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HELL ISN'T EMPTY IF ALL THE DEVILS ARE THERE

KAILYN MERCER

There's something to be said for the memoir written by someone who hasn't lived through what most would consider a serious trauma or something "normal people" don't go through. Someone who hasn't lived through a "larger-than-life" experience. Average people, with average lives, writing an anything-but-average full length memoir. Bloggers become novelists, spewing forth a narrative that everyone has lived, everyone has experienced, and *everyone can relate to*. I guess that's the whole point. When Jenny Lawson published her first book, *Let's Pretend This Never Happened*, she became an overnight success. Everyone *felt connected* to each other and to her—the writer! "This voice behind these words, she knows me! We're the same person, connected in our minds and experience!" (*I am he / As you are he / As you are me / And we are all together.*)¹

It's something about being relatable, that no matter how mundane your life may seem (and honestly probably is), no matter how exceptionally unexceptional you are, you are still human. You are somehow still special and worthy of attention. You are still relevant. Therein lies the message of the "average memoir:" You, all of you, are remarkable. (*There are 7 billion 46 million people on the planet and most of us have the audacity to think we matter. I know it's a lie but I prefer it to the alternative.*)²

Your life isn't inherently interesting. What entralls and

1. The Beatles. "I Am the Walrus." *Magical Mystery Tour*, 1967.

2. George Watsky. "Tiny Glowing Screens Pt. 2." *Cardboard Castles*, Hodge, 2013.

invigorates you can be the most banal of shit to everyone else. Frankly, (*fuck me gently with a chainsaw, do I look like Mother Teresa?*)³ no one cares. The *New York Times* Bestseller List isn't full of boring shit. Many people don't want to read about the daily events of someone's life for 300 pages without something outside of the norm happening. Say something. Do something. That's what we live for. (*Come on, it'll be very.*)² We devour fast-paced, overly-dramatic fiction as if our lives depend on it. Yet somehow, against all odds and assumptions, we find entertainment in the reality of others. We find solace in David Sedaris explaining the process of quitting smoking, comfort in Jenny Lawson describing a below-federal-poverty-level childhood in some unheard of town in Texas and we found a whole damn *culture* in *Eat, Pray, Love*.

At their core, none of these stories are as fascinating as they seem. Quitting smoking is not breaking news. Everyone's done that shit or some version of it at least. I quit smoking a month ago; no one cares and *The New Yorker* definitely won't be publishing a 3,000-word article detailing my personal smoking history.

The difference between the harrowing tale of David Sedaris telling his vice to fuck off and me, whining like a baby about how damn hard quitting feels, is that he tells the story in such a way that you become entirely empathetic to his plight. Furthermore, he's telling you secrets and you feel like his confidante. He trusts you, he's speaking with you as if you are his best friend, and damn, do you feel special to be the one listening. The faceless creator behind these words is somehow brought down to your level or you up to theirs. You feel connected, not because of the story itself or the content of it, but because of how the story is *told*. You become the storyteller, as in fiction you become the protagonist. You, the reader! That's you standing in the medical examiner's office of death, holding a deceased stranger's lung! You, chain-smoking in an airport bar, promising with each light that, damn it, this one is your last.

These writers, these everyday people with their extraordinarily ordinary lives have a talent. They put forth an

3. *Heathers*. Directed by Michael Lehmann. Cinemarque Entertainment, 1980.

emotion that invades the reader's own psyche, forcing them to feel as the writer or protagonist does. It's a talent usually lauded in film directors and novelists but applies here in the personal essay.

I'm not sure if one can accurately judge their own "talent." I think it's ultimately up to someone else to decide. I'm sure Sedaris is only aware of his talent because his *New Yorker* bio reads "David Sedaris contributes frequently to *The New Yorker*," and I assume such a highbrow publication doesn't let you contribute frequently unless they like you. How arrogant then is it to confess that I, as with virtually everyone else on the planet, am convinced that I have so many stories I could tell you?

I could tell you how my childhood was shitty. I know, a shitty childhood, how completely unique. I sometimes wish someone would write a memoir about their white, middle class upbringing. That would be weird to me. You mean families eat dinner together? *Regularly*? And 12-year-old daughters aren't forced into situations where they have to protect their mothers, even if that protection means risking their own physical wellbeing? Even if it means wearing long-sleeve shirts until the bruises fade?

I could tell you how I quit smoking, or I could tell you the truth.

I didn't, really. I made it about a week without smoking at all (*Nikki, baby, I love you, but now I gotta go.*)⁴ After that, I just quit smoking a pack a day: I quit buying my own cigarettes until the day last week when I finally went and bought my own again. I pretended I was proud and deleted that "Quit Smoking Now!" app on my phone, even though it reinforced my lie, telling me I had survived 30 days without a cigarette. If you don't tell those you're afraid to disappoint that you've failed them, have you really disappointed anyone but yourself? And with such low expectations, can you disappoint yourself?

But you've heard all of this before. Hundreds of memoirs and essays detailing childhood trauma and rape have been published throughout the years. People dedicate entire blogs to recanting their personal struggle with addiction. Everyone has had bad shit,

4. Logic. "Nikki." *Under Pressure*, McArthur, 2014.

hard shit, unmentionable shit occur in their lives. My story doesn't make me special or different, so why would I bother telling you?

My point here is not that trauma has become the new normal or that I can't tell you my stories because they've "already been told." It's that the trauma discourse has come to the surface, has seeped into the mainstream culture. Trauma has been recognized as common, almost unavoidable. It's no longer "shell-shock" or being "weak," it's PTSD. The stigma of trauma has faded and yet I am still so scared to tell you anything. Fearing some unforeseen repercussions, if I told you a story, if I wrote down a concise history of my childhood abuse or the rape that took my virginity, I would leave out the names and it wouldn't be to protect the predators.

Reading a memoir is an exercise in self-awareness where you start to feel okay because *someone else is talking about this*. Who am I then to rely on others to tell me their story, to help me get over mine? Who am I to not tell my story because I'm scared of what you'll think of me? Or how you'll look at me? (*How am I to forgive myself for doing nothing in the mouth of trauma? Is silence not an act of violence, too?*)⁵ I'm so afraid of seeming weak that I refuse to even admit that I once was. I refuse to admit that it was—is—okay to be scared and fragile. I can't admit that sometimes, staggering through the day in a daze of flashbacks and triggers is *normal*.

But one thing I can admit to is that I am unhealthily self-absorbed. At least once a day, I make a joke about how I'm a narcissist. I tell friends who compliment me that they're only feeding my ego and someday, when I'm rich and famous and every one respects me, I'll never think of them. I'm only kidding when I say that, it's subconscious way of saying, "Don't count on me, and I won't count on you."

I respect them, the writers of personal narratives. I respect Jenny Lawson for talking about her miscarriage and how it changed her; I respect Blythe Baird for using spoken word poetry as a conduit through which she can tell the story of her assaults; I respect David Sedaris for a) quitting smoking because that shit is hard, and b) for talking so candidly about being ostracized by his

5. Blythe Baird. "Pocket-Sized Feminism." YouTube, 2016.

father for being gay (My dad left 'cause he didn't want a girl) and every other private thing he tells anyone who picks up one of his books. It takes courage to write about one's personal life, to disregard judgment and be brutally honest about their shortcomings and failures. We see ourselves within them, just like we're meant to see ourselves in the hero/heroin within fictional pieces. As long as we're capable of empathy (lookin' at you, Patrick Bateman), we have the ability to mirror emotions of those we have come to care for. Film directors do it with photography and camera movements, writers do it with words and structure. The story isn't as important so much as the emotion it garners.

So, really, just be honest. Be open and enthralling and helpful. If you can't fix the problems of your readers, gently guide them toward the path of okay-ness by telling them your story. Be funny and witty and successful.

Or write about how you're a sensitive little bitch who pretends to be aloof and struggles with intimacy and honesty. I, of course, don't care.