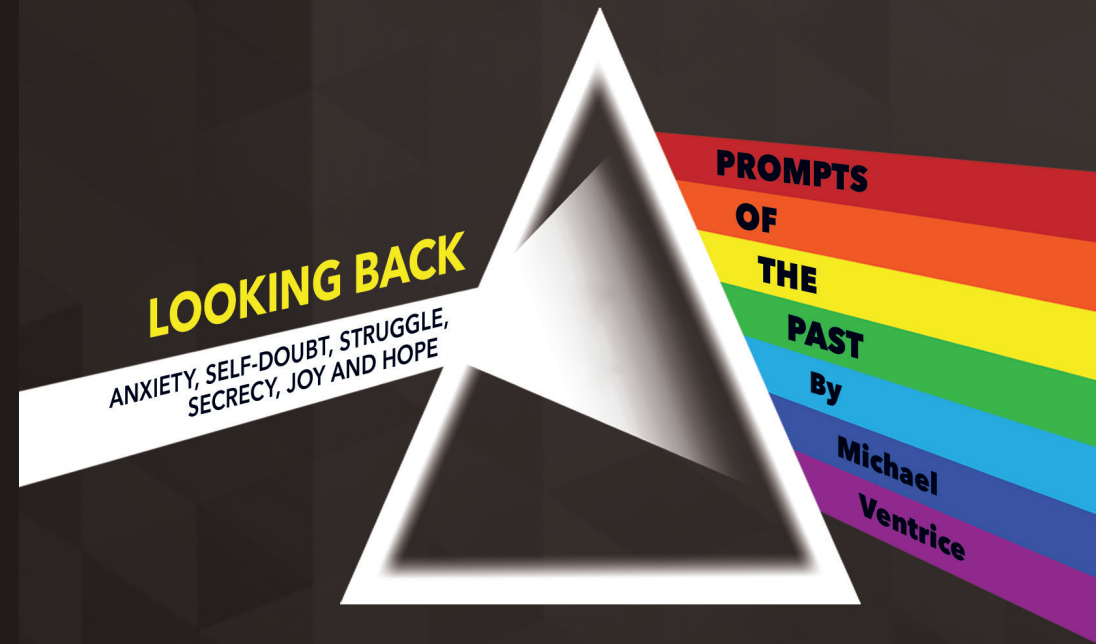


STORIES ARE
MEANT TO BE TOLD

LOOKING BACK: PROMPTS OF THE PAST By Michael Ventrice



© 2021 SAY: The Stuttering Association for the Young

Michael Ventrice

Looking Back: Prompts of the Past

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise without the prior permission of the publisher or in accordance with the provisions of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 or under the terms of any license permitting limited copying issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency.

Published by: SAY: The Stuttering Association for the Young

Text Design by: Life Styl Design

Cover and Interior Illustration Design by: Francisco Borges

Distributed by:

SAY: The Stuttering Association for the Young
247 West 37th Street, 5th Floor New York, NY 10018

Printed and Bound by BookBaby

Dedication

*To my Parents, Older Brother, Older Cousins and
Family-Friends who helped me get to where I am today.*

Thank You

CHAPTER CONTENTS

Elementary School Years **15**

Stuttering as a Kid

I have what??

Middle School Years **23**

To Middle School Me

The Weird Years

Worries

High School Years **29**

Her - A Reflection

r/woosh

The Myths about High School

Meh, do I want to go?

A new Point of View

The Future **71**

The Road Ahead

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Dear Reader,

The book you are about to read is essentially the story of my life as a person who stutters. I hope that by the end of it, you are able to see what it is like to live in a world where a person does not take their speech for granted. Some of the context was altered for privacy reasons but is made to still give an understanding of the event.

We sometimes may get anxious whenever we're speaking to others. Whether it's to a boss, group of friends, spouse, etc but does that anxiety include thinking about whether or not what you're going to say will come out correctly? Or just shot down as a whole to maybe not even join the conversation in general. What about secondary actions, ever heard of them? Whether it's rapid eye blinking, or twitching, or hitting oneself to try and physically get the words out. These involuntary actions vary from stutterer to stutterer but can all bring the same level of embarrassment to the person.

In our quick-paced society today, everyone is bound to get interrupted from time to time and it usually happens when a person is stuck trying to think of a word and another person tries to finish their sentence by guessing what they were going to say. Try worrying about that every time you speak. "Along with while you're trying to speak, someone just interrupts you mid-stutter and unknowingly makes you feel like you just got "shot down"." Also try waking up every day not knowing whether or not it is going to be a good day or a bad day when it comes to how fluent you are.

Though I am a part of the 1% (70 Million People worldwide), I still have experienced certain things that are considered normal while growing up. I've had experience in learning differences, mental health challenges, along with friend groups at school, my first girlfriend, my future and the college process, etc.

To put it plain and simple. My past experiences aren't much different from the average, everyday person, with a little bit of the extra toppings that is my stutter.

More times than I could count I have been told the phrase, "oh I stutter too". Well yes, we all stutter when we are at a loss for words. But what about when you're having a conversation and your vocal cords just randomly close all of a sudden? And you're trying to rush the words out because you're panicking due to the racing thoughts of your peers staring at you, even though you know that trying to rush the words out won't even help in the slightest?

I decided to write this book to get my story out there. Sure some parts may be longer than others but they're still a part of my story.

You can begin this book at any point, though I would recommend starting from the beginning so that you are able to get a better picture of everything. Some of the prompts have to do with stuttering while others are about other important events from my life. Either way it's a part I never really talked about and see this project as a way to finally let the stories out. Also my next memoir is most likely going to be about my college experience, I'll have to see (and wait a few years).

Lastly, I hope you as the reader are able to see the world with a little bit more clarity and insight. Heck maybe you can even relate to some of the things I talk about. So what are you waiting for, get reading!

Sincerely,
Michael Ventrice

Looking Back: Prompts of the Past

Michael Ventrice

Elementary School Years

CHAPTER 1

Elementary School Years

Stuttering as a Kid

During my summer of quarantine, I was able to find my old red composition notebook from when I went to Speech-Language Pathology as a kid. Flipping through the pages of notes my former SLP (Speech-Language Pathologist) wrote to me and that I never bothered to look at as a kid, really took my back. It helped me remember what we did during some of my sessions, both the things I did and did not like.

I don't think my stutter came as a surprise to my parents. After all it is normal for some young kids to still have a stutter however if it lasts let's say into the 3rd and 4th grade, then it might be time to go and see a doctor. Now from what I can remember, my parents initially took me to

see a Pediatric Neurologist (whom I still see to this day) because of my stutter. I mostly remember this because I had to have a C.T. scan of my head, for the doctor to see if there were any signs of decreased blood flow to the Broca's area of my brain.

The scan came back negative and I went to get tested for a learning disability by a psychiatrist when I was in the fourth grade. However, before I can tell you more about that story, let me take you back to another one first:

As I got older, I was just like another kid. I had lots of friends, I went to school, I had a loving family, but there was one thing that made me different; and that was my stutter. My stutter staying with me as I got older came as a surprise to my parents. When they asked my pediatrician about it, they said it would go away as I got older, which does happen in most cases, but in mine it did not.

Since both of my parents were fluent and my family never knew anyone else who stuttered, my parents tried what they thought would be the next best thing; and enrolled me in speech-therapy. I had both public (via my school district) and private lessons. The private one was mainly where I was taught that I had all three of the variations that come with stuttering, along with the breathing exercises and techniques that I could use to help manage it. My first private lesson, I remember they recorded me almost as an interview. I only remember this happening because the private Speech-Language Pathologist showed me the tape at another session a few years later.

During the four or five years I was enrolled in private speech therapy, I had the same routine every Monday after school; I'd get picked up by one of my parents and be driven to my SLP's office for my weekly 3:15 appointment. The sessions lasted about forty-five minutes to an hour and they usually started by asking how my day was, and then with my stutter. We mostly played a game but with a twist. Everytime that it would be my turn to move my character, I'd have to use one of my "speech strategies". I had not realized it at the time but the secret technique there was that if I did the strategies a certain amount of times, it would eventually almost become like second nature. Which it did, until I got bored of them and stopped. Out of all the games and activities we did, my favorite was these magnetic boards she had in her office. Off the top of my head, I know that there was a trainyard, a zoo, a town, and a doll house. I enjoyed them so much that my mom bought me the same ones in the hopes that I would use them the same way I did in speech therapy. I would move a certain magnet to an area of the board and I'd have to explain what was happening while using one of my strategies.

Which I guess might have helped in the long run because my stutter is much better now compared to when I was a kid, but that could also just be because I slightly grew out of it. Other than solo sessions, I had some double sessions with a kid around my age named Jack. I don't remember much about him besides being a blonde kid and that the last time I saw him was when I was probably eight or nine years old, it was a long time ago.

Lastly, I remember bringing this **red** journal to speech

therapy (the same one I mentioned earlier), I guess it was to act as an agenda so that I could remember all of my speech strategies that I had to do. That mostly stayed in the car so that it wouldn't get lost, but that also meant I never opened the book outside of speech therapy. It always had a neon-orange post-it note that would just act as a bookmark so I would not lose my place. I still remember the pen my SLP used to write down my "assignments". It was not a pen, but also was not a marker either. Oh! There was also this technique thing that had to do with a pitch counter; I guess I had to count how many times I stuttered and used one of my strategies. We had that for a while too, I am a little curious about what ever happened to it. It might have been given away (along with the magnetic storyboards) or it is still hidden away in a draw somewhere. Never to be seen again.

When I got to my middle school, I met the school's SLP who I still see two to four times a month (depending on what is happening). I initially started out in a group session but that kinda dwindled down to just her and I, which I didn't mind. Out of all my years of going, I would have to say that this year is probably my favorite because it is like a fifteenth to twenty minute session during one of my study halls that I get to come and check in. The only downside was the masks, which hopefully will be a thing of the past by the time this book comes out. (Would that be a fourth-wall break?)

I have what??:

It was not until fourth grade when my mom took me to

get tested. At the time, all I knew was that I was going to complete some puzzles and answer some questions to the best of my ability. The whole process took an entire school day so I got to eat breakfast and lunch in the cafeteria of the building where the doctor's office was located. Then before I knew it, I had started taking pills to help my "Attention-Deficit Disorder". One of the tests worked via having to constantly move around and flip over these red and white colored cubes, and the objective was to recreate a certain design that was on a note card in a spiralled medical book. The designs gradually became more and more difficult. Some did not have the lines that showed the outline of each cube in the design, while others would be made of nine blocks instead of four. I would have to match up the block with the imaginary section I thought it was in. Each of them had one white side, one red side, and four sides that were equally half white and half red with a diagonal line dividing them. That portion of the testing ended when I either gave up or ran out of time.

After that initial test, my results came in and before I knew it, I was prescribed stimulants in the hope that they would make me focus more as opposed to randomly daydreaming or zoning out. I have taken a handful of different kinds over the years to figure out which one wasn't going to give me a dry mouth nor upset my appetite.

It would not be until about five years later that I would be reevaluated. Same doctors office, same testing process, but an older version of me. A few weeks later, we had reviewed the results with my neurologist and he noted that there was something odd. I do not remember what

it was but he asked me, “are you depressed?”, and a tear just ran down my face as if his question had been the key to unlocking a treasure chest that I never knew I had. Looking back, it was probably the part where I had to rate how much I thought a certain statement pertained to me on a scale one to four. The sheet read all kinds of statements such as “I think bad thoughts”, “I have friends/family who like me.”, “I like the image of myself”, etc. I personally never really thought I was depressed nor did I know what it was so I never bothered to ask about it. For my mother however, it was probably even more shocking for her to see that tear run down my face as I was asked the question.

During the car ride home, I stubbornly explained the whole story of why I thought the feelings came from. Truth be told, it involved eighth grade me, social media, and a crush I had at that time.

Middle school otherwise was a weird time for me, as it probably was for everyone else at the time. You’re still kinda getting used to your lockers and some friend groups for high school starting. For me, I think I stayed the same besides a few people from my friend group moving after eighth or ninth grade.

Middle School Years

CHAPTER 2

Middle School Years

To Middle School Me:

I know that moving up to Middle School seems like an intimidating transition, especially with the lockers. However you are going to get used to it, as well as having some highs and lows. You're going to experience things that you never thought you were ever going to experience and some of it may change you whether it's for the school year or for your entire life. I know it wasn't easy, but you can get through it. Middle School is a weird time, everyone knows that.

The Weird Times:

Before I go any further, let me say this down. Eighth grade is around the time a young teen starts to think that they know everything but that could not be farther from the

truth. We mainly judge circumstances off of our emotions while our brains are still undergoing the developmental process of the frontal cortex, we rely on the amygdala; which is an almond shaped mass of graymatter inside each cerebral hemisphere, and is involved with the experiencing of emotions. Not having as much life experience as the adults around us, we interpret these sensations as logic rather than our emotions getting the best of us.

It's also around that when boys start to show off, usually it was using a trend like hitting the top of a door frame or flipping a water bottle. Me? I mostly kept to myself. Which brings me back to my story.

Worries:

My very first crush was on this girl who I shared my third-period English class and my sixth-period Social Studies class with. I had not realized it at the time but apparently eighth grade was around the time she started to pick up popularity.

This incident happened on a Thursday during spirit week, it was Color Wars day and the eighth graders had to wear purple. I was sitting with one of my friends at our table of desks, with my head tilted over my shoulder, paying attention to the unit that the teacher is trying to teach us and I randomly locked eyes with her. I was going to think nothing of it, until she did a double eyebrow pump with a small smile. Ok, now my heart was starting to pick up the pace. Almost as if I had received a text from her out of nowhere. Completely stuck on whether or not I should reply, I made a small silly face. Which she replied to with another eyebrow pump but that

was the end of it. Now, any logical person would think more in depth about this, but not this guy!

While still intrigued by the event earlier that day, I went to look at her instagram account after she had posted something, and I still do not know why to this day why I did this, but I liked the oldest post on the account. At the time I did not think much of it, but a few days later I noticed that she blocked me. Still having a crush on her, I had my first feeling of heartbreak. Being only thirteen you can't really piece together such an event with logic. Meaning stepping back from the emotions and thinking about it from her point of view or the point of view from a third party. From that point on, it felt like a downhill spiral. Ever since then, I was embarrassed to even look at her, let alone have the possibility again to lock eyes with her. I would even get nervous when I passed her at her locker while I was entering the 8th grade wing of my school, or passing by it again when I went to my science class before the end of the day.

It wouldn't be until a few weeks later on the yearly Eighth Grade Washington D.C. three-day field trip. During our first night there, while we were getting settled on the buses, one of the kids in the pair of seats parallel to mine told me that the girl found out I liked her. Still looking back, I am still not exactly sure how or even if she had actually found out, but my best guess was that it was from liking that old post all those weeks back.

After we got back from the D.C. trip, I noticed that it was also when the flashbacks started happening. They would

happen at any random moment. At school, on the bus or in the car, or in my room doing homework. I treated it as something I wanted to run away from, it was all I could think of at that time; and that is what I did. However it did not go away after that. I was even too nervous to ask her if she would sign my middle school yearbook, which oesn't really mean much to me today but at that time it was a heavily debated topic.

The anxiety around it continued for a while. One of my most notable moments was when I forgot one of my books in my English class the period before, because I had lunch right after and I'd rush down to try and nab myself a seat.

Anyway, as I was going to retrieve my forgotten book my heart starts to race and my palms get all sweaty and my vision starts to slightly tunnel in. "You just gotta go in, and come right back out", I tell myself, "don't make eye contact with anyone, especially her." I do not remember if the period had already started but I quickly walked to the desk (that was conveniently on the opposite side of the classroom from the door), grabbed the book and got out. But guess who sits a desk or two behind mine during that class period.

I don't think we ever made eye contact (just like what I told myself while speed walking over there), but just the thought of her looking at me while I retrieved my book freaked me out; heck I was already embarrassed for accidentally forgetting my book, the last thing I needed was for the crush I was trying to move on from, looking at me. Honestly, being a teenager isn't always as fun as some people (and movies) make it out to be.

High School Years

CHAPTER 3

High School Years

Her - A Reflection:

The anxiety and flashbacks about the girl still stuck with me after middle school. I would still get tunnel vision whenever crossing her in the hallway. One guess as to why I still liked her was because I was at that age where I am thinking “ok what kind of person do I like, What’s my type?”. All I knew at that time was that I wanted someone with a good personality aka someone who could make me laugh, pretty harmless right? She was the only person I had still had an interest in and figured out she could make me laugh. I hadn’t talked to her since the eighth grade, but I would sometimes overhear her voice in the chatter of the classroom, and it would make me smile inside. It was weird. It felt like I was able to connect with her even though we were in different social groups essentially. She

had hers connected by all of their shared interests, and I had mine connected with all of our (different) shared interests. If I were to put it into a venn diagram format, the existence of the middle area would be little to none.

I moved up to tenth grade, but that was also when I met her.

I was about fifteenth at the time and I met this other girl, who I'm gonna call Rachel, over the summer on Instagram. (Before I go any further, I want to clarify that I was lucky that the person actually was who they said they were and not a catfish. She also lives halfway across the country so we never met up in real life until almost a year later). I did not think much of it at the time because most of our chats only lasted about five mins at max and were over text, but they slowly became more complex. Almost like a spike that suddenly popped out but it would disappear; so I never knew if the conversation would suddenly spike up (in length of time) or would last just five minutes. We also both knew we somewhat liked eachother but I tried to contact her while she was on the shy side.

We were gradually able to grow our then-friendship in the coming months, but it was about a week before Christmas 2018, when we were able to grow even closer. Since the both of us previously knew we both like-liked one another, it gave me the idea of asking her out. I will remember the night for as long as I live. It was the night of December 26th of 2018; I would have done it the night before but one of us was too busy to talk then. When the moment finally came, I asked her in a timid tone: "I was wondering if you

would like to be my girlfriend?”. Through her cheeky yet playful grin she says, “Sure we can try it”. Her answer did not fit too well with my question but I didn’t care.

The next few weeks were great!! We talked nearly every chance we had and we got to know a lot more about each other. Admittedly like most first-time boyfriends, I felt I had the cutest and best girlfriend in the entire world! However that euphoria did not last long as the first wall we hit, or at least felt like I hit, was in late January of 2019. She called me over facetime while she was at a friend’s house and explained that she thought we should break up because she felt insecure and that I could do better. My reaction to hearing this was both shocked but heartbroken. I simply just layed down on my bed and didn’t really give a reaction; other than one of disbelief.

As cliché as it may sound, this event was the inspiration for my character in my first SAY skit! The heartbreak lasted about two or three days, she talked to me about it on a Friday because I remember that I had SAY the next day.

It was the second or third day of brainstorming our characters but my mind was in other places. Feeling as if I had lost the love of my life (whom I’ve only secretly dated for a month), I decided to incorporate my heartbreak into my character named John. The very first scene I was in, was where my character got broken up with. If you were to ask me my opinion, both my previous experience and pounding heart due to rookie stage fright helped me in portraying my character during that scene. Back to the story!

I do not remember exactly how or why, but we got back together a day or two after my SAY session that Saturday. Everything seemed back to normal. For Valentine's Day that year, we sent each other almost like a mini love letter over snapchat explaining how much the other person means to them. It had heart emoji and "I love you" gifs. Looking back, all I can do is laugh at myself because I didn't really know what I was doing but I guess you could say I enjoyed doing it. Fast forward another month and a half and guess what comes back to hit us again? If you guessed a metaphorical wall, you would be correct!!

Now this was another break-up wall, so to speak, but it was built for a different reason. This one was built because she and I hit "what are we?" moment.

I am not sure if this is a thing with in-person couples, or just long-distance ones, but it felt almost like a mutual hopelessness. We both cared about each other but we weren't sure if we should continue. You see, one of the main selling points of being long-distance is that you have to know when (or if) you are going to see your loved one in-person again; and this can put a lot of strain on someone's heart. We had mutually decided to take a break and see how we both felt afterward. Neither of us blocked the other because it was still kind of a testing phase. Even though it was only about a week, some "I miss you's" were exchanged, and we got back together after talking it out and reflecting on what we learned during our time apart.

Afterwards everything was pretty much back to normal

again and then one day in June, I was eating dinner with my family when I checked my phone to see that she texted me pictures of plane tickets in NYC. We both were really excited because we knew it was a big opportunity to try and see each other for the first time. I forget when exactly I asked my parents if I could meet her but we ended up agreeing to meet on a Friday in the middle of July.

The days I had work during the same week she was flying in felt so slow, since she was practically closer than ever. We were also limited to only texting because she was not available to facetime while she was in New York.

When that Friday finally came, my heart started to race as soon as I got into the car to go to the train station and it began to beat even faster as our train was coming into the train terminal. I walked out and up the stairs more vigilant and alert than I had ever been. The real moment was when I was walking up the stairs to the main concourse of Grand Central Terminal. The whole time, I was looking up and down at my phone texting her. “Are you here yet?”, “where are you?”. I started to get paranoid because I wasn’t seeing anyone who looked like her. “Is she even going to show up!?”, I thought to myself. I was constantly switching between her location on snapmaps and Find my Friends, hoping it would give me some kind of information (other than her general location) that would help me find her better.

Honestly the next few moments were kind of a blur, but all of a sudden the next thing I know is that as I am looking up from my phone (still trying to get some kind of an update from her), she appears right in front of me; and my jaw just drops.

I'll never forget the smile she had on her face, it wasn't like an ear to ear smile but I could tell she was pretty excited. I was in such disbelief at first, that I didn't know what else to do other than to hug her. Also I wasn't sure if Rachel had already told her mom that I stuttered. Whether or not she actually did, I had a National Stuttering Association hat on, so it hopefully would have conveyed the message. After both of our adrenaline highs wore off, I introduced myself to her mother, and we talked about a plan for the day.

The first stop out of the Grand Central Terminal was the Empire State Building, which was probably only like an eight to nine block walk. During which I told her, "Hey look, it's the Empire State Building!", she said "wait really?", I replied with "No it's the Chrysler Building, you can tell by the gargoyle statues near the top". She didn't see the humor and gave me the stink eye, which is another look I'll never forget and that I can still smile about. Our tour of the Empire State Building was pretty cool (and expensive). We got to learn all about the history of the building and took that green-screen background photo, which Rachel ended up keeping.

After we got to the top, Rachel and I were able to get a little "alone time" by sneaking around a corner without either of our parents noticing at first. After squeezing our way through the crowd of people so that we could actually be able to see something, she grabbed my right arm and laid her head on my shoulder. Even though it kinda came as a surprise to me (again), I laid my head on her head and lightly rubbed her hand with my thumb. I wish the moment would have lasted longer but we were still cautious about

our parents seeing us, so we made our way back to find them. To be honest both of us thought we were in the clear until my dad popped out from behind the corner with Rachel's mom right behind him. He asked us what we were doing, and I explained that we were trying to get a better view of the city, showing him one of the pictures I took [below] as proof. Thankfully it worked and we were told to ask them next time, instead of just going off on our own.



Pictured: Midtown to Lower Manhattan; Brooklyn and Queens

After our tour, we walked around more of the Midtown and Lower Manhattan until we came to a resting place and figured out where we wanted to go for dinner.

During the walk there, my dad talked with Rachel's mom while I talked with Rachel. So her mom might not have even noticed my stutter at the time, aside from when we were eating dinner. We had it at this restaurant that felt really cramped. It might've been a busy time when we arrived because it seemed like there barely had any extra space to move around, but we were seated near the entrance so it wasn't too difficult when we were getting up to leave. Also even though there wasn't enough room to really stand, there was enough room to secretly hold hands under the table. It was an on and off thing because we were still so afraid of getting caught, which honestly made it all the more memorable.

From there, we explored some of NYU's campus, and settled in Washington Square Park. Rachel and I saw this as an opportunity to ask if we could go and walk around the park. We asked our parents if we could explore the park and they let us go but also told us to keep the trackers of our phones on, which we did. When Rachel and I felt we were far enough away, we held hands again and tried to find a spot to have our first kiss. I don't remember where exactly it was but we were standing on the side of a pathway facing each other, myself looking down at her and her looking up at me. Then it happened before I even realized it! The next thing that came out of my mouth were the slightly disappointed words: "I didn't even feel it". Having previously hyped the moment up in my head, my expectations were higher than normal. We decided to find a different and more secluded spot (still in the park) at which we hung out for the next two or three hours by exchanging sweatshirts, taking pictures together and

overall appreciating the fact that the other person wasn't behind a screen anymore.

Our next and final stop was Times Square. We made sure to take a few more snapchats to save to our memories along the way. The deal at Time Square was similar to Washington Square Park, Rachel and I took a few more pictures until we had to say goodbye due to the fact that it was nearing midnight by that point. I can still see the image of Rachel walking and looking back at me, as her and her mom slowly blended into the crowd. I got home at 1am that night both thankful that I finally got to meet her and sad that it ended so soon.

All and all both of us thought it was an amazing (and a little bit awkward) first date and I hope to remember it for as long as I live. Oh and I didn't get murdered, so that's another plus. (^-^).

I also later found out from Rachel, that her mom thought that I liked her and I mean, she wasn't wrong.

The next time Rachel and I were able to Facetime (which was about a week after she left) it hit differently, because we both knew that we were back to talking from behind a screen. However we both still had the hoodies that we had exchanged while we were at Washington Square Park, so it was still better than before we met.

The incoming school year was an exciting time for the both of us, I was somewhat beginning my college process by entering my Junior year while she was starting her Freshman year of High School. She sometimes used to

joke with me by asking why a Junior would be dating a Freshman, to which I usually just rolled my eyes. Luckily our relationship was able to remain stable for the rest of the year but that doesn't mean it wasn't without jealousy. One of the downsides to her going to a different school than me, was the fact that every few weeks she would tell me a new story about how she was hit on by another dude. I mean, she still stayed loyal regardless but the fact that I couldn't physically be there would sometimes get to me. In my mind, she had this child-like innocence to her that I sometimes thought needed a "protector"; in the hopes that it would give off a hint that she's not available. When I look back on moments like those today, I'm not sure if it actually would've worked, because I didn't know any better at the time.

Speaking of insecurities, our next best solution to the distance-problem was this pair of long-distance bracelets made by a company called Bond Touch. It's essentially where you can connect the device to the Bond Touch app on your phone via bluetooth and whenever you miss your significant other, you can buzz to show when you're thinking of them. We had got them just in time for the new school year and overall the bracelets were so great that we made up little codes that meant things like "I love you", "I miss you", "S.O.S", etc. Only downside were times when I would be sitting in class and a really large set of buzzes came in. Due to the fact that it lights up as it buzzes, I would immediately try to hide it because I didn't want to accidentally distract anyone.

We were able to stay together for the rest of the year and

our winter breaks were the same length; which meant we were able to use it as another opportunity to see each other in real life again. It took a little bit of convincing at first but I got the tickets in November and I was going to be flying out on New Year's Day.

The night before my flight I was playing Truth or Dare with a group of friends at a New Years Eve Party: one of the dares was to call and tell your crush that you like them. And so me being the only person in the group who knew I was dating someone, I volunteered. I think everyone else was a little bit surprised as I called my "crush" on speaker. My palms began to sweat and I bit my lower lip as the dial tone rang. I wasn't sure if I was actually going to be able to pull this stunt off but I may as well try. As soon as she answered I could tell she was trying not to laugh, which didn't really help me at all. In a genuinely nervous tone I said, "Hi, I have something I want to tell you", she replies, "ok what is it?". I was about to speak but stopped for a second because I was trying not to laugh. After I mustered up the courage, I said "I have a crush on you." Her reply to that was "Well I have something else I want to tell you; I really like you too." I made my jaw drop to make it seem like I was hearing that for the first time. Realizing my little plan to fool my friends worked, I asked her, "oh ok cool, so do you want to meet up tomorrow?" to which she replied, "yeah see you then" and hung up. Unbenounced to my friends, I actually was going to see her tomorrow.

I barely slept that night. I went to bed at probably 1 or 2 am and had to wake up at 6am to catch my 8:30 flight.

During the early morning car ride to the Newark Airport, my stomach started to twist again. I wasn't just nervous because I had never been to Colorado before, but I also had never met the rest of her family before. In my opinion, a guy always wants to make a good first impression when he is meeting his girlfriend's family, especially with her father.

I was able to calm down while my flight was being taxied on the runway. After my plane landed, I got on the train terminal with my brother (who came to make sure I didn't get kidnapped or lost in the airport) and headed towards the baggage claim where Rachel said she would be waiting for me. During the ride to the baggage claim area, the twisted feeling in my stomach changed into a pit. I was excited to be seeing her again but nervous at the same time, mainly because I wasn't exactly sure which direction she was going to pop out from. The train came to my stop and I headed up the escalator where she said that she would be waiting for me.

The reunion was similar to our initial meeting in July. I was somewhat clueless as to where she actually was (maybe or maybe not because I was also looking down at my phone trying to text her) and then all of the sudden she appeared out of the corner of my eye and hugged me.

After our little reunion, my brother talked and exchanged information with her mom just in case anything happened to me and I joined them as we went to her mom's car. During the ride to her house I was able to get a better view of just how different the Colorado landscape was compared to New York's back home where there were trees

everywhere and you could maybe see one-hundred feet out at best. While in Colorado it was just like flatlands and a snow covered mountain range in the far distance; with barely any major vegetation besides a handful of small trees. The overall difference in landscape was astounding to me, I felt almost as if I was on a different planet, when in reality it's just a different state.

As we began to pull into her neighborhood, my heart began to beat faster and my palms became a little sweaty. I let her know beforehand that I was a little anxious about meeting her father for the first time, not just because I had never met him before. "What if I stuttered as I introduced myself to her father? "Am I going to be interrupted if I stutter while I introduce myself, is her father even familiar with stuttering as a whole??" The first thing I reacted to as I walked into her house wasn't her father, but rather her dogs' two little front paws touching my shins as she jumped with excitement to the fact that I was a new human.

After I finished saying hello to her dog, I brought myself back up and introduced myself to her father. Which isn't something I'll never forget. Nothing bad happened but the anxiety that I had built up during the car ride there, was all for nothing.

Following my introduction to her father, Rachel showed me to my room and then told me that she wanted to show me something; so she took my hand and led me towards her room. While she was guiding me there, my mind felt like it was running at a thousand miles an hour because I was nervous and kinda curious about what she wanted to

show me. She ended up guiding me into her walk-in closet and closed the door about 95% so that neither her parents would think that we were doing “other things”. She then turns around to face me, and then wraps her arms around me while she whispers “I missed you” in my ear. My reaction (aside from slightly blushing) was heartwarming to say the least. The nervous pit in my stomach felt more like a gentle hug and I wrapped my arms around her as well.

Similar to when we were at the Empire State Building, the moment probably would have lasted longer but we heard Rachel’s mom calling her name, and she immediately looked up at me with a wide eyed, “oh crap!” face. I forget if her mom already knew we were dating at the time, but Rachel opened the (previously 95% closed) closet door and told me to sit on her bed while she pretended to be looking for something on her desk.

Her mom appeared in the doorway with a confused look on her face, while the both of us did our best to try and not burst out laughing. Her mom said to figure out what we wanted to do that night, and then left. With a sigh of relief, Rachel joined me (sitting) on her bed with a little box in her hands. She explained that it was a present for the both of us and that she wanted me to open it. I was confused on what it could’ve been and to my surprise, it was a disposable camera. I’ll admit it wasn’t exactly what I was expecting, but I still hugged her and said “thank you”. To me it was one of those gifts where it wasn’t too expensive but it was also really thoughtful.

After I put the camera down, we researched things we could

possibly do that night, and settled on a 7 o'clock viewing of the new Star Wars movie: *The Rise of Skywalker*. Neither of us were huge Star Wars fans but we were still excited to go see it. We arrived at the movie theater at about 6:45 and then got settled in our seats by 6:50. At first we thought we were going to be two of the only people there, however more people started to walk in as the time approached 7pm. The theater became about a $\frac{3}{4}$ of the way full by the time the lights went down and Rachel simultaneously lifted the arm rest between us. What happens next still kinda gives me butterflies; after she was done lifting up the arm rest, she gently took my left arm and wrapped it around herself as she settled on my left side. I didn't mind it because I found it adorable at the time.

During most of the movie, Rachel kept alternating between laying on my left side and laying on my lap. I was fine with it just as long as I wasn't immobilized. Also during some of the moments she was laying on my lap, I teased her by tickling her side.

The movie finished at 9:30 that night, and her dad picked us up at around 9:45. By the time we got back to her house, we were pretty tired. So we both went to our rooms to change and got ready for bed.

I woke up the next day and I wasn't exactly sure where I was. When I went to check the time on my phone, I saw that it was 6:15 am in the morning. Naturally I would have woken up at 8:15 am, however my circadian rhythm had not been fully adjusted yet, so I went back to sleep.

It wasn't until 15 minutes later when I heard someone whisper "Mike, Mike, are you awake?". I opened my eyes to see Rachel slightly standing in the doorway. As I sat up to stretch, I replied, "Good Morning Babe". I didn't even get the chance to fully open my eyes, when all of a sudden I felt part of the blanket sink into the bed. It took me a second to contemplate what exactly happened, but Rachel had quietly ran over and jumped onto the unoccupied side of my bed while I was stretching.

We ended up staying in those same spots (on my bed) for the next two hours until her mom called us upstairs for some breakfast and talked to us about what our plan was for the day. We settled on showing me some of the places in Denver; such as the Downtown area and the 16th Street Mall.

During my tour, Rachel and I were able to do things I never really thought I'd ever get to do. Mainly rent these electric scooters that we rode around for an hour or two. They were similar to Citi Bike but, it was a motorized scooter that would purposely limit it's max speed in certain areas for safety purposes.

By the time Rachel and I finished seeing what we wanted to see, it was around 5pm so we went back to where her mom was, and we searched up places where we could grab some dinner. We settled on this restaurant called Panda Express and her older brother was going to be joining us because he was in the area.

I didn't mind it when I heard this but I was anxious again, similar to when I was about to meet her father. My palms

started to become sweaty, and I kept pacing the floor while watching the door, overall just kinda dreading how it may go. I think my heart even skipped a beat when I realized they walked in the door. “Okay now it was kinda panic time”, I thought to myself. I’m sure they were a good person but at the time, I didn’t know anything about them coupled with the fact that I’m not the greatest at small talk. Also! There was like 99.99% chance he didn’t know I have a stutter, and the last thing I wanted was for them to think it was because I was nervous.

Thankfully, I didn’t stutter as I introduced myself and shook his hand (this was 2020 pre-covid). Our orders were already placed so Rachel and I got our drinks and found a table while her mom and older brother talked about something. When all of our orders were ready, they brought them over to the table Rachel and I were sitting at. The best way I would describe it was the conversations were kind of 50/50. Initially Rachel’s brother talked to her and her mom about something but then the conversation kinda shifted over to me. He asked general “get to know me” questions. I explained stuff that I’m from New York and I was a High School Junior, I wasn’t sure which college I was going to yet, and that I liked binging TV shows and playing video games. The realist moment hit when they asked me what my favorite TV show was.

It took me a moment to think because at the time it was *My Hero Academia* but I felt too embarrassed to say that, along with fearing I would stutter on it. So in an attempt to dodge the bullet, I turned to Rachel and asked her, “what’s my favorite TV show?” With a grin nearly ear to

ear like mine, she said “My Hero Academia”. Yeah it was not exactly my proudest moment but I asked her because we both liked the series at the time and it was one of the things she and I originally bonded over when we first met. After that conversation was over, her brother talked to her mom again while I talked with Rachel.

Overall I think the meeting went well. We all finished eating and said goodbye to her brother. When we got back in her mom’s car, I let out a sigh of relief. Rachel looked at me with a confused and slightly concerned look on her face, and I explained that the meet up with her brother went better than I had hoped.

We got back to her house at about 8:30 that night and did the same thing we did the night before; changed into our PJ’s and hung out until it was time for bed.

The next morning I woke up at about 7:15 am, meaning my carcanain rhythm had somewhat better adjusted to the different time zones. 5 minutes later I am awoken by an all too familiar weighted feeling by the foot of my bed, so I did the same thing I did the morning before; sat up, stretched, and said “Good Morning” to Rachel. We went upstairs at about 8:30 to make some breakfast and get our day started because we (Me, Rachel, and both of her parents) were going to be driving to the Cave of the Winds in Colorado Springs, which was a good two to three hour drive.

Although the drive was mostly uneventful, I got to see more of what the Colorado landscape was like. I realized it was much more rural as you drive further away from the

cities and suburbs. Aside from looking out into the middle of nowhere to try and entertain myself during the drive, Rachel and I slightly interlocked our arms because we were sitting right next to each other in the back seats and it was an overall more comfortable sitting position.

We started to see more activity as we got closer to Colorado Springs. Aside from getting a better overall look of the 14'000ft high mountain that is Pikes Peak, we drove by part of the United States Airforce Academy and saw one of their propeller planes flying around. Then before I knew it, we had arrived at the Cave of the Winds parking lot. Along with our general admissions tickets, Rachel's mom had got Rachel and me tickets to the next Discovery and Haunted Lantern Tour, which was going to be leaving in 20 minutes. So we had some time to kill.

During some of that time, I was able to snap a few pictures of the astounding view from one of the balconies:



Pictured: The Rocky Mountains and Colorado Springs.

When the time for Rachel and I's tour was called, we went over to where the ticket person previously told us to go and handed them our tickets. The tour started out with the Discovery part, which was mainly artificial pathways because it was all lit up and the ground felt more like a sidewalk, than a real cave floor. As its name might have already implied, the purpose of that tour was to teach people all about the science and history of the cave. Then near the end of the Discovery Tour, our tour guide took us to this locked iron door, with about twelve to fifteen metal bucket lanterns hanging next to it.

Before we went in, Our tour guide explained that it is literally pitch black in that part of the cave and it was very important that nobody wandered off. To be honest I was a little spooked but I also didn't want to leave Rachel by herself (even though she wasn't as scared). So I took a candle-lit lantern and held my breath as I followed the light in front of me.

Aside from some of the spooky ghost stories and a literal four-foot high passageway, the tour turned out to be pretty fun.

At one of our stops, our tour guide made each of the couples in our tour group stand with their backs turned toward the entrance to another smaller tunnel. After she was done sorting everyone, she proceeded to tell us another ghost story about the spot we were at and how (about ten to twenty years ago), a female tourist felt someone lightly tug her hair; the only problem was that there was no one else standing behind her. She was so freaked out that she stayed at the front of the group for the rest of the tour.

So naturally when I heard this, I got the idea to try and play a joke on Rachel by lightly tugging her hair once or twice during that same stop. Unfortunately, she immediately knew it was me and gave me one of those “cut it out!” nudges to the side. I’m not sure if she saw the humor in it, but I know did.

The rest of the tour was pretty exciting and even though I could tell most of the stories were probably fictional, they still had me on the edge of my seat. The only people who I would not recommend the Haunted Lantern Tour, are people who are severely afraid of the dark, tight spaces, or are unable to physically crouch down to four feet.

After Rachel and I got back from our tour, we met up with her parents again, and then we all drove back down to Colorado Springs to find a bite to eat. We got lunch at this burger place called The Skirted Heifer. The way in which you placed your order there was similar to the way some fast food chain restaurants work: We had to place our individual order at the counter instead of at a table. I ordered second, after Rachel, because 1. I wasn’t sure what I wanted just yet and 2. I wanted to practice saying it so that I did stutter while saying my order.

I guess I had been so used to ordering on my own with my family, that I never really took it into account when I would be ordering with my girlfriend and her parents. It felt isolating in a sense, knowing that I wouldn’t have any type of “backup” this time around. So I took a few deep breaths in, and told the person at the register my order. My order came out clear enough that I only had to say it once

and with a sigh of relief, I joined Rachel at our table. We stayed at the burger place for about another hour until we got up to leave.

During the long drive home, I think it was safe to say that Rachel and I were both pretty tired. For most of the ride back, Rachel slept on my shoulder while I had a few intermittent naps. Which helped it feel like the car ride was shorter than it actually was. We probably got back about 9:30 pm that night and we both did our same old nightly routine. Afterwards, Rachel and I were still so tired that we said goodnight to each other and then went to bed.

The next morning I woke up at around 8am and Rachel came into my room at 8:15. Then at 8:45 we went upstairs to have some breakfast. While we were making pancakes, her dad walked in and asked us what we wanted to do for that day. Originally the plan was to go up to Pikes Peak, however there was so much snow on the mountain that they weren't allowing any tourists. So after doing some more research while Rachel and I ate our breakfast, we settled on going to the zoo.

About an hour and a half to two hours later, we arrived at the Denver Zoo. During our walk to the entrance, Rachel and I debated how we could ask her parents if we could explore the zoo on our own, since the both of us saw it as another date opportunity. It was about five to ten minutes since we physically entered the park, when Rachel asked her parents.

They said that they were fine with it just as long as we

stayed together and were back by the main entrance by 3pm. As Rachel was walking back, she had a smile on her face which gave me the hint that her parents said Yes.

Overall I think we had a really great time on our own. Mainly because we got to see what we wanted to see, and they had dozens of animals from all across the world. From the Asian Elephants, to Okapis (a Zebra and Giraffe Hybrid), to Peacocks that were allowed to roam around the zoo.



Pictured: A Male Peacock

My favorite part of it all was the 4D Theater. It was where they played an episode of one of those *Planet Earth* documentaries with a few extra 4D effects. For example, whenever an aquatic animal made a big splash, they would push a button that activates the water sprayers. There was also this one scene with thousands, maybe even millions of Locusts. I wasn't exactly sure what was used for their effect because all I felt was these tiny things hitting my

calves. I later found out that the effect was created via these tiny wires that spun around really fast and when the ends hit the back of your legs it felt like, well, Locusts.

After our 4-D movie was over, Rachel and I decided to grab some lunch at a cafe and then wander around the rest of the zoo until we had to head back to the main entrance, where her parents were waiting for us.

The next day was a sad one for the both of us. Rachel and I were glad that we got to do so much stuff together and we just didn't want it to end. However, as the proverb by Chaucer states, "all good things must come to an end".

My brother and I flew home on the evening of January 5th. I could have stayed one extra day but I had school because it was a Monday; ugh. While I was in my classes the next day, I was still pretty jetlagged to say the least. I had gotten home from the airport really early in the morning. So it took a few days for my body to adjust again.

Trying to Facetime after I was back home, felt more unusual than it did in July. My guess was because we saw each other in person for an extended amount of time and then all of sudden, boom! We were back to being 1600 miles apart. Though it stunk to be so far apart again, we were able to make even more memories that'll last a lifetime.

For Valentine's Day that year, I did things a little different. Instead of sending her a snapchat explaining how much I loved her, I wrote her a physical letter and mailed it out, so that it would get to her right around Valentine's Day. She

did the same thing a few days later. It's the thought that counts, ya know?

Two weeks later we started to talk about when we might be able to see each other next. The initial plan we settled on was for her to come over to my area sometime during the summer because I had been in Colorado over the previous Christmas break. Unfortunately that plan kind of fell apart as Covid and we were dead in the water as for where and when we were going to see each other next. We knew we wanted to do it some time over the summer but we just weren't sure when. Plus both our main priorities at the time had to do with our final grades and to not catch Covid.

It wasn't until mid June, when we were finally able to schedule the day I would be flying into Denver once more. In a way, it was the same drill as last time. She was going to meet me by the baggage claim and probably see me first as I rode the escalator up from the train terminal. Almost as soon as I got off of the plane, I snapchatted Rachel asking "where do I go to get to the train??" I was still able to follow the signs but I still wasn't sure where the entrance/exit to the terminal train was. After about five minutes of walking around the main terminal (where the gates and shops meet), I was able to figure out where exactly I was supposed to be going.

As I was riding the train from my terminal to the baggage claim area, I looked at my phone and realized I hadn't texted Rachel back after she responded to my "Where do I go from here?" questions. So me being me, I decided to try and create a disguise using my mask, sunglasses and hat.

I got up to the baggage claim area and started looking for Rachel. I was expecting her to be in the same spot she was in when I flew there in January. When I realized that she wasn't there, I became bewildered and a little anxious. I wasn't able to find her until a minute or two later when I noticed her walking towards me, from the corner of my eye.

We said our hellos once more, and then as we started walking, she was leaning against one of the further walls in the area. She also explained that her dad was waiting by one of the entrances to the airport. When we got to her dad's car, Rachel took my bag and put it in the front seat while she joined me in the back. I was a little confused at first but I didn't mind it since we were technically in person again.

We got back to her place an hour or so later and I was greeted by the same dog who previously had their two little front paws on my shins back in January. I said hello to her dog, took my shoes off, and then went down stairs to put my bags in my room. That night for the most part was uneventful, aside from when we went to Red Robin. On the car ride back to her house, we made a plan to go to the Downtown Aquarium for tomorrow's activity.

The next morning, both Rachel and I woke up at 8:15 and then hung out in my room (with the door still open) until about 9:45 when we decided we wanted to make pancakes for breakfast. At the time we didn't realize this but logistically trying to make two-dozen or so pancakes, coupled with trying to get changed really pushed the amount of free time we had until it was time to go, which was about 10:30am. Long story short, I scarfed down one

or two of our pancakes while also trying to fill up my water bottle and put my shoes on. We also ended up having to leave the rest of the pancakes in the microwave so that they could (hopefully) preserve their heat.

During the car ride there, some pancakes got stuck in my chest because I ate it too fast, so I tried to flush it down with some of my water... BIG MISTAKE! The clog only lasted for 2 or 3 seconds but instead of flushing the stuck piece of pancake down, the water started to fill up in my chest. It felt almost like I was drowning because I knew if I was going to try and take a breath, I would have inhaled water instead of air.

But luckily (and thankfully), the stuck piece of pancake managed to slide down into my stomach, releasing the built up water with it and then therefore allowing me to breathe again.

We got to the Downtown Aquarium about an hour after we left and out of all the Aquariums I've been to, Denver's was the best. For starters, they had this completed Megalodon jawbone right by the entrance and then as you walked further into the exhibit, they had all of these prehistoric-looking with the skeleton of something behind it.



Pictured: Me taking a selfie with the displayed skeleton.

We later moved on to other exhibits like Tiger Exhibit and exhibits with more saltwatery fish and the stingray's touch tanks; both seen below:



Pictured: Saltwater Tank



Stingray Touch Tank

Rachel and I ended our tour of the Downtown Aquarium with some lunch at the (little bit pricey) restaurant they had at the aquarium, and then we later waited outside for her dad to come and pick us up.

After we got back home, Rachel and I managed to keep ourselves occupied until it was dinner time. Mainly because we watched a movie on Netflix called, *The Kissing Booth 2*. One of the reasons why we wanted to watch (other than to kill time), was because two of the main characters were in a Long-Distance Relationship, just like Rachel and me. A few minutes after we finished the movie, Rachel got a text from her mom saying we should wash our hands because dinner was going to be ready soon. When we came upstairs, her mom had made chicken cutlets, macaroni with fetecunni sauce and peas.

The only stand-out difference that I had to temporarily

try and adapt to while I was over there was that if you took seconds, you had to heat it up for a minute or two in the microwave. Which was what I did, I went over to put my food in the microwave, and set it for two minutes just like I usually do. Her dad came over with his plate of food waiting for his turn to warm his food up. While we waited, he told me a story about when he was a kid, one of his friends accidentally set a baked potato on fire while it was in the microwave. Now I'm not exactly sure how that happens, so I asked him "wait how did it h-h-h-happen"? I was about midway through that stuttered sentence when he finished it. He finished it in an all too familiar tone of "was that what you were going to say?", to which I just nodded my head. He explained that his friend must've put it on for too long and they realized something was wrong when the fire alarms went off.

After my food was done, I retrieved my plate from the microwave and went back to my seat trying to hide the embarrassment. I knew that I was already used to being interrupted; however, the fact that it was one of my girlfriend's parents kinda just added another layer of guilt. I don't blame him because interrupting is kind of a subconscious thing if you're not as experienced or do not know other people who stutter. Nothing like that would've happen back at home, so I guess it gave me more of a sense of the real world because some people aren't always going to let me finish my sentence when/if I stutter.

Even though I know it's a minor incident and shouldn't really let it affect me, I still kinda cringe about every now and then. Also when it came to refilling my water, I just

had to get up and get to the fridge. If I was at home, I would've pointed to the water while asking for it.

The rest of my stay was both exciting and uneventful. I'm glad we were still able to go places (despite the pandemic), but not as many compared to if she already had her drivers license and there was no pandemic. Some of the other things we did to pass the time includes driving to Pikes Peak, going fishing, trying quail eggs (which are literally like the size of a nickel), and visiting some of her local parks.



Pictured: Our Catch of the Day!

After all of our activities were finally finished, it was finally time for me to fly home. Though I did end up staying there a little longer than planned, we were able to make the most of it and I was able to become closer to both her and her parents.

The last time I ever saw Rachel (in person) was when I was at the non-existent TSA line at the Denver Airport. After a few minutes, We said our goodbyes and I went on my way.



Pictured: My view of the Denver Airport after I got through TSA.

To bring a long story to a close, Rachel ended up breaking up with me about a month after I left Denver because she had realized that being long-distance wasn't cutting it for her anymore. When I initially heard this, I assumed we would've just gotten back together (like we did in the past) but that reunion never came; and it started to stress me out. When I tried to talk to her about it, I said that I thought we should cut all communication for a few weeks, while she wanted to stay friends. I'm not exactly sure why other than she still cared about me.

The following months after the final break up weren't the easiest for me to handle. Over time we started talking less and less, which eventually made me realize just how big of a role I thought she played in my sense of self, and identity as a whole. The stress from it was nearly unbearable at times. I had nights where I could barely sleep as well as days where I could barely pay attention, let alone not have a face that seemed depressed. I played a mediation video via youtube just about everyday and I had times when I

wrote in my notes app with no intent to stop. I wanted to lessen my stress but I still was not sure how.

It wouldn't be until 7-8 months later when I was finally able to come to terms with what happened. She had moved-on from me, and I should do the same. Today, Rachel and I are still on good terms and have small conversations every now and then, similar to how it all started. I'm not sure if she'll ever read this book, but I wish her the best in life.

Also as for Colorado as a whole, I want to go back within the next five years or so. Not necessarily to try and see Rachel again, but rather to see if I can find some answers. You see, ever since I got home on January 5th, 2020; I have always had this amazement with the state of Colorado along with its Denver area. I want to try and go back on my own (or with some friends) to try and see if the "amazement" came from my time with Rachel, or if it came from the places I saw in Colorado. Yeah some of the areas are going to be more nostalgic than others but I still want to try and see if I can finally get the question that's been nagging at me for so long, finally answered.

r/woosh:

Sarcasm, the use of irony to mock or convey contempt. In a lot of TV Sitcoms today, there's always a character whose main trait is sarcasm. Whether it's Jerry Seinfeld (Seinfeld), Chandler Bing (F.R.I.E.N.D.S), Sheldon Cooper (The Big Bang Theory), or even Stewie Griffin (Family Guy). They all use a kind of sarcasm to help convey their role in the show. However when it's used in

real life, it is a bit different.

You see the whole point of the joke is that there is a punch line and when the other person realizes what the punch-line is, they laugh. Now maybe the punch-line is built up or it's subtle; it depends. No matter when the punch-line is used, the audience has to be endangered or it might go r/whooshh (over their head). For me I feel this is an all too common occurrence. I'm not saying I'm necessarily that "slow friend" but whether or not I actually understand the joke depends on how engaged I may be. An example is watching a comedian's act on Dry Bar Comedy vs overhearing another person's conversation. If the comedian talks about relationships or what they were like in high school, that's something I can personally relate to so I am going to laugh at that, as opposed to overhearing someone use a punchline in a side conversation where I'm not exactly sure what the topic is. In my view, in order for something to work (i.e. a punchline), the other person(s) need a foundation to work off of. However if that isn't set up properly, the whole structure could literally go whoosh come down at any moment.

The most common occurrence where I've experienced (and misinterpreted) was whenever I was with one of my parents or older brother and they said something that was meant to be a rhetorical question or sarcastic comment.

The thing that gets me is that the tone is usually a serious one but with some hidden sarcasm. I'm usually also still a little "shook" which means there's still stress and racing thoughts in my head, which can lead to more irrational

thinking and it all just kinda snowballs from there. As I got older I learned to adapt with it.

When I was a kid I'd get so overwhelmed whenever someone yelled at me I would just cry because that's all I could think about doing. Now I still kinda get the small feeling here and there but I know I am able to push through it (mostly). After all, practice makes perfect!

I would think that another part of the problem is the way my brain is wired. I've already talked about my ADD (Attention Deficit Disorder) but I haven't mentioned a part of it called RSD or Rejection Sensitivity Dysphoria. To put simply, I don't always take criticism or rejection too well, and this includes rhetorical questions. When something like that does happen, I tend to internalize it and it pops up from time to time.

The worst is usually when sarcasm happens overtly. I could be reading something in for example my family's group chat and one of them says a sarcastic remark. If it's just a sentence or two, then the sarcasm goes completely over my head, however if it has emoji, it helps give a hint that maybe they don't actually mean what they say.

The Myths about High School:

I think the thought about what high school is going to be like crosses the mind of a preteen/tween. Our idea of what high school is like is mostly dependent on what 2000's children's TV we watched. Heck even *The Breakfast Club*. They show you that there's the athletes/popular guys who

are also usually dating popular girl (who may or may not be the head of the cheer team), and then you got your typical basket case, nerd, rebel/metalhead, etc. All these characters who more than likely influenced our idea of what high school is, however now that I can speak from experience it's farther from the truth.

The social hierarchy in high school isn't as singular as one may think. I mean yeah it may depend on where and when everyone went to high school but it's more of a handful of social cliques as opposed to just one major hierarchy. Ex: I'm a theater kid, I have been one ever since the sixth grade, and more often than not, the main role is given to a Junior or Senior who probably has at least a semi-popular standing. Also I've seen instances where the lead usually hangs out with the other leads both during and outside of rehearsals, one of the reasons being because they can all relate to the pressure and time commitment that comes with being a lead.

Then you have your supporting cast members, who are usually a part of the ensemble and whether or not you actually have a line in the show, depends on which character you get, let alone if they even have a name! Those cast members are in their group because like the main cast, they're the ones who spend the most time together and interact with each other.

Then you have the Stage Crew, who are the ones that are backstage and dressed in as much black as possible. In my experience, they have the most interaction that doesn't necessarily have to do with the show because the amount

of times they are able to do their job depends on what set piece(s) go out/come off during each scene change. For the most part, I've had side conversations, watched the show, danced whenever a musical number is playing, and had to lecture the off-stage cast because they were being too damn loud. You may think it sounds odd if you've never participated in theater but trust me in saying that it's fine just as long as none of us are able to be seen or heard in the wings.

Probably my most memorable moments in my "social hierarchy" were during the Hell Week Dinners. For those who don't know, "Hell Week" is a term used to describe the rehearsals during the week of opening night, before the show. The rehearsals would start at about 3:15-3:45pm and end at 9-10pm, meaning we all had to get fed at some point. As soon as the dinner time was announced, everyone went to the cafeteria in their own smaller groups and got a bite to eat. The tables then have unofficial-official sections where the main cast, supporting cast, and crew all sit. I think of it as kind of like a queen bee and the rest of the hive, they go wherever the queen. In the case of seating during hell week, the first person in every group sits somewhere and their friends/fellow castmates follow suit.

I'm not sure about the supporting cast but like I said before, the most popular kid(s) in the main cast and stage crew are usually the juniors or seniors in the show. Just about all of the freshmen and sophomores look up to them because they've had the most experience with past performances. I unfortunately never got this "experience" as a senior because of Covid, but what can you do?

However I will say this, once you reach your senior year of High School, it's practically (and hopefully) the finish line. No more higher grades to worry about, no more seeing a teacher in the hallway and having no idea who they are or what they teach and heck maybe even you really enjoyed that subject you used to always stress out about in the lower grades.

Meh, do I want to go?:

Based on what you have read from the prompt above, you may think that I'm generally a social well. Well you're right but you're also not wrong.

To put it plain and simple, I'm an introvert; a shy person, a lone wolf. It's not that I don't enjoy social interaction, but rather I like keeping to myself and observing others. If we're ever in a group conversation, you'll usually see me almost as like the third-wheel.

When it comes to major social interactions/occasions, I don't do night clubs or big dance parties. I prefer hanging out with a group of friends whenever it's most convenient for us. Usually this was when we were at some theater event for school but now that I'm going to be leaving high school and be more on my own when I get to college, it would be helpful to learn how to plan events to do on the weekends, no matter whether it's on or off the campus.

Speaking of college, I'm kinda curious and nervous for what Orientation (signing up for classes) and Welcome

Week (move in day) is going to be like. I'm sure I can try to find something to talk about with another kid in one of my classes but if I'm meeting for example in the line for a food truck, I'd have much more trouble trying to maintain a conversation unless I previously know something about them. To adapt to this, I've mainly come up with a rule on whether or not I should engage. To some this may seem kinda too complicated but I see it as a good starting place. Pretty much if neither of us met each other during an ice breaker session, I'll try to see if there's something about them that I can try to start a conversation about. Whether it's the character/company on their shirt, or I saw their post in the Class of 2025 facebook group, etc. Probably the best piece of advice I've heard when it comes to making new friends is that you should ask them about themselves. Obviously not like a super personal question but rather a general surface level conversation starter. After all, who doesn't like to talk about themselves every once in a while?

Am I going to become friends with every new person I talk to? No, but it wouldn't hurt to try and become friends with someone and if it doesn't work out then it doesn't work out.

I'm fine with my current friend group. One of the things I credit to being an introvert is my stutter. I'm not saying it's a bad thing but it's definitely played a role in my social life. Previously being the only stutterer I've ever known was lonely. I'd watch everyone around me be able to start a sentence for conversation with such ease. Almost as easy as well, talking. This kinda gave me social anxiety. As a kid, I debated over and over whether or not I should

join into a conversation or answer a question. I would get paranoid over whether or not I would stutter. Would everyone look at me while a struggle to get a word or or phrase out

A new Point of View:

One of the things that definitely helped me with my anxiety around stuttering was my speech-therapy sessions with Ryan, one of SAY's Speech-Language Pathologists. I was hesitant when my mom first told me about it because all I had ever known before then was using specific strategies and breathing techniques to try and fix my stutter; something I was not too interested in.

However this one was different. To put it plain and simple, the purpose was not to fix/minimize the stutter, but rather to help the individual (me in this case) feel less anxious about it. This is because when for example a block happens, I'd try to rush it out because that's all I could think of at the moment. Downside is that it does not really help the stutter and it can even worsen it in some cases. The feeling of your vocal cords subconsciously closing for an extended amount is not exactly something I can put into words (literally), other than you're still able to breathe but your vocal cords feel paralyzed with a strong tightness in your chest.

One of my most memorable moments from our sessions was this strategy game type thing where I called up a local restaurant or store, it does not matter where, and I asked them a question(s). The trick to the game is that I was

supposed to (but did not have to) tell them that I have a stutter, before actually saying what I wanted to say. This was also an activity I could do on my own but never did do it on my own. My guess is partially due to the “stranger danger” idea that most of us were taught as kids.

Obviously it was and still is a good thing to teach a young kid but now that I’m older, I think it could be something fun to do while I am in college, especially since I’ll be on my own. For example, if I need to call a company that has a job/internship opening, or if I want to order out instead of eating the food at college, etc.

The Future

CHAPTER 4

The Future

The Road Ahead:

“Paint it any color but you cannot erase your past, but you still can paint your future. It’s bound to happen sooner, so let it paint your smile” These lyrics from an english-translated cover of a song called “Starmaker” are something that recently stuck with me. Just thinking about them gives me chills.

To me, it’s one of those examples of eventually coming to terms with what happened in your past and realizing that there’s much more to life than feeling bad about what happened then. We’re all going to have those demons and other bad memories but how you deal with them is up to you. One of the best ways (in my opinion) is making the most of what has yet to happen, rather than what has

already happened.

Now obviously when something tragic (such as the first time getting broken up with, or the death of a loved one) happens, you need some time to try and grasp yourself back together; especially if that person had more of an influence in your life than you realized. Afterall time can heal, no matter whether it's a physical or emotional wound.

However there's still time to figure things out. Whether it takes five minutes or half your day! What you do then can potentially become something that aids in recovery. If you're like me, time management isn't exactly your strong suite. I get that but that does not mean you don't have a starting point. For some people the path may just be a straight line but others it's a dozen starting straight lines. You never know!! Point is, (and you don't always realize it at 17-18 years of age), but you have one life and you can do just about anything you want. Yeah you may have to push a little harder than normal to actually get the gears moving but it'll be worth it in the end. Another thing I've realized (and hope to get) is that mental toughness. You see, having your first broken heart sucks and I was a mess for a month and half until things kinda started dying down. I still had her blocked then because I wasn't mentally prepared to even look at her social media account. Yeah I'll admit it wasn't the most mature thing in the world but I didn't know what else to do at the time.

My moment of when the switch came on was one night when I was texting one of my cousins. I was still healing at that point and figured why not tell him about my situation.

Turned out to be one of the best decisions I've ever made. It wasn't until a few days when I actually took his advice, but I unblocked her on all social media. It varies depending on the person. If the split was mutual and neither of you hate each other's guts, I would recommend unblocking them; trying to follow them back is more of a you decision. I personally chose not to back then, because they were not the people I used to know and I was tired of the grief that once plagued my life. Besides I was still healing and didn't need another reason to constantly keep checking my phone; "oh I wonder if the girl (who I shouldn't be worrying about) posted something" NO!

However if your ex is still potentially "out for blood" or making up lies and rumors about you; you should keep them blocked. °-°

Without that urge or trigger, I was able to focus more on myself. As for the other advice my cousin gave me and I quote, "take it out on the weights". This may not work for everyone but it definitely helped me get my mind off of things. You have something else to focus on your broken heart. Besides, can you really focus on how your heart feels when your entire body is screaming in pain?? This is also where my idea of mental toughness comes into play. No matter how much your body is screaming to stop, to quit, to let go, you keep going until your body gives up on it's own.

Note: I do not recommend doing it day one if you don't have any previous exercise experience because you can either cause a major injury or you'll get something called post workout depression. Which happens after all of those

“feel good” chemicals fade away. I’d highly recommend conducting your own research and/or asking a professional to learn more.

After you’ve already built up some muscle mass, is when I’d recommend attempting to go the extra mile. It’s gonna probably suck the first few times but it will get easier. Sure your muscles will be telling you to stop but that’s also a time to keep your mindset forward. Listen to some music that makes you want to move, or have a few work out with you. Try to do whatever you can to make sure your mindset is telling you to keep going. To keep on getting 1% better everyday, to annually, whether it be every week or every month. try and surpass your limits; in other words go Plus Ultra! (My Hero Academia Reference). My beginner practice with this philosophy has been something that’s helped build the new me after my heartbroken self just a few months ago, both physically and mentally. In fact I’ve enjoyed it so much that I want to join the powerlifting club at the college I am going to. There I see myself being able to practice around and learn from like minded individuals, along with improving my physical endurance and learning more about how to properly lift weights.

Speaking of clubs, I already have about a dozen or so clubs I found interesting and may want to sign up for during orientation. All ranging from athletic, to cultural and interest based, to co-curricular! My eyes may be larger than my stomach, so to speak, but it doesn’t hurt to at least try new things; that’s all part of the college experience!

Welp, I guess you made it to the end. If you liked this book, then make sure to keep an eye out for my college sequel.

To be continued...

The Future

75

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to explain more about why I thanked all of the people in my dedication page. In short, they have helped me become the person I am today and in my view everyone needs that kind of positive figure who they can always look up to and be able to go to when they are ever in a pickle.

ALSO BY THIS AUTHOR

Friendship is Forever

Winter Short Play Project 2018-2019

Written by Michael Ventrice, Jesus, & Sam

Teaching Artist: Ryan Pater

Untitled

Spring Mentor Project 2019

Written by Michael Ventrice, David, John-Paul, & Josiah

Mentor: Patrick Garvey

Teaching Artist: Rosie McDonald

Trouble in the Schmilite Pone

Winter Short Play Project 2019-2020

Written by Michael Ventrice, Erikson, & John-Paul

Teaching Artist: Colleen O'Connor

The Tammer

Spring Mentor Project 2020

Written by Michael Ventrice & Luka

Mentor: Amy Rodriguez

Teaching Artist: Laura Bozzone

Stereotypes

Fall Storytelling Project 2020-2021

Written by Michael Ventrice & Josh

Teaching Artist: Laura Bozzone

“What Do You Want to Be?”

Winter Spoken Word Project 2021

Written by Michael Ventrice

Groupmates: Erick & Tereza

Teaching Artist: Emily Ott