

To Be Whole

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Please note, this work contains content related to assault, substance use, and death.

You don't think much about your age anymore. Not in the way you used to, at least. You find beauty in aging and growing old with the people you love. You spent your eighteenth birthday, August 22nd, 2019, cherishing your new wave of adulthood with your high school and childhood friends that were soon leaving for college. At eighteen the world was your oyster. You worked at a pour-over only coffee shop in Berkeley and lived at home, saving money to solo travel. You went to Thailand and frolicked in coffee farms in the north, and lost your virginity on the roof of a party hostel in the south. You talked to everyone from all over the world, your naivete and fresh eyes to adulthood giving you an endless social battery. You were the coolest person you knew.

You thought deeply about turning nineteen. You felt lost and spent your birthday alone by the beach in Chicago, having just moved there with five art students you met on Facebook in the middle of the pandemic. Within six months of living there you half-assed a couple of online classes, picked up cigarettes and a few restaurant jobs, then promptly left after getting tired of burning your money when you could live at home for free. You missed your friends too, to say the least. I mean for fucks sake, you were nineteen in middle of a pandemic—you needed social stimulation. That was nearly four years ago, and so much has changed. You still feel lost, just in a different way now. You usually feel

pretty lost, but maybe that's just how your early twenties are, and you're okay with that.

You were on the cusp of twenty when you moved to New York, and unfortunately were immediately humbled. Two hours into getting to your four-story walk up in Brooklyn, you were on a lime moped—a stupid nineteen-year old decision which quickly ended with you getting teed by an uber. You slid about thirty feet. A bruise was left from the back of your knee to your ankle for about a month. You could hardly walk the day after. Welcome to New York! The city where your dreams are so irrelevant they'll get hit by an Uber driver. The next day you were about twenty steps from a friend's house in the Bronx when a man walking towards you decided to ask if you were a sex doll. It was broad daylight, around four in the afternoon. Face-to-face, you muttered, "No," trying to move past him. Instead, he lurched forwards, grabbed your hair, and dragged you to the ground. Pieces of your dignity lay on the sidewalk next to the water bottle you abandoned after screaming, "Don't fucking touch me" before sprinting across the street. Soon after, you were followed home by a different man, also in the middle of the day. You were nearly twenty and could not yet tell if this was the female experience or the New York experience.

Somehow you made it work, even after those first few days. You became stronger from being persistent in a city that seemed to immediately reject

you. After all, about fifty-percent of people seemed to brush off your experiences as just living in New York. So you rolled with it, got into climbing, read constantly, did yoga twice a day, and had a 4.0 GPA. You were a control freak because everything was out of control. No one really seemed to get why you hated the concept of going out as a twenty-year old in New York City, with the world at your fingertips, but why would they. You loved the food and the music scene, but it was the loneliest time of your life. Luckily the climbing stuck, grounding you, and hosting an outlet for your inner child—the girl that needed to run around and explore. It was the one thing that connected you to your body, as the contusion scar that still lingers on the back of your right leg reminds you of getting hit by a car to this day. You learned to nurture your long-distance friendships, too. You called your Irish friend nearly every week, talking almost as much as you did during the height of the pandemic, and you made an effort to see your friends who went to other schools on the East Coast. You longed for the stability they seemed to have. After a year you were thrilled at the prospect of working at a summer camp in California—the antithesis of everything in New York, it seemed. You longed to be surrounded by something whole, by nature, to see and to be seen by people.

Your twenty-first birthday was underwhelming, but peaceful and joyful nonetheless. You weren't back in New York yet, and rather went to a beer garden with some friends and family at home in the Bay Area. In some ways that summer seemed to heal you. You wanted to hold onto that birthday, a final summer celebration before returning to a city that you were dreading going back to. You were nearly certain you wouldn't do more than one more semester in New York, but you'd give it a shot. Twenty-one marked the first time you practiced radical acceptance in uncertainty—you'd made it this far, after all. Twenty-one was a big year.

By the end of three semesters in New York you learned to lean into the circumstances more—you loved your friends, your roommates, your classes, and your job. But your time there was still liminal, as it is for most people. You would always ask yourself if your brief moments of joy there were worth all that you endured within the first week, and every time, the answer was no. Your closest friend there and former roommate, someone who you once thought fit into New York so perfectly, no longer speaks to the techno-loving friends who you'd go out with until the early hours of the morning, mostly due to their newly found sobriety. They now live alone in Chinatown. Things change, people grow up. They don't love New York but it works, and you're happy for them. You're beyond glad you left.

You left to go to Patagonia, as you yearned to be outside, and are still unapologetically fearless to explore the world. Your three months in Chile were full of challenges and the most beautiful wildlife you had ever seen. With the temporary detachment from nearly everything that was once relevant in your life—your family, friends, and school—you came to a radical acceptance of yourself, your past, and your decisions to constantly up and move, and have since then been genuinely happy with it. You love your life. Nature was the constant that grounded you. But unfortunately soon after, things changed for the worse.

You never knew the world could shatter in just three words.

You were nearly half drunk in a Santiago airport lounge when you found out. Having just left the NOLS course in the middle of Patagonia where you spoke to only about twenty people for three months, you were desperate to do anything for an airport drink (or three) during your twenty-plus hour travel day. Sneaking into lounges is one of your favorite activities, after all. Ten minutes into sinking into the cushy leather chair while a movie plays through your noise-canceling headphones, one of your best

friends Facetimes you. You are always elated to get a call from her—you've known each other since you were five and she is by far your most grounded and intelligent friend. She was the first person you called before and after going off the grid, so it hadn't been long since you heard from her just a few days prior, after regaining access to technology. That time around she was in her apartment at Brown, cooking dinner. But this call was a bit different.

Back in her childhood bedroom, in one breath through muffled sobs, she says, "Laura, my dad died." And just like that, your life is irrevocably changed.

You spend the following summer at home, working in a climbing gym and doing your best to stay afloat. Not only is it a shock and you fear for your friend, but her dad, Alan, was one of your closest father figures as well. As much as you tried to remember that you are everything you were before and more, you felt broken, to say the least. He got you a semi-gag gift of socks from Costco before you left for New York. You still think of him every time you wear a pair.

The edge of twenty-one is spent "getting things out of storage" in New York, because even though your things were really with family in Connecticut, it was a good enough excuse to see some old friends and go dancing. You had gone through some of the worst months of your life, grieving, just before. It was still tough. But by visiting a place you're not living, you are free. Your inner child-like frolicking is released. You dance like no one is watching because no one is!

So when you turn twenty-two, at home in the Bay Area, you don't feel like a failure for living at home and taking a semester of community college. Although you are frustrated with the world, the way that bad things happen to good people, you feel grounded. It's okay to take things slow. You needed a breath of life, and at home people could look at you, know it all, and get it all. You hate living with your mother but simultaneously wouldn't have it any

other way. It is the first time in your life where you do not feel the visceral need to find a new adventure thousands of miles away from the people you love. You move about your life choices with slightly more logic, looking for longevity over impulsivity in the big choices. You are grounded by the people around you—it is the first and possibly only time in adulthood where you live within a two hour radius of all of your childhood friends. Two of them have just graduated college and are also living at home, a right of passage in today's economy it seems. You are ever changing, but you know that these people will be in your life until the day you die. They are your sisters, your village.

You move to Boulder, Colorado, in January of your 22nd year, for school. You have vivid flashbacks of going to Boulder for a day once when you were seventeen, and feeling passionately about never going to school there. At the time you thought Boulder was gorgeous, but had way too much typical American greek-life collegiate-ness for your insufferable champagne-socialist-small-liberal-arts-college-let's-have-a-wine-night-on-the-roof-of-my-apartment-in-Bushwick vibe, at the time. Your world had to get bigger before it got smaller. This time around, being in Boulder, you lean into yourself more. You have grown so very much. You love that your sister lives ten minutes away during her last semester of law school, which you realize actually helps a lot too, especially when she cooks you sister dinner once a week. You come to understand why some people always stay close to family.

The summer was mostly restful yet chaotic. In the middle of July you get a call from Nina, your friend who's dad passed away just over a year ago. During the call in the middle of a hot summer's day in Boulder, you learn that a second blow to our friend group has struck. Our friend's partner of about four years, who we never pictured with anyone else, died that morning in a motorcycle accident. He was twenty-three. He and your friend were

desperately in love. It puts things into perspective, and you realize how minuscule the people who you have casually dated throughout the summer really are. That being said, there is beauty in partnership, and your heart aches for your friend's loss. After all, your friends of nearly twenty years are your backbone, your lifeline. You promise yourself you will handle things differently. You will start convening for joy more rather than loss with the people you love most.

In August I turned twenty-three, and spent the eve of my birthday with my sister and our childhood friend. We spent the evening tripping on shrooms while doing tarot cards and emotionally unpacking our experiences in life, love, and loss. I am thrilled

to age with them. They remind me of all that I am, and as much as I can be flighty, unorganized, and impulsive, I am also curious, kind, playful, and genuine. I have never feared being alone or the solace of traveling because I know that I have myself, and thrive in the opportunities to see how my inner child presents itself to the world in each new setting. I no longer question where I belong, or what setting works for me best. Perhaps that's because I do love living in Boulder, where access to the outdoors is engrained in nearly everything, but I like to think that it's more than that. I no longer question my setting because I no longer question myself.

I am safe, I am loved, I am whole.