. They transferred us to a new team with an even friendlier coach, who treated practices like a free-for-all. With no stickers and no rival, my ambition began to dwindle. When the season ended, cementing our unbroken losing streak, I promptly quit.

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I started high school at the tail end of a four-year chubby phase everyone sympathetically referred to as “baby fat.” We needed at least one year of sport or P.E., so I joined the cross country team with the idea that I would get it over with in the first year, and grow into a more lady-like figure. Every day after school, I would gather with a large group of girls and stretch before they broke us into different skill levels and gave us our running assignments. I ran with the JV girls on a five-mile loop that took us right past my house. The temptation to leave them all behind for a tall glass of ice water and a couch left me jogging wistfully at the back of the group. One day, I lagged so far behind that our coach came to pick me up in his car, claiming it was “unsafe” for me to run alone.

I kept pretty good time with a girl named Aubin Fefley. Although she towered at least a foot above me, she ran in a knock-kneed style that caused her to kick up fist-sized clumps of grass and slowed her down considerably. Many of the other girls on the team simultaneously ran cross country and played club soccer. They shared a sports-

man comradery I couldn't find in myself. Even during group cheers the words sounded strange coming out of my mouth. Aubin and I became friends by default and developed our own sense of comradery and competition.

That first month, my legs chaffed so badly that I developed what is now a permanent waddle. I nearly fainted one afternoon from dehydration. My coach pulled me aside and told me I should be drinking 4-5 full water bottles a day. The next day I tried out his advice but after my tenth pee trip, I decided it wasn't for me. An older girl on the team told me she always drank a glass of chocolate milk after practice, claiming it was the best post-run beverage. That afternoon after practice I chugged a glass of chocolate milk and spent the next hour on the bathroom floor, convinced I was going to throw up. Eventually, I learned to wear leggings, drink a reasonable amount of water, and developed running habits that were unique to myself. By the end of the season, I considered running a welcome part of my daily routine. I continued to run throughout the year, even timing myself to set faster personal records.

Next fall came and although I continued to run, I managed to avoid joining the team. I employed a collection of excuses, each one more false than the last. The more I told them, the more I believed them myself. Truthfully, I didn't want to reinsert myself in a group of people I never reached a comfort level with. I continued to run on my own, and still do to this day. It's a source of pride in my life. I know when nothing else works out, I still have this one thing. I don't know if re-joining the team would have changed this for the better or the worse. I do know how it reinforced the addictive feeling of quitting for me. The feeling that floods your body with relief and just a twinge of guilt, that is easily pushed to the back of the mind.

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Like most kids do, I went through a phase where I wanted to be a teacher. I loved my elementary school teachers to the point of infatuation. My mom found (and read aloud) diaries in which I wrote love letters to my second grade teacher, Ms. Mandy. To me, they were the smartest, most amazing women I knew. I didn't have a male teacher until middle school, which is something I'm positive was orchestrated by my mother. In addition, she made sure my sister and I were treated only by female physicians. She wanted us to know that women could fill these roles just as well as men could.

I held onto my teaching goal well into middle school, where I was introduced to an entirely new learning style. Having gone to Montessori school for the first eight years of my life, a system in which you were evaluated by numbers and letters was entirely foreign to me. Much to my mother's dismay, I loved it. I found nothing more satisfying than that large, red A on the top of a paper. The idea of teaching and passing down that kind of judgment, exhilarated me. I brought home spotless report cards that my parents met with mild enthusiasm. Where they hoped I would find a love of learning, I found a love for winning. I found a group of like-minded, equally annoying girls, who could shed tears over an A minus.

The summer following my first year of middle school, I spent afternoons eating hot dogs and mac and cheese with my grandma on her balcony. She was a strong-willed, German woman whose opinions would offend most people. I once watched her bend over a baby at the supermarket and in a sweet, cooing voice say, "MY, what an ugly baby." She was quick to cut anyone down using anything from their weight to the shape of their nose. While she could be vain and critical, I saw her only for her strength and independence, and I loved her fiercely.

One afternoon she asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up and I told her teacher, beaming with confidence and waiting for praise. She looked at me appalled and said, "Darling, you are much too smart for that." I felt my stomach drop to the floor with disappointment. I fumbled for another, better answer and said, "Um, Doctor?"

"Much better," she smiled, patting me reassuringly on the hand. That was it, the turning point. From then on I set my sights on that prestigious, white coat. When I told my parents this story years later, they were disappointed, but not surprised. They knew my grandparents shared a dislike for teachers. My dad assumed it came from the discrimination they experienced in German schools as Jewish children.

Nevertheless, my grandmother's harsh opinions pushed me towards something I may not have found otherwise. I loved the formulaic nature of medicine: asses, diagnose, treat. It felt purposeful on a large scale. Just the thought of reaching the goal filled me with a premature sense of entitlement. My mom was a nurse at the Children's Hospital and she harbored resentment for most doctors. She felt her hard work went unrecognized and her opinions unheard. Among the doctors she liked, some expressed regret as to their career choice. They wished they had become Physician's Assistants or Nurse Practitioners, really anything with less hours and insurance complications. She warned me of these situations, wanting me to explore all options in the medical field. At the time, I assumed

she didn't want me to surpass her expertise, which only made me want to more.

My mom set up a day for me to shadow one of her favorite doctors, Dr. Chang. He worked as an orthopedic surgeon at the Children's Hospital and specialized in making colorful, decorated casts that the kids loved. He was a staff favorite, famous for blasting *The Grateful Dead* in the operating room.

I probably tried ten outfits that morning, unable to find the perfect balance between casual and professional. I arrived early and when Dr. Chang walked in the room I gave him a firm hand-shake and looked him right in the eye, like my dad taught me. He sat down and I remained standing as he questioned me about my ambitions to be a doctor. I told him why I wanted to be one and where I planned on going to school. He listened to what I had to say, nodding his head. When I finished, he looked up at me and said, "I think it's great that you want to be a doctor, but it's hard work. I see a lot of women struggle with the career because they want to be home with their children. You may want to strongly consider something like nursing instead."

I felt the floor drop from underneath my feet. His voice sounded far away as he continued, "...and University of Montana is not a great school so you're going to have to get a 4.0 and even then it will be difficult." I managed to respond but spent the rest of the day in silence, feeling miles away from my body. I felt like a nuisance, like some clueless girl he had to drag around just because he owed her mom a favor. He played *The Grateful Dead* in the operating room and I found it the opposite of endearing.

I went to the first few pre-med meetings at the university and met with an advisor who reviewed my options with me. During the meetings they discussed other options, such as Physician's Assistant and Nurse Practitioner. In these fields you have the ability to diagnose, prescribe medicine, and even assist in surgery but in most cases you do so under a doctor's supervision. And by this they don't always mean direct supervision. Your supervising doctor could be a phone call away, working in another town. However, the most significant difference is only two years of school, post-undergrad, and a regular, nine-to-five work schedule.

After learning more about the options, I spoke to several doctors and PA's to see what they thought about their careers. A striking number of doctors warned me against medical school, saying in the end it wasn't worth what they put in. Instead, they said PA was the way to go. The Physician's Assistants I talked to expressed passion for their careers and most of them had no regrets. In the end, I changed directions, deciding not to put years and money into a career that was advised against.

Although I felt confident in my decision, for a while I was embarrassed to tell people, feeling like I fell right down the path both my mom and Dr. Chang expected me to. It felt like a failure, like I was picking the easier path. I am still met with the occasional person who asks me, "Why not doctor?" Each time, I wonder if my decision came intrinsically or was influenced by a slew of outside voices saying NO.

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After moving to Missoula, it only took about a year to feel completely influenced by the culture. I wanted to be a part of the Chaco-wearing, beer-loving, outdoor enthusiast community. The summer after freshman year, I took an EMT course through Aerie Backcountry Medicine. Through this organization, I met some of the most fearless women I have ever known. They backpacked, mountain-biked, rock-climbed and specialized in saving people's lives. I wanted nothing more than to BE them.

Later that year, I dated a guy who had a very *Carpe Diem* attitude towards life. I don't subscribe to this notion, having always been the kind of person who lets the day seize me. But he swept me up in the romance of the idea and I ate up every word as if it was some new, revolutionary idea. Midway through the semester we had a Wednesday off in the middle of the week. The night before, between drags from a hand-rolled cigarette, he asked me, "Schuyler, what are you going to do to make this Wednesday different from any other Wednesday?" I felt too embarrassed to tell him I had no plans to leave my couch that next day. I spent the entire following day feeling guilty for staying inside and relaxing.

At the end of the year, feeling inspired by all these new people, I applied and was accepted to a rafting company in Colorado. I would live the entire summer out of my tent and learn to guide class three and four rapids on the Arkansas river and I couldn't help but think, everyone is going to think I'm so cool. I would quickly learn that this should never be the basis behind any life-altering decision.

I spent one-week training at Echo Canyon before I threw in the towel. My first inkling of doubt came during paper-work day, when they explain how a girl died last year during training. We were asked to acknowledge

this as a possible, personal risk. The first few days passed smoothly as they introduced us to the different stretches of river. We rafted through the desert rivers, the snow-capped Sangre de Cristos towering in the distance and for a moment, I felt I had made the right decision.

On the third day, we left on a three-night rafting trip, packing with us our tents, clothes and everything we would need. The moment we left, it started to rain and did not stop for three days straight. Every night I changed in my tent from a wet suit into damp, cold clothes. We all laid our wetsuits out at night in hopes the rain would stop, but woke up every morning to change into a freshly rain-soaked suits.

On the final night of the trip we set up camp on a hill not visible from the fire-pit and cooking area. We couldn't stake our tents in the rock-hard soil so we all piled rocks on top of the stakes, hoping they would hold. That night the wind and rain blew so fiercely that we ate dinner huddled under rain tarps in our rain jackets. After the sun set, we made our way back up to the campsite where I found my tent, rain-fly missing, completely flooded. My sleeping bag was almost completely filled with water.

I moved my half-sopping sleeping bag into a friend's tent and spent the night curled up in the top of the sleeping bag, where the water hadn't reached. I left my toothbrush and paste in my pocket from the night before and woke cold, wet and covered in toothpaste. When I shared the story with my instructors the next day they said stuff like that was something to get used to. Conditions could be rough and you had to be able to withstand them.

When we got back from our trip, I packed up my stuff and head for home. I drove out the entrance onto the highway and felt a massive weight lift from my shoulders. The familiar feeling of relief flooded my body but with no hidden twinge of guilt. I went on to spend what might have been the last, full summer with my sister. It's still embarrassing to explain why I quit, but I never felt any regret. My passion to become a doctor and my decision to try raft guiding were carried out with the intention of gaining prestige or impressing other people. In this way, quitting doesn't hold me back from things I could accomplish. Instead, it helps me see the difference.