How Did We Get Here?

I remember a time not long ago when I was the life of the party. I was cool, casual, and I always knew just what to say in every party-type situation. I was fun to be around, and people seemed to genuinely want me to be there. My reason for being on this earth seemed to be party attending.

Now flash forward around seven or so years. I find myself at a party standing red-faced and panting over the screaming, thrashing body of my four-year-old daughter. I’m violently strangling and shaking the child’s pink stuffed bunny in my hands. The words, “I’LL SET YOUR STUPID MISTER FLUFFERS ON FIRE WITH GAS AND FLUSH HIM DOWN THE TOILET!” have just left my lips only seconds ago, and at the top of my lungs.Around me are a number of wide-eyed, mouth-hanging-open partygoers…the same partygoers who used to want me at their parties. The room is dead silent other than my panting and my child’s maniacal tantrum. Two women sitting near me lean toward each other and begin whispering, most likely wondering to each other how I have not had my children taken away from me by now.

So how is it that we got from one reality to the other? What happened in those seven years? How can a fluent, suave party professional end up declining to the point that he finds himself in this ridiculously embarrassing scenario? Children. Children are what happened. They have transformed me. They are not growing more mature; I am growing more infantile. I used to be the life of the party. Now I’m the elephant in the room.

Where I used to surf the party crowd, hopping effortlessly from conversation to conversation with ease, I now find myself only getting a few sentences out before feeling the dire need to find out where my daughters are, and what or whom they are harming. I used to be calm and collected. Now I’m nervous and sweaty. Whenever other people’s children run past, I scan them for fresh bite marks or missing clumps of hair that resulted from playing with my children. While engaged in conversation, I find it hard to complete a full sentence or two without instinctively stopping to yell, “HAS ANYONE SEEN HANNAH? WHERE’S HANNAH? NATALIE ISN’T WASHING DOLL HAIR IN THE TOILET AGAIN, IS SHE?”

I feel like a zoo keeper who is in charge of a pair of tigers. Only the tigers are not confined to a cage. Instead, they are free to roam among the zoo visitors, and it is my job to make sure no one gets eaten. And being at the party, my two tiger daughters are even less apt to actually listen to me than usual. So anything I tell them to do, or not do, must be said three to five times with an increase in volume each time my demand is repeated.

If it happens to be a party that has the combination of food and nice carpet, I end up nauseous from the stress. I constantly picture myself writing a check to replace the carpet that my daughters have just spilled sloppy Joe and grape Kool-Aid all over. And if anything goes wrong during the party, I assume it was caused by one of my children. I impulsively and furiously begin apologizing. “I’m sorry about the furnace catching fire, Bill. I’ll find out what they did to it.”

I sometimes wonder if I’ll return to normal after the girls are grown and gone. Or will I carry these mental scars for the rest of my life, like a shell-shocked soldier who can’t escape the vivid images of war? I fear that even if I am able to return to a normal state of mind, I will have long since eliminated all chances of anyone actually inviting me to their party.

The Huge Book of Horrifying Diseases

In the early years of our marriage, my wife decided that she would go back to school and complete the nursing degree that she had started years before. During this time that she was attending classes, she would come home every night with an armload of books and plunk them down on the dining room table. One particular book that was part of her armload was what I referred to as the Huge Book of Horrifying Diseases. The Huge Book of Horrifying Diseases was about four inches thick and weighed around ten pounds. Contained within its pages was a highly detailed description of nearly every disease known to man, and it included all the symptoms and had many large pictures of each disease.

One day, I realized that I couldn’t hear out of my left ear. I had just left work, and I was on my way home, when I turned on my truck stereo for some after-work rocking out. The music pounding out of the speakers seemed different than normal. It seemed to be unbalanced. After a few minutes of trying to adjust the balance between the speakers, I suddenly realized that it was not the speakers that were the problem at all. It was my ears that were unbalanced!

I COULD NOT HEAR OUT OF MY LEFT EAR.

I tried not to panic, but the long lists of symptoms mentioned in the Huge Book of Horrifying Diseases kept flashing through my mind. I repeatedly told myself to stay calm, as I drove home as fast as I could, periodically pounding on the left side of my head in case it was just a bad left ear connection…but to no avail. When I arrived home, I ran straight into the house. Without explaining, I grabbed the Huge Book of Horrifying Diseases right out of my wife’s hands and ran to the bathroom, locking the door behind me. Through the door, I could hear her yelling, “What is wrong with you? I’m trying to study that book, you weirdo!” but I didn’t care. This was an emergency.

Feverishly, I scoured the pages to find what agonizing fate awaited me. But I could find no disease with the symptom of “sudden hearing loss in left ear.” Maybe I was the victim of an undiscovered disease! I knew I needed medical attention, so without even telling my wife where I was going (who would probably make jokes), I rushed back out the front door and drove myself to the hospital. At the hospital, I described to the doctor my symptom of hearing loss in my left ear, and how I could find no mention of such a symptom in the Huge Book of Horrifying Diseases.

With a raised eyebrow, and having checked a few vital signs, he looked into my left ear with his lighted ear-looking device.

“Hmmmm…I see,” he said.

“What is it, Doc? AM I DYING?” I asked frightfully.

“Mmm…no, seems like you are suffering from a simple case of idiocy,” he replied while reaching into my ear with a pair of tweezers and pulling out an earplug that I had apparently forgotten to remove after at work.

An earplug? HA! A wave of relief swept over me. I wasn’t going to die, after all.

Everyone vs Nancy

Nancy is nineteen. She abides by the rules set out by society, and often keeps her head down. ‘The key to fitting in is to do what Everyone does. Don’t stand out. Its either you’re excellent at what Everyone else does, or you blend in with the chaos in this world.’ That’s Nancy’s mantra. It’s not fascinating, and definitely not the most inspiring.

In the past nineteen years of Nancys’ existence, she has tried to follow her mantra. Doing what Everyone else does? More like what Everyone says is ‘right’ and ‘correct’. In high school, Nancy chose to do chemistry instead of literature, because that’s what ‘everyone’ did. Nancy chose to go to law school because that’s what ‘everyone’ thought was right. She abandoned her dreams of becoming a writer. Nancy didn’t want to break out of the mould of what ‘everyone’ told her to do.

Two years into law school, Everyone’s succeeding. Everyone’s saying they love what they’re doing. Nancy, on the other hand, has been failing. She hates law. Nevermind all the juicy cases and the notions of justice and righteousness. The novelty wore off when Nancy started actually reading law. Nancy sighs. She doesn’t understand - she’s done so well up until now, why isn’t her mantra working anymore?

Let’s take a pause at this moment. Up until now, Nancy always decided to do what Everyone else did. Nancy never did what she wanted to do. It got to the point where Nancy forgot about everything she enjoyed; she got so absorbed in trying hard to do what Everyone did. She used to love writing short stories. The amount of self expression and creativity flowing was simply illuminating for her. Its funny how she decided to conform with what Everyone did. Her mantra kept working because she never dared to break out of the mould. She thought conformity equated to security, which amounted to happiness.

Nancy sighs again. She’s in the library, studying, and finds another rejection email from another law firm. She doesn’t know what she’s doing wrong. She’s doing what Everyone else is doing. Staying in the library till late? Check. Burying her head in thick law textbooks trying to comprehend the various theories of law? Check. Applying for those boring corporate jobs that Everyone keeps talking about? Check. Nancy’s been trying her best to keep up.

Nancy keeps trying, and trying, and trying. She pauses for a moment in the library and starts thinking of the ‘what ifs’. Ah, the ‘what if’ thoughts. It’s what Nancy does whenever she questions why she chose law. What if she didn’t do law? What if she quit law school? What if she just took the risk and started to write? Nancy sighs as she dispels the ‘what ifs’, dismissing them as reckless thoughts. She continues to find articles for her latest essay and continues reading.

Remember. Keep doing what Everyone does, Nancy. Stop thinking about the path no one talks about. Everyone is right. Nancy keeps repeating her mantra to herself over, and over, and over again. The dreams of being a writer eventually turns into nothing more than a wallflower in Nancy’s mind.

The Blanket Story

When I was twenty five years old, I received this warm, fuzzy, multi-colored blanket. It has seen me through the good times and the bad. I think to myself "How would my life be different if this blanket had never been created at the textile shop?" Somebody took the time to weave and stitch this blanket so it could be a great comfort to me. This blanket has taken care of me when I was sick, when I broke my ribs, when I had brain surgery, and when my best cat Toby died. It didn't judge, it let me cry, and it was a great solace through dark times. My favorite time to have this blanket is when the windows are open, and it's slightly cold. I loved being able to curl up in this blanket on those nights. It made me feel content. Like life is good.

Over the years, I have watched my husband and boys get sick. It has brought them comfort as well. How can one little blanket mean so much to so many people? Who would've ever thought that when they were creating this blanket, they were creating the gift of love. Love that can be handed down from generation to generation. I can't help but envision my cat Toby laying on my stomach when I was covered up with this blanket. Sometimes he would just lay there. Other times, he would want me to share my ice cream with him. He always purred his little heart out when he was curled up with me on this blanket. If this blanket could talk, it would say "I did my job. I brought you warmth, comfort, solace, peace, and security." Yes, this blanket is more than just a blanket. It is a family member.

It has now been fifty years since I was given the gift off the blanket. It is old and worn. There is so much wear and tear from overuse that I thought about throwing it away. Could I really throw something away that had once meant so much to me? If I kept the blanket, who would love this ratty old thing as much as I did long after I'm gone? (I am after all seventy-five years old). How could I throw something away that had the equivalence of a family member? Knowing that I'm not going to live forever, and that nobody could possibly love this thing as much as I did, I reluctantly threw it in the trash. Once in the trash, the blanket says "How could you do this to me? Did I not love you my whole life? Did I not comfort you in times of sadness? Was I not there for you when you were sick? Did I not let you cry on me without passing judgment? Think of all the times that I have kept you warm. Don't do this."

She knew the blanket was right, but she also knew nobody could love this blanket like she did. Reluctantly, she leaves it in the trash. She walks away. The blanket then screams out "I know things about you. You've told me so many secrets. Do you really want me to divulge all the secrets that you told me? I will. You know I will." Alison goes to bed thinking "He wouldn't act on it. He wouldn't dare." The next morning, her husband David opens his email. It said "Please open. I know many secrets about your wife. One of which I have slept with your wife many times."

Upon seeing this, David says "What the heck is this? Don't you think you owe me an explanation?" Stunned, Alison says "He did it. He really did it. "What are you talking about? Who really did what?" "It's not a who, it's a what. The blanket came alive when I threw it in the trash. It told me that if I didn't take it out of the trash, it would divulge all my secrets."

David, not knowing what to think, goes to the trash to look at the blanket. While looking at the blanket, he thinks to himself, "Why would she throw this away. She loved this thing." David felt sorry for the blanket. He knew the blanket was right. What was the harm in keeping it on the shelf in the closet. Pulling it out of the trash, David says "You're right. You were like a member of this family. It isn't right that we discard you just because you're old and worn. I will do as you say. I will put you on a shelf so that when I look at you, I will remember."