

One, Two

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One-two, one-two. I strode forward at my usual speed-walk pace, one step per second. My checkered blue backpack thumped against my back as Oak Street stretched out before me in its mottled-grey-concrete glory. A cool breeze swept through my hair, and although the afternoon was a little too sunny for my taste, the leafy green trees granted me shade. I loved trees and leaves—a constant reminder of nature’s beauty. A constant reminder of change.

“You have to make sure it’s not folded and not cut off the page.”

A small pile of leaves—red, orange, gold, yellow, brown—lay beside a voluminous dictionary. My mom was teaching me how to press leaves. All I had to do was flatten a leaf into a page of a big book, almost like a bookmark, and close it. Weeks later, after fall was over, I could re-open the book and find the leaf there, unchanged. It would be as beautiful as ever. I couldn’t believe how easy it was.

I took a deep breath, letting fresh air fill my lungs. I was 8 years old when my mom taught me how to press leaves. I almost forgot what it was like to be left in awe by the simplest things. But childhood wasn’t always so fun. I felt every emotion and change more intensely back then.

It was 8:40 A.M. My first day at DLG would begin in twenty minutes. My mom was speaking in her accented English with the receptionist in the office, but I could only hear my heartbeat.

I didn’t want to be here. I should have been playing in the snow with my best friend Chantal. I should have been reading a Geronimo Stilton book in the library of my now-former school, Osler. Instead, I was sitting in an unfamiliar chair in an unfamiliar building, watching my mom speak to one of many unfamiliar people.

After another lonely day of eating lunch by myself, watching my classmates giggle and whisper to each other in class, and hiding in the bathroom for all of recess, I couldn’t take it anymore.

“Just talk to them,” my mom said.

“Just tell them what school you went to before,” my dad advised.

They made it sound so easy, but I knew I would stutter and struggle to find words. Still, I had no choice but to try. If I didn’t, I would live in misery every day.

It was 10:15 A.M.—time for recess!

“Wait up!” Hadas called. Kate and Alicia joined us. Soon we were all spinning around the flagpole in front of the school, laughing, dancing. The mottled grey concrete and leafy green trees disappeared from sight as I twirled about.

DLG was still unfamiliar in some ways, but my life was still my life. My new friends were kind and hilarious. The library didn’t have as many Geronimo Stilton books as Osler’s, but there was a whole row of Rainbow Magic books. I could always use some magic in my life.

But high school wasn’t so magical: I was always doing boring homework and mindlessly, motionlessly scrolling through the Internet. There was something disenchanting about routine. I longed for childhood wonder. When I was 8, I was lamenting a big change in my life, but when I was 16, I was lamenting the opposite. I was experiencing my first taste of adulthood by “working”—volunteering—as a customer service representative at Science World, a science adventure museum.

“Hey!” James, one of my co-workers, was going to replace me at my station for the next hour. It was time for my lunch break.

I smiled and nodded at him before hurrying to the employee changeroom. I really needed a break. Although I was technically a volunteer, I had to work from 9 A.M. to 6 P.M. at a new section of the museum every hour. I hated that I had to wake up much earlier—7 A.M. at the latest—to get there on time, and it would be 7 P.M. when I got back home. Traffic and work were all routine, but it was unpredictable as well. How did that even work?

After changing out of my uniform and grabbing my sandwich from my locker, I went to the greenhouse for a change of scenery. It was nice to breathe in some fresh air. I only had around 40 minutes left of my break. I suppose school gave the same amount of time for lunch, but this break felt much shorter. What was it about work that was so draining? Maybe I was more physically exhausted—in school, I didn’t have to stand for hours. Here, I rotated between stations, helping visitors with various activities, and I couldn’t sit. The station I just finished was a building-block activity where kids made things—buildings to birds—with Jenga tiles. I had to clean up when they were finished, constantly re-fill blocks, and walk around providing smiles and encouragement.

I never realized how tiring it could be to smile.

I never realized how quickly excitement could fade. For the first week, every minute was a new adventure. Now, every hour was an old routine. I knew which stations I enjoyed and which I didn’t. I used to love the mini go-kart station, but watching the kids push themselves around the

room became repetitive. After 5 minutes, I wanted to take a break—a break that never came. It was drudgery.

I shook my head, trying to escape my thoughts. There was no sense complaining about the past. It was funny, really. I was just a summer volunteer trying to fulfill a graduation requirement. I couldn't even drive, yet I was imagining what adulthood would be like. Then again, this routine *would* become my future, especially since I am an adult now.

Wait, what?

I stop in my tracks. I almost forgot—I'm not used to my age anymore. My birthday was two days ago. I am eighteen years old.

I'm an adult now.

Every image I've seen of Vanderbilt University online has been tinted red-orange-gold-yellow-brown. But in real life, visiting in the middle of spring, I see that it's not always fall on this campus.

The trees aren't red, orange, gold, or yellow—they are green, so many shades of green. It's beautiful.

"Wow, it must rain a lot here," my mom remarks, taking the thousandth photo of a tree. We learned today that Vanderbilt is an arboretum, so there are countless species of trees that have all been carefully tended to. Not even my hometown has seen such vibrant greens.

I love it. More trees mean more fresh air. I take a deep breath. Fresh air for a fresh start.

One-two, one-two. I stride forward at my usual speed-walk pace—one step per second. My checkered blue backpack thumps against my back as Oak Street stretches out before me. The trees are green, but only for now.

I'm an adult now.

How is that possible? And what does that mean? Science World would tell me it means work until retirement age. Every day starts at 9 and ends at 6. Life is banal and stressful, ridden with responsibilities. Hours of my back aching from walking between groups of children all day. Days of my eyes glazing over manuscripts at dimly lit tables. I was barely 16 when I volunteered at Science World, and that was a position that didn't require a high school diploma. How much more would I have to do at age 18? 22? 30?

The pedestrian light across the street turns on. I still need to walk.

Things are different. I can walk anywhere I want without my parents knowing. I can vote in elections. I'm about to start college and live on my own—day after day, month after month.

I rummage through my purse, feeling around for a particular pen. A pen emblazoned with “Vanderbilt University” and its leaf-and-acorn logo. A pen that tells me this is happening. Adulthood is happening.

A pen that is writing my future.

I look at the pen a moment longer, then tuck it back into my purse, hiding it from my sight. But removing it from sight will not stop the passage of time.

“Weber believed that we are trapped in an ‘iron cage’ of rationality. Capitalism entails the rationalization and quantification of the world, and a side effect of this is that nothing is enchanting. Life becomes efficient, routinized, highly bureaucratic, and boring.”

My sociology class was actually not boring, but this statement resonated with me. It had only been a couple of weeks since college classes began, but I was already falling into a routine. The days were not as different as they initially seemed—different topics and readings, but the same classes and the same meals at the same times.

It reminded me of my high school days in Science World. Things weren't as exciting as they were the first few days, then and now.

But...was that such a bad thing?

Even now, I was not so disconnected from high school. I think back to a different class. Not sociology, but history.

My history teacher continues writing on the board. I love Ms. Puzio. Her voice has the sweetest, most engaging tone, but I just want school to end. That hasn't changed.

“Change and continuity is one of the key concepts in historical analysis.”

Things change—revolutions occur, wars break out, different people take political power—but things continue.

From elementary to high school, from walking on Oak Street to walking on Vanderbilt's campus, it's true.

Things change—schools shift, new books come out, different people become central in my life—but things continue.

Another pedestrian light turns on. I keep walking.

My life will change into various routines. I am eighteen. But I don't feel much different from seventeen two months ago. I don't need to be not-me, or new-me, so quickly.

I take a deep breath and close my eyes. The air is crisp, cool, and fresh. Sunlight filters through the fall trees, making the leaves even more vibrantly red, orange, gold, yellow, and brown. Sometimes I forget how beautiful Vanderbilt's campus is. But moments like these, breathing in my surroundings, in awe of nature like I was as a child—these moments remind me that I can still find enchantment in the everyday.