

Storms Destined to Fade

A nightmare. That's what I used to call it.

I'd glimpse at jumbled-up words--seemingly too complex to sound out--floating in zigzags across a page of dancing animals and floating sandcastles. I'd hear the voices of my parents, overflowing with hope and encouragement, that my mind seemed to readily translate into mounds of jarring criticism. I'd witness the shakiness of my hands underlining each word I read, afraid of being met with the battle of distinguishing whether or not certain letters were crafted to be left mute or voiced. I'd mumble the sound of every letter I encountered, a mob of question marks surfacing above my head when I crossed paths with an ongoing trail of letters that supposedly crafted a word. I would then look at the reflection of my four-year-old eyes staring back at me, accusing it for my struggles instead of pointing the blame to the true culprit: my lack of understanding that actual perfection has never existed.

Word by word, minute by minute, the little girl, bundled up in her pink pajamas and pigtails, grew more distressed at her many failed attempts of achieving so-called "perfection." She grew worried of falling behind the rest of her pre-school friends, disappointed that her mind ached in ongoing throbs as she looked at the next word, and even embarrassed that she couldn't comprehend the word "obvious" like her sister could. But worst of all: the corners of her mouth drooped into a frown, incapable of finishing the story before bedtime rolled around the corner. That night, she'd dream about whether or not the zebra and the cheetah made it to the party.

The ongoing panels of this movie-like nightmare are engraved into the hard drive of my very mind so permanent that even when wiped, the data can still be retrieved. The feelings flowing through my veins are so clear that I could convince myself that I currently embody the pre-schooler I once was, vulnerable and constantly stuck in a state of self-doubt. Once my mental

mouse hovers over the file of these bits and pieces of memory, the system overheats and I'm left with beads of sweat on my brow. Every challenge disposed of on my path was a reminder of these feelings.

Each book she opened, each word she gazed upon, and each letter she articulated nearly correctly were left surrendering to her mental image of perfection. She tore herself down at her failure of living up to the expectations she, herself, had implanted in the crevices of her mind. With every "defeat," she'd just stare at a single word for passing minutes, anxious to make certain her pronunciation was of complete accuracy. Her oblivion to the sounds of a ticking clock, the fake existence of flawlessness, and her emptying hourglass of self-esteem can claim itself as her fatal flaw; she was just lucky enough to escape her tragedy before it imposed its arrival.

As weeks progressed into months, that supposedly fixed perspective seemed to shift. I became aware of the necessity of time, persistence, and patience in every page turn in order to achieve success. Reconstructing the confidence I once lost, I kept reading any book I got my hands on, patting myself on the back whenever I spotted the words: "The End." I learned that these books--ones skillfully weaved around adventurous stories, emotional memories, and intriguing history--are far from the sources of tears. They inhabit the crumpled up tissues I once held in fists, drying up the frustration that fell in downpours across my face. As I grew older, I came to strongly believe that nothing is more meaningful than words on a page that seem to take you by the hand, functioning as a savior from the stressful reality of life that submerges you whole. Sophie Blackall, an Australian illustrator and author notable for her children's books, encompasses this very concept beautifully: "There will always be storms of one kind or another, but I will always be buoyed by books--hopeful, encompassing, life-saving books."

December 25, 2024: *A Typical New York City Sidewalk*

“BEEP! BEEP!” a car horn blared.

I whipped my head toward the window of my car, the abruptness of the sound leaving me to lose my spot in my book. I spot the commotion between a yellow taxi driver and the biker almost instantly. Middle fingers were promptly exchanged, and at the sight of that, I turned away toward the more pleasant sight of my romance novel.

“Con oi,” my dad called me. “You should put your book down. You came to New York City to look at the *city*, didn’t you?”

Nodding, I peer outside again, hoping to be met with prettier scenes than what I had just witnessed. My eyes spotted the tip of the gorgeous Rockefeller tree; the blinding neon lights of Radio City; and the cute ornaments decorating the side of the streets, most of which were covered by mobs of humans.

As my dad continued to stroll around the city on the four wheels of our family van, I took my eyes off of the architectural scenes and pointed my attention to the people. Left and right, pedestrians, all with handfuls of their own problems, were speedwalking to their appointments, bumping shoulders with strangers they cared less to spit the words, “I’m sorry,” to. Taking a bite of my bao bun, my vision panned to arguments between bag sellers and customers, not agreeing upon a price that’ll satisfy the both of them. I then looked at the homeless, shivering in the cold, being left alone without a companion to talk to. *Just a typical afternoon in New York*, I thought, sighing.

The giddiness of the winter season one might expect did not completely sparkle across the frosty atmosphere of New York. Yes, the glowing lights and the fall of subtle snowflakes

were enchanting. However, the minimal “Merry Christmases” and the regular adjustment of sound-cancelling headphones made me lose hope, little by little, of the human capacity to show general empathy and kindness to others. Every part of the world is slowly turning into a jammed, classic New York City sidewalk: everyone attached to their respective dangling earbuds and looking out for only themselves. This sight occurring in slow motion right before our eyes is the very reason why our standards and expectations of others’ actions seem to naturally diminish.

Our one solution lies within close reach: books. The simple turn of pages can restore the faith we lost. From reading movements of an old man wrapping his arm around his wife, to visualizing the considerate grab for napkins to soak up a coffee spill by our favorite character, individuals in our world can learn from the scenes they read and exhibit these actions in our present. Utilizing books as a tool for our actions can bring us the hope Blackall said these collections of paper were capable of upbringing. In any type of storm that may mentally gate you for only worrying about yourself, books can shine a light to pull you out of the drowning rain and bring you to the reality of exchanging general compassion for others you had accidentally left astray. Taking inspiration from books holds the potential of generating a viral web of kindness aimed towards those surrounding us, reviving the faith once lost in the abyss of self-preservation and stress.

April 7, 2023: *You’ve Reached Me, All of Me*

“I listen to the message again. I listen to it on the way home, and several more times before I fall asleep... I listen to it on the days I miss Sam most and want to hear his voice again. I listen to his voice mail until I have it memorized, and I don’t need to play it anymore,” I read, hands gripping the side of the novel, trembling (Thao 292).

Not blinking, I couldn't remove my teary eyes from the page. My eyes trailed at the blank piece of paper, hoping words would magically appear and tell me Sam really wasn't gone. It didn't show up; *You've Reached Sam* has truly met its end.

Just hours before, I was jumping off walls. I was grinning ear to ear. At that moment, I believed that nothing could ruin my supposed everlasting giddiness. There was nothing wrong with my life: school wasn't biting at my flesh, my sisters and I had not undergone the intensity of arguments, and I--the ever so hyper youngest sibling--was still standing as the giggle machine of the family.

Looking back, this switch of emotion was so necessary, even if it left me in chills minutes later. Suppression of any emotion is unhealthy. Floating in a world of purely laughter and smiles deprives you from experiencing all other complex feelings. Similarly, dragging through life with clouded eyes and sagging shoulders share parallel levels of risk. If I had kept spiraling along this trail of only happiness, I'd be left an absolute train wreck once some unfortunate moment hits. The longer this refrain of all other emotions persists, the more dangerous the outcome when this unhealthy barrier inevitably collapses.

Reading has the very power to evoke all emotions--even some that individuals title they lack full possession of. Designating time out of our storms of giddiness or sadness for reading can make the happiest individuals welcome a subtle frown, or the most dull-lit beings have the slightest upward curve in their lip. This healthy balance between sadness, frustration, and joy can overall lead to a more human and meaningful life we were given the chance to inhabit.

September 18, 2025: *Left or Right*

"The youngest sibling is always the most spoiled."

“Mom and Dad always favor you.”

“You always get what you want.”

Stuck forever in the back of my head, these childhood bites and barks seem to haunt me whenever a more unpleasant encounter with my sisters seem to bring it to remembrance. I grew bitter of how they justified their feelings of hardship and injustice through modern stereotypes, downgrading any suffering of my own. It was as if my experiences of having to meet standards they set, having to ignore comparison by relatives, not being given much attention for achievements they already met, and lacking the playfulness of a common childhood due to their “mature age” were of just my own imagination.

Coming back to the present, I recall the relationship we have now: putting our all into each other’s birthday surprises, failing to stifle our laughter as we play strange video games till the crack of dawn, and blabbering nonstop over random topics for hours on end. I wouldn’t trade my bond with them for anything in the world. They are the puzzle pieces that keep me whole; without them, I wouldn’t be *me*.

I’m left at a loss for words, unable to make out what my thoughts were whispering to me. I’m practically planted in the middle between two paths: one with a sign to forever hold the grudge, and the other naming my bitter feelings completely null. I have no idea which one to choose.

After being assigned *One Amazing Thing* by Chitra Divakaruni, I found myself deeply relating to one of the characters. Undergoing similar experiences, Lily is seen being constantly compared to her academic-genius brother, leaving her to pursue alternative methods of eyebrow piercing to gain the attention of her parents (Divakaruni). Even though she could’ve hated his

guts, she reminisced how he'd let her play with his games and books and how there was nothing to dislike about him as a person; she just simply loved him (Divakaruni).

I came to the realization that I shouldn't discredit feelings of my own, but not have them hinder the relationship we have now. Likewise, their emotions should not be discounted for, and that they, too, were going through rough patches that pushed them to act unfairly. Even if it may seem that their personal experiences are a cover-up excuse for their behavior, knowing them, they wouldn't have embarked on those devilish ventures inscribed in my memory without a valid reason.

In our most confused states, reading offers us a path to clarity and comprehension. Books, composed of a series of simple curves and arches of letters, have the capacity to illustrate words into paintings. When buried under ideas that don't necessarily make sense when flown off the tongue, or being left utterly clueless as to what our untidy thoughts truly convey, we should utilize the freedom of visualizing the words composed from the talent of authors and rid the need of writing them ourselves. It is within the proximity of a single book that we are able to discover the treasure we were searching for all this time. When surrounded by a tornado of shuffled notions bottled in a crowded mind, we must take the time to read; the biggest worry is just which book to choose.

January 13, 2025: *Tick Tock*

Two meningitis shots are no joke, I declared, clutching a thermometer that unsurprisingly read numbers no other than a 103°F fever. I placed a hand on the side of my head, hoping to ease the throbbing somehow crammed into the very nooks and grooves of my brain. I glared at my dangling legs, somehow capable of aching in every chair position I attempted. I moved the other

hand over my eyes, questioning how pain could formulate at such an odd spot that left me practically cross-eyed. I could barely move.

Closing my eyes in an attempt to erase the everlasting torment bestowed upon my body, my mental to-do list started flashing in blaring, red lights: two hours of notes, two tests, an 8-page packet, and finalizing next year's courses. Opening my eyes with the little energy I had, I pinched at my skin to wake myself up, desperate for one thing: to study.

I scrolled through my pages of notes; gazed upon my piles of content I had to look over; and sighed at the time-ticking clock, warning me that I was a failure. I shakily reached for the nearest pencil and jabbed at my notes, sentencing myself to another five hours to the three I already had glued to my desk. *I physically cannot do this.*

Knowing my easily overwhelmed demeanor, I would break down--my gears completely malfunctioning--if I had kept up with this desperate reach for a packet and then the next. The piles of stress weighing on my shoulders and the fever clawing at my existence and composure would double the time necessary for studying. I needed a break: a mental one.

From a few pages in a picture book, to the depths of chapters in dystopian novels, books--competent of being composed in any form--free us from the worries and stresses of the real world. Painting a temporary but worthwhile setting, these very books leave us in the shoes of the characters, strangely skilled in the art of shooting lasers or interacting with supernaturals. Books hold the very gift we'd want in our most vulnerable moments: escape. With a book within reach, one's mind can wander off on a mystical journey away from home, undergoing experiences we aren't given the opportunity to inhabit in our reality. Even in storms that differ from mine, books hold the capacity within simple words to heal the inner wounds of one's life and free them from the chains of societal obligations.

It was within the few minutes I granted myself with a book that I was able to persist on my endless journey scrambling through history textbooks and lengthy math equations.

Visibly, mere pages neatly fabricated from our own very nature and the creativity stretched from the brains of writers embrace great benefits to one's own mental health and the world around them. Although books may appear challenging--or sometimes even impossible to decipher at first--in the eyes of many early readers, time continues to prove that every bead of sweat and every click of a tongue is worth the future upbringings entailed to us. In the worst storms--composed of tornadoes of stress or engulfing clouds of self-doubt--it is within the power of words that we may survive and persevere with a rested mind and perhaps, true humanity itself.

If the story of my life lived by one moral, it'd be this: perfection is unreachable, not because of one's lack of ability, but because it has never been a part of any storyline. Achieving a one-hundred percentile frankly doesn't exist. Hours on a single page, reading it over and over, is pointless. This desperate reach to meet one's idea of flawlessness would cause this notion to advance in complexity and difficulty each step one takes, leaving every subsequent attempt an impossible feat. What matters is the effort put into starting a new chapter to obtain the skills necessary to improve, not to perfection but to one's fullest potential.

If I could tell that little girl that all her hard work would be worth it, she'd likely deem my words false. She'd point at her hour-long stare battles with a book, the mounds of tissues overflowing in the trash can, and the stacks of books she failed to complete. However, every second would come to showcase the beautiful gifts of fingers gliding between paper pages and eyes moving left to right, glazing over the magic of words; she would just need a few extra minutes before bed.

Selena Vu

10

Works Cited

Banerjee Divakaruni, Chitra. *One Amazing Thing*. Voice/Hyperion, 2010.

Thao, Dustin. *You've Reached Sam*. New York City, Wednesday Books, 2021.