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The Courage to Sound Like Ourselves

22 February 2017

### Wants

I remember pushing the television's off button *hard*, like my pointer-finger against the warm plastic really meant something, and somehow it made me the better person. My mother would leave the TV on in her upstairs bedroom while she was downstairs or outside, or even worse, while she was taking her ritual, hour-long showers. A waste of electricity! A waste of water! This is what the burgeoning hippie inside of me was saying, we *were* from California afterall, where the air was dry and the land was thirsty.

I would scream down the staircase, thinking that somehow I was diciplining my mother. I was the one teaching her a lesson.

"Leave her alone," my dad would say. And casually, jokingly, he would add, "It's all she has, let her be." Tone aside, these words still had meaning.

It's all she has.

It took me a while to figure out what this really means. Maybe it didn't actually hit me until I moved out, when I felt, along with my new-found independence, the need to justify my every action.

I do remember thinking about this though, before I turned thirteen. It was the summertime and I was feeling liberated by the first tastes of independence that along with a guarenteed awkwardness, fortunately came along with the age. My parents had left me home

alone before, but not for long periods of time like that summer when I was twelve, not that I can remember. I had a routine-- I would make my lunch (quesadilla, carrots, and pink lemonade), watch an episode of *Freaks and Geeks*, and then get to my summer reading: *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* by Betty Smith.

The book is a coming-of-age novel about a young girl, Francie Nolan, who grows up in a tenement apartment in Williamsburg, Brooklyn during the first decade of the 20th century. She is born to parents that are both young and poor; her mother is determined to give Francie and her brother a better life, and her father, though kind and charming, is an alcoholic that is unable to financially provide for the Nolans. Francie spends her days reading. She escapes her poverty with books and small candies when she has a penny. Her life is brightened by the little things. At the time of reading this book, Francie's father, Johnny Nolan, in ways, reminded me of my own father. Johnny was a romantic, always singing and bringing other pleasures into the life of the Nolan family, but he never made money with his singing, as good as he was. Francie's mother reminded me of my mother, always making do with what she had.

This book got to my core. It turned me inside out and flipped me upside down, and my heart ached with my head down on my desk clenched between my arms as I cried the hardest I remember my twelve-year old self ever crying when Johnny died. I cried for hours. I was crying for Francie, but it felt like I was crying for myself. The Nolan's weren't a family of excess. But, when Francie's aunt criticizes her for throwing away her coffee, Francie's mother says,

Francie is entitled to one cup each meal like the rest. If it makes her feel better to throw it way rather than to drink it, all right. I think it's good that people like us

can waste something once in a while and get the feeling of how it would be have lots of money and not have to worry about scrounging. (Smith 12)

I look at the little red star I put next to this paragraph in the book back then, and only now do I realize that this is what my dad meant. It's the Little Things. These Little Things can make a person feel like they have more than they actually have, and *that* can make a person feel *goood*. Sometimes people need that, *it's all that they have*.

No, I did not grow up in a tenement house in Brooklyn. I know my family is different from the Nolan's. I got scholarships to private schools, and in our apartment, I had a bedroom with a bathroom inside of it, even if that's where the cat's litterbox was. I count my blessings. But we never went on family vacations and we never had a big fancy house in the hills of Los Angeles. These were the pipe dreams, half-heartedly mused about and occasionally followed by a sigh. We did, however, sometimes go out for nice meals at the hip neighborhood restaurants. This is how my dad treats himself. He one time read in a magazine that it's been "proven" that the happier people are not those who live extravagantly, but those who, when they can afford to, treat themselves with little luxuries.

An entire pot of coffee, the TV left on while not being watched, just because she wanted it to be, and showers that left her fingers pruned and her face glowing; these things are my mother's only luxuries.

I still think that leaving the TV on is a waste of electricity, and that taking long showers is a waste of water, but I have come to see that these little luxuries once a week, occasionally more frequently, the amount of time I will say my mom partakes in them, may not really hurt anyone. These things my mother does for herself may not be my favorite way that one chooses to

reward herself, but I no longer see why scrutinizing others for these things makes me the better person. My mother always gives more than she gets. She puts everyone before herself, constantly running around doing errands for every one else in our family, along with her friends. She cannot say no to all that others ask of her and I think she deserves something, even if it's the tiniest something that I may find myself chastising, if that's what makes her feel like she has more than what she has been dealt.

When people think of LA, they don't just think of a land aching for water. More often than that, it is seen as a land of materialism. But with the exception of my family's rather small wants, I never found us particularly materialistic. I think about materialism much more in New York City. I feel like this is the place where people like to acquire *stuff*. Or maybe, I'm just at the point where I have more of a control of the things that I acquire. I find myself, thinking about my family's little luxuries a lot here. How often can I treat myself? I use it to justify buying a five dollar cup of coffee, at one point almost daily. Right before I buy it, I find myself conflicted, thinking about how I should really be saving this \$5 a day. I want the coffee but surely it adds up? But then I think to myself that I work for my money and I can spend it how I please. I can splurge just a tiny bit everyday if I want to. This overpriced cup of coffee, crafted beautifully with a little heart of foam just for me, a quick love affair-- it's all I have!

But is it? Probably not, even if sometimes it feels like it is. I ask, what do I have and what do I deserve and what do I need? Do I need it or do I want it? And is it that bad to want it?

I find myself mostly condemning consumerism. Condemning the materialistic nature that people expect from me when I say I'm from Los Angeles. But that cup of coffee? That cup feels *goooooood*. Sitting in a coffee shop, reading with muffled background noises, this saves me from

myself, distracts me from my oh-so-distracting thoughts about this world and my classes and the people around me and the changing climate that is contributing to making my California too dry. I have many privileges, I know this, and as I sit in a fancy coffee shop, sniffing espresso as my fingers leisurely do their dance against my laptop keyboard, I know I need to remember this more. But this little privilege, this coffee, I relish in. Somehow I can think in this shared, unauthorized office space that's definitely not just my own. \$5 I probably shouldn't spend daily, but in the moments I feel the warmth of the coffee against my chapped lips, that's when I start to feel sane. I am happy. In my minutes sipping, time slows down, my brain turns on its defroster ridding itself of the fog, and I feel a moment of peace. A moment of clarity, or at the very least, a moment that is mine to savor. Sometimes I'm saddened that something I had to *buy* like a cup of coffee can make me feel so nice. It makes me feel as though I am living out this LA stereotype. But other times I feel a bit of hope that something small can incite this feeling of ease. To find happiness in a little luxury? I think we all deserve that. We all need that. Because hope? It might be all we can give ourselves. It might be all we have.

Work Cited

Smith, Betty. New York, NY, HarperPerennial, 1998.