

The essay I never wrote

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I plopped the baby on the ground beside me, mail already scattered across the grass like clumsy confetti. He lunged for the letters; I snatched them up and sighed. A long, muggy summer afternoon; too-hot kids whining about everything under the sultry sun and still hours to go before dinner.

The baby grabbed the envelopes again. I gave in. Junk mail; who cares, he was happy. So I reached for the magazine instead, the one that made my heart skip whenever I saw its spine curved in the mailbox, the one my husband and I secretly race to read ahead of each other, leaving favorite pages folded open on the counter so the other doesn't miss the good stuff.

I flipped to the back page. Always the prized place for the best essay. And oh—a small glimmer on a dragging afternoon—a favorite author's byline! This would be so good. This would be the cool breeze on the sweaty neck. This would be the moment's peace in the feuding brothers' backyard war. This would be my five-minute reward for making it through the longest hour before dinner.

I read the whole essay. Start to finish. Five minutes flat.

And it sucked.

It sucked? It was not supposed to suck! It was supposed to enlighten, escape, and enthrall. It was supposed to whisk me away for a moment and drop me lightly back to earth better for having read it.

But it sucked. It was just plain bad: unimaginative, predictable, boring, blah.

I closed the cover and frowned, tossing the disappointment to the grass-clipping strewn mess of a lawn. And I felt that rotten familiar swell within me.

I could have written something better than that, maybe. If only I would try.

If I only could sit down and finish that stupid essay, I could send it off somewhere.

If only I made the time.

If only I didn't waste so much time on stupid things.

If only I sat down and did the work that really mattered.

It's been a whole stupid year since I started it. And I've barely touched it. It'll never go anywhere.

Stupid essay I never wrote. Mine probably sucks, too. At least he gets his published.

I heaved out the whole jagged breath I'd been holding, annoyed at everything. The baby stared up at me, wide-eyed, silently gumming a credit card bill. I turned and squinted up into the crab apple tree, shielding my eyes from the glaring sun.

And then I saw it.

A messy, muddy nest of dried grass and tiny twigs. Hidden high in the tree, thick and hidden in the dense tangle of branches and leaves. I had passed this tree ten times a day, all spring and summer, and never noticed it once.

Of course the lump formed in my throat, the metaphor hanging above my head. Of course the baby crawled over on cue, grabbed a fistful of my hair to pull himself up to my face, eye to eye. He grinned, drooling.

"Ma-ma!" he delighted. "Ma-ma-ma-ma-ma" babbling into my ear as he wobbled next to me.

Of course the throat lump swelled into tears. Of course it was a nest and a baby and a wry reminder from the universe. A mother bird swooping back home and a mama-babble in my ear and a clear quiet voice speaking see?

He is the essay you did not write.

They are the book you have only started.

This is the life you are already writing.

There will always be all the undones before me: sparkling intentions paving the road, ideal habits waiting to be picked up, lofty goals reaching to be grabbed. The essay I never wrote. The workout routine I never started. The room I never painted. The discipline I never tried. The book I never finished.

And cruelest temptation of all, the mythical person I never became because of it.

But all the undones only blind me from the goodness of the dones. Like this small nest in a tangled world that I am helping to build day by day, mud by twig, for these children I love.

Lost in the brambled branches, I busy myself right around it, not noticing its sheer, silent, sacred existence. And like a predictable proverb, I miss the forest for the trees.

What I want to give my life to will never be flashy and sexy. It will never make anyone's *Top 30 under 30*. It will never be a *NYT* best seller.

But it is a worthy enough love to fill every last one of my days.

It will be worth every essay I never write.

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