

Against All Odds, I Dared To...

August 14th, 2019

To begin, I'm super honored and grateful to be given the time and space to share a part of my story. Your attention is a gift. And TBH, every time it's given to me, every time folks listen to me when I talk, it's startling. I notice their focus and can almost see their listening. I'm truly grateful.

See, where I'm from, where I was raised, the overwhelming message I received was that I was to be seen and not heard. That children were to be seen and not heard and most of the time, they weren't supposed to be seen, either. So I spent a lot of time in my basement, talking to myself and my barbie dolls, creating dramatic ass story lines about marriages and divorces, kids, and cheating partners even though barbie was only 23. I'd spend hours setting up elaborate living spaces for my dolls, only to get bored and throw everything back into the plastic bin from whence it came. I had two older sisters who moved out when I was eight. My parents divorced when I was nine. My mom was a junior high math teacher and when she got home from work, would grade papers and lesson plan to hours and hours of Law and Order. Occasionally, I'd climb onto her bed and join her; my nine year old mind oddly piqued by the sexually based crimes that were especially heinous, these are their stories.

On weekends, we'd go to Larkin Baptist Church. Every Sunday. Every. Muffukkin Sunday. And sometimes Sunday nights. I remember when I was at a Christian summer camp, I wrote "Are you real, I want to know" on the margins of my bible. When Pat Rogers told me that a whale ACTUALLY swallowed Jonas when I was five, I couldn't shake the feeling that she was full of shit. When I was thirteen, I walked out of a sermon when the pastor spoke of our demise due to the gays, the apocalypse, and bird flu. I'd had enough.

Joliet, Illinois.

I have written so many poems. So many stories. So many journal entries, to begin to articulate what this place means to me. The place where I grew up. A city with hands like sandpaper and smokestack lungs. A place whose heart is a blasted quarry, its downtown lined with dilapidated apartment buildings, old businesses and decaying schools. My Dad was an alcoholic. And he never got violent around me, lest my mother hear about it and demand more of his money. He'd finish one of those glass gallon jugs of Carlo Rossi as his eyes glazed over to PawnStars or Crossing Over with John Edwards. That's how I remember my Dad, sitting at his kitchen table, waiting for something. I'm not sure what. He'd also resume this position on his back porch. Smoke his cigarettes and talk about how he'd win the lotto some day or how "chicken boy down the street with all his chickens" woke him up at dawn. Retirement was not good to him.

My high school was on the East Side. There was regular gang violence and metal detectors. I was in honors classes, so I was on the periphery of a lot of this activity. I'd hear about it. I'd be on lock down. I was with the smart kids. The choir kids. One of the handful of white kids. The kids who got to do pretty much whatever they wanted. Our school was hella liberal. Hella accepting. Everyone was broke and just tryna survive, so cliques weren't really a thing. We had fun.

One of the last times I visited home, was for a funeral. My friend Eugene was shot and killed walking home from work at 2am. Everyone was at his services. Some travelled cross country to be there; I hadn't seen many of them in over ten years. They looked like older, not older, aged versions of themselves. Fatter. Balder. More laugh lines. More smile lines. More kids. Happy to see me despite the shitty, unbearable circumstances. We were all in disbelief. Eugene did no harm. Could do no harm, only radiated joy.

When I was thinking about this prompt, "Against All Odds, I dared to..." I didn't know where to begin. I didn't know what qualified as "odds" or what "dared" meant. But I recently met another actor from Joliet; he was in a show and his bio mentioned his hometown, so I HAD to meet him. BECAUSE THERE ARE SO FEW OF US HERE. Like, I couldn't even. It was SO RARE. And so often, when you say you're from this place, you're met with "With the prison?" or "The Blues Brothers" or "Isn't there a casino there?" It's reputation is earned and accurate. My hometown is meant with judgement and hints of disgust. Which is fine. It wasn't until I got to college in Champaign-Urbana did I realize how many white people there were or what a Winnetka was or that it was possible to get higher than a 2 on your AP test. (My first partner was from Dubai, but when I first met him, I thought he was Mexican because I didn't know Dubai was a thing or a place or even what the idea of "wealth" could mean.)

So when I met David, the actor, my mind was kind of blown. Like, I'd never met this person before and we talked for like, three hours about what it meant to be HERE. Where we are. Doing what we're doing, despite where we're from. When we were walking to the train, he read me this poem he wrote:

"Most days I forget that I am doing everything I had ever wanted.
Every drunken star I spoke while standing atop picnic tables
My back lit by the bonfire in the crazy bourbon midnight
I am doing it."

And I breathe out.
And I release.
And I remind myself.

It is Wednesday, August 14th and I am HERE.
It is Wednesday, August 14th and I am HERE,
with you at the Volumes Bookstore in Chicago, Illinois.

The fact that I am HERE. The fact that my odds of being HERE, doing what I am doing, are slim to none. My Dad used to say “You don’t want to end up bowlegged, barefoot in a trailer with kids runnin’ around.” And my sisters both had genuine fears that they’d end up homeless. And there I was, a quiet kid with dreams too big for my hometown to hold and learning how to not 1. End up homeless, 2. End up bowlegged and barefoot with kids in a trailer park. (TBH, not that there’s anything wrong with either, they’re just not what I wanted.) Adopting stories of smallness that didn’t quite fit right, but I didn’t know what else to tell myself because I hadn’t been introduced to tales of “Why Not You” and stories of “Just try it” and ideas of “No one knows what they’re doing.” I’d existed as an observer of cycles and toxicity, follow and surrender. I’d always known that wasn’t ME. But how do I get to where I wanted to go?

As a kid, I always knew I wanted to be an actor. I always KNEW that’s what my dream was. But I was always met with stories of “That’s for other people, but not for you. You have to WORK. And WORK means LABOR. Means HARD. Means FACTORY. Means “in service of others.” So that’s what I tried. I’ve cleaned houses, washed dogs, worked in donut shops and Starbucks, cafes, and racetracks. But now. I’m HERE. I’m finally HERE.

I work as an assistant to a theater producer and non profit consultant. And I work at two of my favorite theaters in the city: Victory Gardens and Steep Theater. I’m represented by DDO Agency, booked my first voice over gig and have a show coming up at Steppenwolf at the end of the month.

“I am.
Every small town big town
medium black tea
in the back,
in the light,
In the alley talking about your
dreams,
in my black fabric smock
with the drenched cardboard
boxes and dumpsters.
I am everything I wanted to do
Everything I wanted to do but didn’t know how.

I didn't know it then,
But it's here,
on its way.
When I'm tired, or feeling
bloated.
When the Movement of the
grounds.
The exhaust,
and whining.
I am here.
I made this thing.
I am thousands of years.
I worked hard on this part,
And this part,
And this part.
And this part.

Here.
This is the music.
This is the punch.
This is the part, I need you.
This is that part.
When I want it again.
It, when it's gone.
It's when I'm doing it.
When I want more.
It's when I'm seeking it, I never find it.

The parts of the thing.
And every time I get the thing
itself,
I die a little bit.”

I am not a gambling man, despite Joliet's reputation. But I like to take risks and feel wildly. There is a part of me that's ash and smoke, my feet, callused from years of running around barefoot across concrete and broken glass. I inherited my father's wistfulness and his taste for bad wine. I took after the quiet of my mother, the generous and observant listener, that knows all about you. I have stories not just about the ends of the earth, but all its ugly. Its crevices, dusty nooks, acid living rooms, and damp basements. Alllll these stories. They live inside of me and that. That's what I call home.

Thank you.