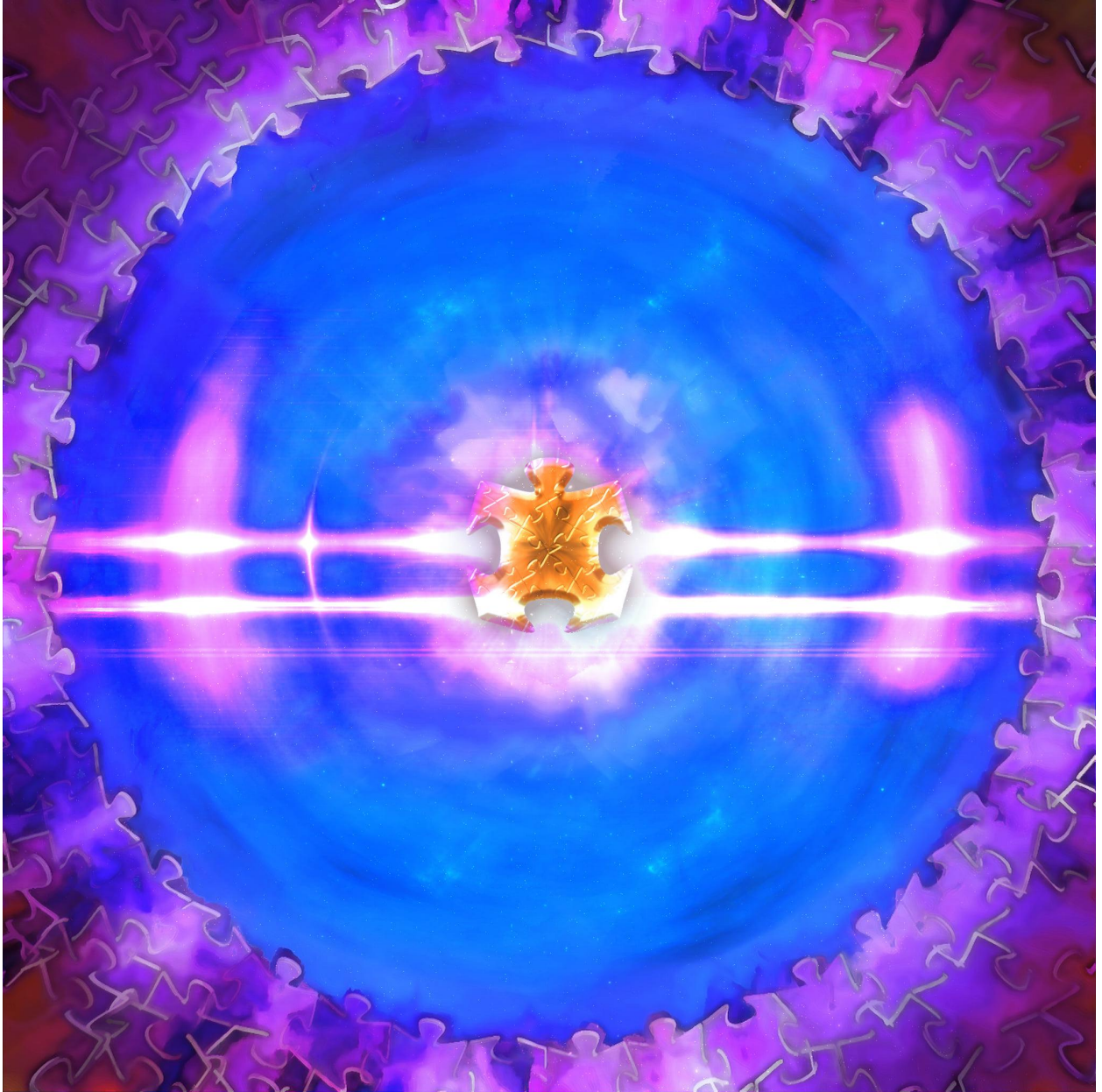


## **-Den of Wonder-**



**A Golden Child's Quest to Shake Off Shadow  
and Reclaim His Missing Pieces of Self Love**

This is a self help book. Make no mistake, you are reading a memoir, a biography, and the story of a life, but the act and intention of putting it in text is a radical act of self love. What kind of person pens their life story in a memoir? A celebrity, that's who. A New York Times best selling author who people know and follow and care about, with a brand and an agent and an agenda. ...right?

I don't have any of those things, other than maybe an agenda. An agenda of self love. I get filled up by telling my story. Sharing the tale of my self discovery and the work I've done is something I'm proud of and it's a beautiful thing.

This is my personal legend, and I'm proud to share it.

Authors note: This story deals with themes of trauma, addiction, and struggle. It contains body measurements and numbers, coping behaviors, and judgements. It is *my* story, and no matter what *your* story may be, know that you are worthy of love and support.

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## Chapter 1: The early years

### *Cast of Characters*

#### **Me, Tyler**



I'm an adorable child, and my parents love me. I mean, how can you hand make corduroy pants for your son and not love him? The three of us and our cat lived in harmony in our country suburb, often visited by deer, elk, and other wildlife that terrified my parents in the early hours of the morning, as evidenced by home movies.

## Dad



This guy's a total nerd. Works in tech his entire life, and meets his wife via video dating? What a guy. Earliest memories of him involve playing computer games. 1993 was a particularly magical year. Doom, Myst? He planted the early seeds of love for video games and technology at a young age, and not too much else. He's a jovial thinking man who works, enjoys chess, weed, and reading. The rest of him is mostly a mystery to me. He taught me that a man provides for his family and keeps emotions behind his aviators....and also that fanny packs are great, and one can never have too many Hawaiian shirts.

## Mom



My mom is pretty swell. From the Amish plains of Ohio, she found herself on the coast of California, makin' her way in the world with a promising career in radiology. And then someone had to go and tell her about this whole video dating thing. Ever since I was born, she's strove to give me an amazing life. From hand making clothes and important childhood security blankets, to reading the best books and reminding me that everybody poops. My mom taught me that creativity is ok, family is everything, and food is love. I was carted from team sport to team sport, supported in school plays, and even band. Mom worked ceaselessly to give me a beautiful life.

## The Stage

When someone asks me where I'm from, I usually say Washington, but in the presence of genuine curiosity I can tighten that up with the logistical truth of being born in San Jose California. We were only there long enough for one earthquake, and it was a big one. 1989. Good year! A bunch of great things happened, I assume. I don't advise looking up a timeline of 1989 events, because there are a ton of bummers. But you know what's not a bummer? I was born. August 19, 1989. A new player entered the game. The child of Jean Browning and Raymond Woods, a couple of hip young folks who met via VHS tapes in the magic of the video dating world. I only have two memories from this early period: Trying to grab our cat's tail, which she really hated, and the sight of highrises and vertigo during what may have very well been the Loma Prieta earthquake. We stuck around for a little while after that, but by the beginning of the 90s, the family had settled in Washington state. Ah, washington! The land of tall pines, beautiful mountains, and vast deserts. I'll stick to western washington, thanks. After a brief adjustment period the Woods family settled in the small town of North Bend, in the shadow of the glorious Mount Si. Growing up, I'm pretty sure I thought it was a volcano. I was adorable.



## **The Surprise Bandits**

Life as the golden child was great. I was a happy, silly kid with a burgeoning love for music, video games, and bugs. And then the unthinkable happened.



October 1996. Three new siblings arrived in my life. A miracle, or a curse? I was floored. Our house was chaotic. At first I was eager to help, after all, there certainly wasn't enough to go around. Resentment began to trickle in. Wasn't I the golden child? As I grew, I felt ignored, and

abandoned. Home documentary footage showed a wounded boy, retreating from the world and becoming ever more isolated. I would bully my siblings with micro and macro aggression, and avoided my parents. By middle school I had my own computer and video game systems, so I could retreat to any number of fantasy worlds. As I drew within, food became my greatest comfort, and as I grew I was often bullied and teased for my size. I watched my mom go through phases of dieting, and I remember a period in which I accompanied her to weight watchers meetings, sitting through weigh-ins and circles of women only for the trophy of leaving with boxes of those tasty tasty diet bars. I remember miniature sandwiches on half-sized potato bread. I remember coming home and calling my mom, and telling her "I'm going to eat the house down." I realize now that I took on a lot of trauma, taking on the message that my needs weren't going to be met. My needs didn't matter. I pushed them down, and continued binge eating, mired in deep shame. I discovered pornography almost by accident thanks to a cousins hardcore magazine collection, and with the rise of the internet I developed an unhealthy habit of late night adult content perusing. More shame. I began to wall off from the world and retreat inward as I trundled through middle school.

### **A Sense of Identity**

Fortunately, while my parents never truly understood what I was going through, creativity was encouraged and fostered. From 5th grade until 2 years into high school, I was in band, because that's simply what my mom's family did. It gave me community, responsibility, and a reason to own a very large cummerbund. I was the nerdy band kid who loved video games and anime, thank you very much. Fate smiled upon me when a friends' father gave me some creative software. As an artist and dreamer, he was an object of scorn for my mother. Mostly because he didn't have a job. I would go to my friends house to hang out and play videogames and hit trees with sticks, and inevitably get caught in his fathers web, unable to politely excuse myself as he went on and on about the future of online entertainment (in which people could pick up your sleeping virtual avatar as you logged off, only to find yourself somewhere completely new upon returning). He was like a wizard, smoking and exploring thoughts and ideas, weaving threads of

possibility in the air. He also made bizarre, strange electronic music, and impossible words in 3d software. Without his gift of Fruityloops 3 and Bryce 5, my inner artist may have languished.

I began to make music. In December 2002, I churned out my first weird little tune, appropriately titled “the first of many.” Through 2003, I would make over 100 songs, each done in less than a day, because the trial software would only let me render the final project to an audio file: never to save and revisit my projects. An Identity began to coagulate: the music kid. With the tools I was given, I dabbled in 3d computer renderings with Bryce 5, a unique piece of software specialized for generating landscapes, with basic building functionality for primitive shapes. So I made some art, and began to nurture the creative part of myself. By the time I entered high school, I had really begun to embrace this as my thing, and even had a computer teacher to mentor me and teach me more software. My parents approved, and I was encouraged to attend a few technology summer camps. One of these was at the Digipen Institute of Technology, a mythical video game school, right next to the famous Nintendo of America. I was intrigued. Go to school to make video games? It seemed like the next logical step. I compiled all my best art and began to build a portfolio. My parents even brought in an art teacher to help me with traditional drawing from still life observation. I was as good as I was gonna get. Sending off my compiled works with a prayer, I hoped I was enough.



## College Life



The response was quick and gratifying. I was IN: all I had to do was finish 200 pages of observational drawing over the summer as a prerequisite for art 101. Oh boy! It was so exciting, I was going to college! This excitement for finishing highschool, however, did not translate into finished sketchbook pages. The summer found me doing very little drawing. I was really good at procrastinating. I went on vacation with my family, and did a few sketchbook pages out of obligation.



I was terrified of starting college. It was a familiar feeling of Sunday dread before the first day of a new school, a full body terror, heightened by the stakes. I was frustrated and struggling with my own feelings of shame, inadequacy, and fear. And herein lies the first time I remember my mother being drunk. The fear of pretending to be asleep while my confused mother tried to check on me, with an equally confused and scared father unsuccessfully trying to comfort her and whisk her away. I felt a full body visceral shock of 'something is not ok.' By this point, my mother had gotten weight loss surgery, and was a changed human. Everything was ok on the outside! I knew nothing of her own struggles and addictions. She had gone through years of raising the 4 of us with little to no outside support, juggling parent teacher responsibilities, sports, band, and several full time jobs. She would go into her retail job at midnight, working through the morning for the perks of a discount, just so we could be clothed. Hardship and suffering, unconsciously doing what was right, and never asking for help.

So September 2007 rolled around, and I strode into art101 for the very first time, terror and all. My ego sized up my classmates as supreme competition, and the level of practice on display instantly sent me into a judgemental panic. We soon learned that the Talent Fairy was dead, and began to embark on the great crusade of practice. Weekly sketchbooks, figure drawing, flipbook animation classes, and trying to be independent college kids all at once. Though I kept to myself, I managed to make tentative friendships, bonding over the love of team fortress 2 and other video games. As my digipen career progressed, I showed up, did my work, and learned how to be an artist. I stumbled into unlikely partnerships, providing my music expertise to student games, and even stepped on stage at the independent games festival. I never did finish that summer sketchbook.

## Puberty II



In the summer month before starting my senior year of college, something happened. I was at home, probably spending pantsless time on the internet. I found a lump in one of my testicles. Sheer terror moved through me as my mind raced. What should I do? Am I going to die? I soon found myself in the wrinkled old hands of the family doctor, pants down, and terrified. I was thoroughly examined, and reassured that the lump was nothing to worry about. I could relax. Relief percolated through my body, as he slipped in one final comment. A parting gift. My weight, he said, was much too high. He handed it to me on a piece of paper. 333 pounds. I got a

lecture on weight loss surgery, and left the clinic with a face of stone and all the denial in the world. I went across the street and got a smoothie. It was a hot day. Everything was fine.

Everything was not fine. Something changed in me that day. With my 21st birthday looming, I felt on the cusp of a milestone. Things were changing inside of me. The party came and went, my dad offered to take me to a bar, and I had my first taste of Mike's hard lemonade. Interesting. All these new realizations circled around me as senior year started, and I began to shift my trajectory. Parties ensued. Emotions began to bubble up. Women became people I wanted to pursue. I learned the finer points of drunkenly dancing to dubstep. I stepped outside my comfort zone for what may have been the first time in my young adult life. I was living for something new, experiencing highs and lows that I had never found before. With this brazen confidence I asked my dad for help in losing weight. I joined a new gym, got a key for anytime access, and my dad hooked me up with a Nutrisystem meal plan. I had all the systems in place to change my life.

That year I experienced magic things. I helped build games, soundtracks, animations, and saw new beauty in the world around me. I appreciated film and music like I hardly had before. All of the shockwaves of 3 years of creative training were collapsing on an angsty child, shaking me with a sonic boom that vibrated internally for months to come. I graduated with high hopes. I had done everything they told me to, and looked eagerly for my hard-earned game industry job! I was soon about to become intimate friends with rejection. From every woman who told me how much of a nice guy I was, to every recruiter and game studio that ghosted me or told me I just wasn't a good fit, I spent the summer of 2011 dazed, confused, and still partying. I would drive to Redmond to go to the gym, and finish off my days at the Irish pub, lubricating the cogs of friendship with hard alcohol. The AMF, or 'adios, motherfucker' became my drink of choice, and I would never have just one. Drinking gave way to musical chairs and excited conversation of little to no substance, but I felt less alone, and part of something. The drunken conversation is the feeling of the spark that could change the world. But change was always out of reach. Often I'd find myself at the gym late at night, tipsy, calloused, and kindling a growing bitter weed inside of me. I did everything the world had asked from me, and graduated from college. What the hell do I do now?

## Salvation

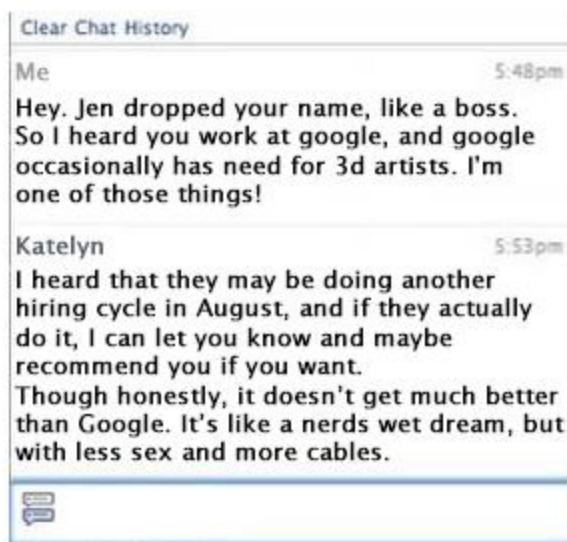


Human memory is great. I can look back on the swath of life and call a spade a spade. Or an ace. Technology, as infectious as it was in 2011, is not so easily preserved, and it often falls to the fallible clay of human minds to reproduce the state of the world in years gone past. What follows here are facts, soon to be peppered with feelings.

In the summer of 2011, I was wearing out a nice worn rut into my life path. I was drinking often, looking to get laid, and feeling frustrated. I wanted something more out of life. Flung out of college with a sub-par portfolio and little to no industry contacts, I felt abandoned. I hopped from party to party as the year dragged on, and by July I found myself at a fateful apartment in Kirkland, Washington. The place had become somewhat legendary, and all the cool kids were there. Current graduates, former graduates, and even a few folks with real game industry jobs....and girls! It was the perfect catalyst for something to happen.

The story is well travelled by now, the tired kicked and retold to new relations, ever curious about my past. I was at this party, thirsty as ever, grinding up on a member of the opposite sex, as a young inebriated gentleman is driven to do. Things were going....well. I had spent months easing into any sort of familiarity with women, and here my efforts had peaked with actual contact and... attention! I did what I knew....I asked for her number! She obliged, and I was elated. I floated away from the party with a sense of satisfaction. We ended up getting together shortly thereafter, driving around, supervised by her best friend, in a weird friendship adventure devoid of any intimacy or romance. I think we went to walmart. Sensing my desperation from miles away, the wonderful woman pulled a smooth move: she passed me along to a friend. As a matchmaker, she would pair me with a fateful woman that would change the course of my life forever.

## Nerds



Her name was Katelyn. She worked at Google, and she was a cool nerd girl. I was smitten. As our conversation flowed, I laid on all my charms, my wits turned up to 11 and tactless heavy hands. Somehow, she didn't run, and we met at her place on July 27th, 2011, for a date. A real date. I rolled up in my PT cruiser in the summer heat, wearing my best outfit....a thick black peacoat. Ah, to be young. I knocked on her apartment door and hoped for the best. We decided to go to the ferry dock, and walk along the beach. As soon as my feet hit sand, I grabbed her hand like it was a lifeline, and we started down the waterfront. Things progressed swimmingly, and our afternoon progressed to dinner and a movie. Over burgers, she told me how pretty my

eyelashes were, which I promptly invalidated by casting my eyes down. A bold one, this girl. We watched Captain America beat up some Nazis, then went back to her place to watch young frankenstein. A classic. The night ended, we did some making out, and I floated off to home in my PT cruiser. She returned to her apartment to find that her fish had died.

Things moved quickly. I proclaimed my love almost *immediately* (to a confused reply of 'that's nice, I think?'), and she soon met the family, being universally accepted as one of the tribe. We alternated dates back and forth at each other's locations. We played games together. We cooked together. I clogged her toilet. A lot. Like, real bad. We set our virginites free over the weekend of the Penny Arcade expo. What had started as a job recommendation ended up as a special relationship, and serendipitously I soon had myself a job offer, with a very small 3d studio in Seattle, doing medical animation. I took the leap, using the opportunity to leave home and get my first career job in one fell swoop. Hardly a month after meeting, we had decided to live together.

And so it came to pass that I found myself in a one bedroom, 680 square foot slice of nerd freedom with a loving partner, an hour away from my childhood home. I had no roadmap for what to do next. Flung into the far end of the pool of adulthood, I floundered. I vividly recall my very first panic attack, driving south to work on a weekday morning, only to pull off highway 99 to hyperventilate in a Fred Meyer parking lot. Fear permeated my every day. I had a temporary contract job, an unreliable car, and massive student loans. There were so many things I didn't know how to do, like write a check, pay a bill, schedule a doctor's appointment, or cook. Seriously, I copied my boss, and ate cans of chili most days at work. Creative work at this small studio was supremely stressful, with looming deadlines and a tiny team. I played all the parts, wore all the hats, and stretched myself, technically and artistically. The mental feel-good payoff was high, but at odds with the low wage and absence of stability. I soldiered on with optimism, using all the skills I had learned and picking up new ones in the fire of production. I reported dutifully to my desk every work day but never strayed into the surrounding area, never exploring any other part of Seattle or expanding my map of the world outside what was necessary. Meanwhile at home, we settled into creating a life together. We spent sunsets at the pier, explored the local video game shop, and I met the family. 2011 shaped up to be a beautiful year that found me in a totally new place from where I started, with a partner by my side and a bright future.

## Chapter 2: The Descent



It started, as one often does with a pizza. A pizza, and a pact.

What had bubbled up years ago, from that first season of boxed meals and frantic gym panic had largely quieted down in the comfort of familial bonding. Instant mashed potatoes, cheesy bread, and canned corn had teamed up to quench any sense of healthy weight loss that I had cultivated the previous year. What do two overweight kids with overweight parents do when alone together? We got comfortable, and we ate. We stained the walls with orange chicken. V8 was my serving of vegetables and fruit. Breakfast came in a chocolate flavored packet. Our endeavours at the gym continued, wheels spinning, as our monthly rotation of underpaid trainers watched my waist expand and my strength stagnate. I developed horrendous back pains as I sat most of the day. My dream job had dried up mere months into 2012, just as they said it would, and I was back into the hell of unemployed existentialism. I kept to our tiny apartment, occasionally fulfilling side work for my previous employer from home, video gaming, and wondering what was next.

Finally, motivated by sheer discomfort, I sought out help for my aching body. The how and why are lost to time, but I found myself on the table of a massage therapist, Said . "Your psoas, it is

incredibly short from sitting!” he said, as he dug his fingers into the side of my belly. It was my first lesson in how my habits and movements could shape my body....and that I could influence and control this shaping. The summer continued on, and I languished without work, until I finally took up my girlfriend's offer of that mythical Google job. Having secured a job, working alongside my sweetheart, we began a radical departure from the norm: she came to me with a diet.

Keto. The bacon diet. Atkins. A radical departure from the standard American diet. My girlfriend had suggested that we try a new way of eating. Weight loss was our goal. We were in this together, but first, the pre diet meal, an important ritual. Rudloof's pizza in Leavenworth. Everything on it. Everything.

We returned home from our trip, joined myfitnesspal, and progress pictures were taken. Simultaneously, I had reasons to be excited about life all over again. My partner and I were working together and embarking on a weight loss journey side by side. I was ecstatic. We began to order bulk orders from Netrition, an internet alternative food store, and soon our home was filled with low carb tortillas, carbquik baking mix, and wonderful low carb cookies. Almonds became a mainstay, and keto pizza night was a special night. Life continued on, and as I worked my exciting new Google maps job, I finally felt stability for the first time since starting college. I was on a path, without fear of lack or unknown.

## **The Best of Times, The Worst of Times**

How does one sum up 3 years of career experience in a paragraph? I had entered the contract technology circuit. Google maps was a circus of young kids and adult responsibilities. I found routine in work life, and as the months ticked on, I slowly noticed those little habit changes starting to add up. My body became more defined. I felt lighter, and movement became more enjoyable. I biked to work. A sense of agency slowly grew within me. I discovered reddit, and began to subscribe to the cult of self improvement. No more zero days, I was all about that growth mindset! I became the office stretching guy, braving questioning looks as the out of place

weirdo actually getting up every hour to take a lap and stretch. I found myself stepping into the formerly unapproachable free weight room in our tiny gym. I was unstoppable.

By August of 2013, I had shed 80 pounds and was feeling empowered. I made the yearly update, revelled in the social media attention, and celebrated a new chapter in life. We had left our first tiny apartment and moved in with my best friend and his new partner. I continued at Google, while my girlfriend's contract had ended. She picked up her camera to chase a dream, photographing weddings, and working odd hours at far off places. She ended up at The Picture People, a studio in the mall. Long hours, low pay, thankless parents: she saw it all. Stress began to grip our world like a vice. As the pressure built at home, poor communication and passive aggression assured us that moving in with friends hadn't been the best choice. A cloud of tension hung over the house. Katelyn had stopped keto, while I had gone all in on weight loss. I vividly recall myself running on the apartment treadmill, my mirrored reflection wavering between who I saw before me and the larger body of my recent past. I seethed as my girlfriend and her "enabling" co worker ate pizza on the bed while I resolved to work out and discipline myself harder. Tiny cracks formed in our love and trust. We gently shifted apart.

I kept losing weight. I chased the feeling of improving myself, and began to embrace the 'fitness guy' identity. I vividly remember sitting in a massage chair at google and just staring up at my arms, their silhouettes completely changed from my routine and diet. There were lumps and bumps I'd never thought possible. My goals went from 'having strong looking forearms' to 'doing pullups' and squatting and deadlifting lots of weight. Our tiny gym closed in 2014, and we were unceremoniously dumped into the lap of the newly constructed LA FITNESS. I became the 5 am gym goer, praying at the church of iron and starting my long days with fitness. As my weight became lower, more options opened up. Suddenly, sprinting to the bus was fun. Running was effortless. I began to pursue calisthenics, training on gymnastic rings and moving through progressions of bodyweight-only movements. It all caught up with me, quickly, and in the winter of 2014, I went through a phase that I would soon come to know very well. "I'm not muscular enough, I can't lose anymore weight. It's time to bulk." My body could use any excuse to veer away from more dieting. I got out the bulking box, and got to work, sure that I just needed to change a little bit more.

## Cycles and Seasons

By winter, I was 20 pounds heavier and spinning my wheels. I wanted to be smaller again. This pervasive cycle would come to rule my life. I meticulously tracked my food, and by the beginning of 2015 I was at my previous weight again. I wondered how far I could push things. Doubling down on the low intake, I watched my weight drop. The data was beautiful, weighing myself every day. I left the 180s and dipped into the 170s. I began running regularly. I chased a 'normal' BMI. I ate strictly and very little during the week. Weekends would find me running massive miles, often coming into an empty workplace, broken and looking for anything I could eat. This was a terribly shameful part of my life. I would march through the offices floor by floor, looking to stretch my stomach with everything that I would deny myself through the week. Nothing was off limits, and I called this 'letting the food beast out.' Working almost every day, I simultaneously anticipated and dreaded the weekends. I felt obligated to show up, with an opportunity for 20 hours of overtime available weekly, and tens of thousands of dollars in student loans haunting me. Alone, starving, bitter, and shameful, I blunted feelings with food and work. And then the week would roll over into the start of another cycle.

By the summer of 2015, my unplanned career path had taken me from Google to Microsoft, and eventually to Amazon. I still was still a contract worker, doing what I could to pay off my loans. Working downtown in Seattle, I was a routine machine. I walked from work, ran during lunch, and always made sure to get my 10,000 steps a day through the halls. The path to and from work was paved with temptation, from coffee shops with lovely pastries that I couldn't have to the food trucks that would so often greet us at lunch time. As control ratcheted up, my weight dipped down into the 160s. My bodyfat was measured at 11%. I thought I was so cool. And often, I was! My hands and fingers were often cold from intermittent fasting, low calories, and goosebumps were common. Food ruled my life. I was a strict intermittent faster, swearing off breakfast, subsisting on a strict intake of tea or decaf until noon on a daily basis. I would crave sweets, often downing sugar free gum, mints, and even antacids from the medical cabinet at work when I couldn't find anything else. My identity as '*Fitness Guy*' was my everything. I worked, went to the gym, and kept up a pretense of art as 'portfolio building,' and just tried to keep the dream alive. I collected thoughts and experiences during this time in a secret blog, documenting my transformation and sharing various opinions cobbled together from reddit and bodybuilding forums. It was optimistic and idealistic, interspersed with bitter rants about an

unnamed person close to me who just couldn't get it together and get in shape. I thought of myself as a disciplined person, waking up at 4 am to hit the gym, and putting in 60 hour work weeks. I just had some demons within. I recognized I had poor body image and control issues around food, but was almost powerless to change anything as my cycles continued on.

## **Food Fight**

These demons would plague me as I jumped ship just as things got serious at amazon. On the hunt for change, and the possibility of a full time office job ahead of me, I found a job listing for a food truck. On an unusually warm October afternoon, I biked over to woodinville, and found myself talking to the owner of Gobble, a thanksgiving-themed restaurant. I had real eagerness to try something new, and so I gave up my seat at Uncle Jeffy's inventory warehouse, and signed on to be a food truck operator. It was my first job away from an office since my brief summer stint at Taco Time in the last quarter of high school. The truck and the restaurant were two distinct worlds, and I existed almost separate from the restaurant itself, like a mercenary. It was a complete change of pace, and I found a new sense of freedom and responsibility, learning to trust myself and not go to pieces during the hectic chaos of lunch rushes, downtown deliveries, and engine problems. I expanded my appreciation for cooking, and found a love for the kitchen, but working with food quickly brought forth the demons I sought to control. I struggled to continue tracking my food intake, and when faced with a walk-in full of wonderful food at early morning hours, I would berate myself for 'picking' and 'tasting'. My undernourished body and logical brain were at odds as I would beat myself up for eating cuts of a freshly cooked turkey that I was tasked with dismantling to start the day. Cutting the sherry cake for lunch delivery was an exercise in white-knuckling, and I hated myself when I would give in to one piece after another, just like the food addict I had labelled myself. My emotions were never acknowledged, and being trapped in a food truck filled with my vices inevitably led to binge after binge that stoked those fires of self hatred.

The old fears began to creep back in. With the enormous cut in pay came an uncertainty in hours and a strict accounting of time served. I was almost never scheduled for 40 hours a week, and the hours I did put in were long, physical, and tracked by an unfeeling time clock. What started as taking home leftovers slowly morphed into a resentful attempt at payback over undercompensation, justified as keeping myself fed at home. The food truck never made enough profit, and after the rush and chaos of thanksgiving, the appeal of it all seemed to evaporate from the world at large, and things slowed considerably. It all kind of came to a head at a christmas party, way out in the farms of snohomish. The truck was packed for feasting, and we headed towards our destination, but something was wrong. We had been given the address to the neighborhood where the host lived, not the barn where the gala was held. We hung out in a sleepy, quiet, neighborhood for almost an hour, our loud foodtruck roaring in the cold winter air.

After what seemed like an eternity, we were able to get someone on the phone who told us where to go, and we high-tailed it into the farmlands. Things were chaotic, and the hosts were not pleased. I was all business, doing what was asked of me and little else. I was in survival mode. The details are a blur, but at the insistence of the host, we ended up calling in my boss's number two to smooth things over. It felt like calling in the mafia cleanup crew, hiding the bodies and making everything ok. A younger man than me but wizened with street smarts, he dispassionately smoked a cigarette in the parking lot of this huge barn, coldly sizing up the situation. He calmly told me that my coworker would be fired for incompetence and other grudges held, and that I would be fine. Stealing food, however, would no longer be tolerated. In no uncertain terms, I knew my days were numbered. I came running back to my team lead at Microsoft and begged for my easy office job back. They were happy to have me, and before the year was out, I roamed the halls of city center Bellevue once more, content to have left my food truck madness behind me.

## **Running On Empty**

I returned to Microsoft with a sense of gratitude, content to be in empty familiar offices while everyone was off enjoying the holidays. I brushed off the food truck experience as a fun diversion, and got right back to trying to reattain my previous low weight, starving myself. My body enjoyed the normalized weight, and things were difficult. I stayed in the low 170s, yet fixated on the unattainable 160s. As 2016 progressed I doubled down on the fitness habits, and took up running longer and longer distances. On the outside, I was fine, and I proposed to my partner one beautiful summer day in Victoria, BC. The moment was incredible, but a haze of sadness sits behind the trip, knowing that I felt that I had to run 9 miles before allowing myself breakfast and dinner. The summer culminated in a 17 mile run, marathon plans, and an IT band injury that left me broken. Apart from a freak finger tendon strain from trying to do pullups on a door frame, this was my first experience with an injury completely taking away my fitness ability. I could have seen this coming miles away, but each of those miles were just another one between me and my true needs, wants, and feelings. I learned a lot about my body and its systems this year, making a powerful connection in a local PT clinic that would continue to serve me for years to come. Winter saw me chasing the same bulking dream that previous years would never realize, with a hope that things would be different. Spoiler alert: they were not.

By 2017, I was heavier than I wanted to be, and unable to run. My partner had joined a crossfit gym, and while I avoided the classes, I loved the space, and opted for the 'guy in the corner' membership that allowed me use of the equipment. We got a couples discount, and my frugal self was happy to show up at 5 am and follow my pre-set plans and routines out of sight of the locals. The stress of planning and paying for a wedding was taxing, but on mother's day of 2017, I got married, in a wonderfully nerdy affair complete with video game soundtracks, nintendo 64 smash bros battles, and a cake made by my mom. Topping things off, it was officiated by the coach at our wonderful new gym. I was surrounded by all these friends and family, and yet all I could think of was how to look good, not do the wrong thing, and don't eat too much cake because I will definitely lose control, gain weight, and get fat.

Two days after the wedding, we honeymooned at a beautiful airbnb on Maui, in the laid back town of Haiku. We arrived under heavy winds and were greeted by the local chickens at sunrise. It was beautiful. Naturally, I set myself to some sort of exercise routine, bringing the ever-present pullup bar, and sought to plan out our itinerary for the week. We went to the local market for food, and I began to plan out my vacation one meal at a time. Imagine my shock

when my wife decided to do NO cooking, NO exercise, and order pizza! I was floored. I was so deep into my routine, judgement, and codependency, that the mere use of a honeymoon vacation to actually relax, let go, and eat what she wanted felt like an insult to me, personally. When I got triggered, ate too much, or found myself without a task to keep me busy, I would set out for long walks. My leg was still injured, otherwise I might have been running. That was my default method of dealing with discomfort: up and distancing myself. I was restless, and unable to tolerate stillness. The vacation had beautiful moments, but looking back I definitely feel the 'check the boxes' mentality of having to do as much as possible. We came home a week later, and with still several days of time off work available, I was almost going crazy with nothing to do. We ended up visiting the Hoh Rainforest, far off in the Olympic Peninsula. I find it interesting, even now, that this wasn't scheduled, we just up and did it. Spontaneity was new to me, and it felt nice.

As May turned to June, my leg was finally feeling better, and I resolved to pick up where I left off: with marathon training. I got deep into it, creating a whole plan to carry me through summer. I put on my IT band brace and got to it, balancing calisthenics, barbells, and distance running. Life picked up tremendously during this time, and my Microsoft contract hit a crucial point in which I would have to take a 6 month break before coming back. My staffing agency had a beautiful way of circumventing this, however, and the summer of 2017 marked the beginning of my life as a remote worker. I embraced the lifestyle, and hardly a week into working from home, my apartment office put up a sign, seeking a porter. Since I would be around, why not? It was serendipity, a perfect match. I walked in and got the job, becoming the trash man for our apartment complex. Starting on the hottest day of the year, I worked my first physical job ever, sweating under the sun as I struggled to push huge bins of trash up the steep hill to the compactor. It was grueling work, but I felt strong.

As my marathon date drew near, I was juggling the responsibility of managing my job from home, full time marathon training, trash pickup every other day around the complex.....and even house sitting for a friend on vacation. It was nearly an hour from home, and things were ridiculous. I would wake up around 4 am to get to the gym near home as early as possible, head home to get some work done from there, then take care of trash, and then use the trails out at this guest home to supplement my training. This summer felt like autopilot, and routine saved my life, as I racked up the miles and went through the motions. Fun fact, this is when I started

meal prepping chicken salad: every sunday, I would cook a whole chicken, shred it up, and add greek yogurt, red onion, dijon, and celery. A tiny bit of mayonnaise. Everything was meticulously logged, and was easy sustenance for the weekdays. I felt like a superhuman.

In September 2017, after all the running and training, I did the thing. Starting around 5 am on the burke gilman trail from bellevue, and finishing 4 hours and 55 minutes later in south lake union, surprised by my wife at the finish line, who had made me a shirt, celebrating the 1st annual "Tylers too cheap to pay for a marathon, marathon. I shed tears of joy, and we celebrated at pie co, with pie milkshakes. It was a sweet victory. As summer turned to fall, and the high of that goal achievement faded away (And my black toenail began to fall off), I began to scheme what was next. Was the body I always wanted within reach?

## **The Supreme Ordeal**

By the end of 2017, the ebbs, flows, and patterns of my life were set. My rhythms waxed and waned like seasons, and I hardly batted an eye. I was powerless to change the way I chased a smaller body, obsessing over calories and planning my food, all in pursuit of the perfect me. Never strong enough, never fast enough, never thin enough, and never muscular enough. Fed up with 'the old fat me,' I had pushed far out of my comfort zone, revealing my goal, sharing my story, and asking for donations towards tummy tuck surgery. I was immensely unhappy with the cognitive dissonance of a once-obese body hanging off what I had worked so hard to sculpt into a fit, athletic frame. My gofundme was passed around, my carefully crafted story received some attention, and I received about 1000 dollars from my family, and through long brutal weeks at work, I coughed up the other 18,000 dollars towards a tummy tuck. As winter came, I did my obligatory 6 weeks of eating big to get big, powerlifting, and ended 2017 with a hamstring injury, a meal plan, and a surgery date of february 1st.

I spent the first month of 2018 easing into ketosis, ditching the carbs again for the first time since my descent in 2012. In the first week of the new year, I began fasting. I went for 24 hours without food. Then another day. Then another. It was my most productive week ever, listing my car for sale and closing in mere days. I was preparing my body for the post-surgery downtime, a

daunting 6 weeks without heavy lifting. I won't be exercising, I won't need carbs! I had picked up a physical job as the trash man for my apartment complex, and was worried. They depended on me, but I was assured I could take the time I needed. The weeks flew by, as I frantically bench pressed like my life depended on it, since my hamstring was injured from winter's heavy squatting. I took all the data, got my body fat tested, hoping for an increase in muscle from last year's numbers. I walked into the operating room tired and determined, all doubt and fear slipping away into acceptance. The last thing the doctor said before I slipped into unconsciousness was, "your heart rate is 45, are you a runner or something?" Hell yeah, said my ego. They went to work.

I had a blurry dream, involving a wheelchair and getting in and out of a car, and full working memory kicked in once I plopped into my elevated bed. The hours-long procedure was a success, and I was exhausted. My incredible wife was at my beck and call, bringing me my meticulously portioned frozen soups, fortified with healthy vegetables(™) and collagen powder. I was determined to heal as fast as possible. By the next day, I was taking trips to the front door and back with my walker. By the next day, I was out the door with my cane. Within two days I was on a schedule, making laps around my apartment complex with alarming regularity. I almost immediately started trying to track my food intake again. My appetite was all over the place. My carefully planned systems didn't fit into this puzzle, and I was a mess, all pinned up into an uncomfortable compression girdle and struggling. It wasn't long before I made the mistake of weighing myself, hating the number and myself. I wandered outside into the cold air with racing thoughts. The train left the station with "I hate myself" and rolled into "I guess I should kill myself" junction. I froze. Something inside of me knew that this wasn't ok. I pulled out of that nosedive with ferocious speed. I needed help.

## -Chapter 3: The Ascent-

While my external wounds were healing, my internal ones were starting to bleed. For the first time in my life, I found myself in the office of a wonderful therapist. Mere miles from my home, we hit it off immediately. Touching that suicidal ideation had shown light on the truth: I was isolated. Nobody was checking in on me. I had sold my car, I was working at home, and my only 'friends' were the other couples my wife would have us get together with on an irregular basis. My goal was to make some new friends. I might have to talk to other people.

Within a few weeks, I was shaking up my life. I went places, I tried things. For the first time, I took my laptop to a coffee shop, working somewhere other than home. Leaving my home yielded miracles, and more opportunities presented themselves every day. Parkour. Movement class. I met amazing humans and expanded my vocabulary of what was possible with my amazing body. My wounds began to scar over, and began to trust myself and build resources. I began to awaken to the incredible world around me. Dropping into a buddhist meditation center only 10 minutes from my house, I began to understand the power of stillness. I made room to reconnect with parts of myself I had pushed so far away, and despite my disbelief, used hypnosis to touch the core wound I never consciously knew I had.

Things came to a head at the end of summer. I had glimpsed how freeing life could be, but part of me didn't think I deserved it. With no particular goal in mind, I had started running again, and with that, intuitive eating disappeared into rigid counting and control. I was pushing outside my comfort zone, but still I had no new friends. My therapist had mentioned something called the Mankind Project. Initial forays into the website revealed a vague service organization with no real entry point to be seen. I ignored it, until one day, my resistance broke. I straight up asked my therapist how to get involved with this thing, and I was given a phone number. I texted,

introducing myself as an awkward man trying to make friends, and soon found myself in a truck with a stranger, driving down to meet a circle of men.

“Is this a cult?” The smell of sage filled the air as I stood in a circle with a bunch of strangers. Men with animal names greeted each other in ritual, waving a lit stick of sage. I was fascinated, and as the introduction completed we sat ourselves in a circle indoors. One by one, men began to share their feelings, their stories. These were men with history, a bond and connection I had never experienced. The sharing went deeper, touching trauma, pain, and heartbreak, and the level of vulnerability on display was almost shocking to me: I was crying within an hour. Truly, I was not alone with my wounds. My story did not make me a weird outsider. I saw a piece of myself in each of the men in this circle. The life I was living would be forever changed.

I began attending this circle regularly every week, spending two hours on a wednesday night sitting with strangers in this new, strange world. My fascination kept me there, though I was terrified, hesitant to truly open up to the group. My life was already expanding, transforming, like the start of a chemical reaction running inexorably towards something larger. I got a glimpse of that something shortly after the first circle, attending an all-day event simply titled ‘a circle of men.’ I was at a crossroads, and I didn’t even realize it until I stepped into that yurt. Once again, men shared their experiences, with new mention of an initiation. I had heard whispers of this ‘weekend’ in my circle, and the monetary cost had me turning up my nose. Still, in this yurt were more men who had been forever changed. Soon I would be one of them. This circle of men concluded with a process that had me stepping into my future, dreaming of the man I wanted to be, independent, with the power to create my own life. I dared to dream of a life for myself outside of my shared reality with my wife, and I began to prune the vine of codependency that entangled me. The circle concluded, and while we arrived as strangers, we left as friends, sharing a tight bond. I knew, then, that I was ready to take the next step towards that larger thing, the inevitable weekend. I signed up that night. I had no idea what I was in for.

## Initiation

October. The weekend was finally upon me. Like so many phases of my life, fall meant big changes. I had transitioned out of my summer running phase into lifting, eating lots of food and chasing those muscles I had always wanted. Still on the lookout for novel new activities, I drove by the grange a few blocks away, and saw a sign for square dancing. I resolved to try it out, but by the time it came up, my body put up all the defenses, and I thoroughly convinced myself that people like me do not square dance. After all, it's full of old people, right? This is important, trust me. Anyway, September wrapped up, and I headed into October mankind project weekend with blind optimism and no expectations.

The carpool process began with an email, consisting of a list of everyone in the Puget Sound area grouped by city, with the instruction to 'make carpools.' There were only phone numbers. It was my worst nightmare, yet somehow, it had come together, and the three of us stood together in a McDonald's parking lot, ready to drive 200 miles south to begin our new warrior training adventure. One man, in his 70s, and the other almost 40. The story in my head was that we had nothing in common, and I was nothing like them, and as we raced towards our destination I hardly said a thing. After several hours together, past rest stops and meal breaks, we neared the camp. As we carved through the winding turns of a meandering river road, I judged these men as jokers. They took nothing serious, they were rule breakers, slack-offs, no good. I couldn't wait to leave them behind.

We arrived at the gates of camp, apparently the first ones there. We stretch our legs and began to meander, seeing other people indoors, before finally being approached by an imposing man, telling us that we were too early, and to come back when we were meant to. As we drove back up the winding river road, my carpool laughed it off. They mocked the man who had told us to leave, clearly above his authority. His words had left me feeling terrified. If only I had spoken up, we wouldn't have arrived early. I felt fear, shame, and resentment for these jokers. We stopped at a nearby church, and as they stopped to have a meal, I declined, and found myself wandering down the road. I found myself at an old summer camp, seemingly abandoned, fascinated by the old environment and the stories they held. Still in my routine, I found a wall to

practice my handstands against, and returned to my carpool with a clear head, ready to face them again. We headed back down the road towards destiny.

## **Stepping Off The Ledge**

The Mankind Project's New Warrior Training Adventure is shrouded in mystery, and for good reason. The weekend is an initiation into a new way of being, a separation, a descent, and a return to community. A true hero's journey, beyond the walls of my comfort zone. From the moment I arrived, I felt part of something bigger than myself. I had stepped into a new world of masculine archetypes, warrior energy, and shadow work.

It felt like an emotional boot camp. There were many partings, from leaving the real world behind to leaving behind my name and my stuff. I was tested, physically, and I was perfectly unprepared. There were 33 of us, from men younger than myself to men old enough to be my grandfather. They were strangers to me, and my ego shined brightly as I made use of the surroundings to continue my newly-started pullup routine. Can't stop, won't stop: don't know how to stop.

The weekend ebbed and flowed. There were challenges, joys, and for the first time in my life, I shared a sense of play with a stranger. We were like puppies, chasing each other in an open gymnasium. I was meeting a need that I didn't even know I had. The staff broke it up and I felt totally charged with excitement. I was bonding, making *friends*. By Sunday, I had experienced for the first time in my life, a community, ready and welcome to accept me with unconditional love. I had seen my inner child, and met my animal spirit. Golden Bear was awakened.

## **The Return**

I drove home with my carpool mates in a love-drunk daze. We all shared something special and unique, beyond words. I returned home to a green-masked wife who gingerly listened to me

recap my entire experience as I took a much needed bath. How could I explain an unexplainable experience? I brain-dumped every second of my weekend as I relived it from start to finish, hoping she could begin to comprehend.

The next day I felt torn wide open. I shared eye contact with a stranger on the street, bursting into joy as we crossed paths. I shared a knowing moment with a barista after trying to explain where I had been. I distinctly had the thought that “this must be what people feel like after returning from burning man.” My heart was open to so much joy and love, but I was tender and raw. Real life matters strained and tears flowed easily. They warned me not to make any big decisions for a while. I took it easy, and slowly came back to the real world.

The Thursday after my weekend, I gathered with several other brothers from the puget sound area, and we were welcomed back into the community. I was surrounded by a new circle of warrior brothers and their families. Eager to flaunt the new me, I was the first to jump up and testify to my experience. It was the start of something beautiful.

## **Doing the Work**

Through the end of 2018, my life began to veer on an unmistakable change of course. I dreamed a dream for myself, of an all-encompassing hub for myself and my talents, and a workshop. I got a business license. I created a web page. Finally, over Thanksgiving while my wife was on a business trip, I put a scrap door over two sawhorses, and my humble workshop was born. I began to experiment. My first major project was to restore a sword that I had found in the trash. I had no idea where to start, but knew I would need the ability to work with metal. Thanks to youtube, I began to learn. Soon, I was making molds and pouring molten tin in my apartment. I bought a 3d printer, and began combining the two mediums together, creating axe heads for tiny axes that I sought to sell online. My dad was the only one who purchased, but the process was an incredible learning experience.

My ego was far from out of the equation. I had signed up for a 50k trail run, to coincide with my 30th birthday, I figured I would run 30 miles. It seemed a reasonable continuation from my marathon a year earlier. I busied myself in training preparations while finishing off my winter 'bulking.' I continued to sit in my Wednesday igroup, and by the new year, I had gone through two supplementary weekend trainings on how to sit in a circle and do some facilitation. I emerged with a mission, and resolved to start my own men's circle to share with others what had brought me so much growth. I dove back into events that I attended as a staff man, both for a circle of men and a December initiation weekend. I saw behind the curtain, gained a deeper appreciation for what went into crafting my initiation, and even made some friends. I'd checked the biggest goal box and was moving into an amazing new world. I wanted to share what I had learned.

February 2019. Superbowl sunday. Snow piled up on the pavement outside the leasing office of my apartment. It was cold, and I hobbled with my cane, but my determination was high. It was the first meeting of my open men's circle. I had come down with an awful bout of food poisoning from reckless carnivore experiments mere days earlier. Still, men were coming, and the 4 of us sat in a circle for 2 hours on a sunday afternoon, and talked about matters of the heart. My vision was fulfilled, and I had birthed the Den of Wonder as a safe, amazing circle for change in the world.

### **The death of Ego**

In March of 2019, I returned to the mountain, revisiting the site of my weekend for the third time, as a staff man. I was there to observe, to experience, hold space, and share in the magic of the NWTA. I was given another look at the preparation and planning that goes into such an event. As transformed as I was, I was not without my hangups and egoistic patterns. The end of the first night was a talk about white privilege and racism, which I proceeded to skate across like the thinnest lake of ice. Yeah, Im white and I got all the perks, it's great, can we move on? I've got a run to wake up extremely early for, because I signed up for an ultra marathon. I'm kind of a big deal. I couldn't stay present for the life of me. I got out of there as soon as they let me, folded into my sleeping bag, and set my alarm for 5 am.

I rolled out of bed as my watch buzzed on my wrist. I put on my thermal clothing and laced up my shoes. I hastily scribbled a note in the semi-darkness, realizing that I was running into the mountains in the pitch dark in the middle of nowhere, more or less. Doesn't stop me, I've got to train! I bounded down the road and into the snow. Slowly, I began to lose sight of the road as the snow piled up over what used to be vehicle grooves, and the fog glowed eerily in my headlamp as I pushed ahead. I wandered into the hills for an hour and a half, only turning back after the snow became almost impassable. My GPS watch registered my activity as an 'elliptical machine' due to the way my jumping gait had me navigating the snow drifts. A neat experience, but ultimately rather dumb, looking back on it. What if something had happened up on that dark mountain? I was on autopilot, and rest was for weaklings.

As the weekend wrapped up, I was meandering around a big gymnasium, when someone started doing handstands against the wall. Not one to be outdone, I showed off my own, and we struck up conversation. We had many things in common. He had just interviewed someone for his podcast, and that someone was the movement teacher that I had briefly dropped into a class of that previous summer of trying new things. The coincidences were unreal, and it really sinched things up when I learned he had gone to Digipen. Having just started a podcast myself, we vowed to interview soon, and then we parted ways.

April. I found myself in the home of my wonderful new friend, and in my lap was a wonderful cat, Fuzz Man. My friend told me of his story, finding masculinity and his own power, and he discussed his stepping into life-coaching and facilitating growth experiences for others. My eyebrows perked up when he mentioned MDMA experiences. I was intrigued. We wrapped up the podcast, and I made the ask. Could I try it out? His childlike excitement was palpable, and with a resounding yes we set the date.

I watched the days tick down with nervous anticipation. I would be a drug user. Who uses drugs? Delinquents. Weirdos. I actually did work around this in therapy. I had been a good boy scout all my life, not touching alcohol until I was 21, and only using edible marijuana once it became legal in Washington. I shifted my mindset and leaned away from fear as I collected my intentions for self love and showed up to meet Fuzz Man once more. I'll let my journal entry speak to my experience:

4/13/2019 3:53 am

*Today is the morning after my first MDMA experience. Chaperoned by Seth Pearson, I walked at least 5 miles on the Burke gilman trail. We talked and shared, and after almost two hours, I was warm, but unimpressed. I felt profound sadness at my lack of friends, but being with Seth boosted my morale. As Seth prepared to up my dosage, and we contemplated driving into the city, I shook my head back and forth, slightly numb, like the tail end of an edible. All of a sudden tingles began to roll up my body and my vision expanded. Seth immediately put a Tycho album on his smart speaker and fixed some tea .Ginger. I felt tired but wired. My vision was focused, but blurry. Almost like after a good carnivore meal. When I closed my eyes, waves of euphoria would roll up from my stomach to my chest, and the music just felt nice, so I pulled off my shoes and took up residence on the couch. Like the painkillers I took after my tummy tuck surgery, there was a crazy light show awaiting me when I closed my eyes. I lay on my side and clutched my pillow, letting the music fill my body and the good feels consume me. As the beat rolled on, I thought of my life, what I held dear, and just wanted to hug my wife so hard. I thought of how inadequate words would be to share this and how others would never relate to my experience. I felt unconditional love and a warm embrace. I decided to do things that made me happy, to quit training for ultra running, to take care of myself, and go back to the flow that served me so well last summer. I thanked Seth, and he headed off to bed (he was snoring at this point), leaving quiet music. The energy changed, and I briefly craved another person. I felt alone, and the thought of the hard choices, like whether I wanted kids, came at me. It hurt my stomach to revisit that topic, like I couldn't change my mind, and scared me to think of anything other than no. I am not ready, world.*

*I had a few hip flexor cramps getting up for water, but eventually settled down on the couch for a few hours of dreamless sleep before finally waking and placing my experience on paper. All I wanted to do was share the moment with everyone in my life. Like breathwork, I was given an almost urgency to do this again, with my wife, my family....I wanted to share. Now its 4:18 am, I'm tired and hungry and my stomach has fear. I am alone and awake in an empty apartment. What happens next?*

I vividly remember the next weekday afterward. Leaving the gym in the early morning, I shared a phone call with a friend. He read me a poem. On beginnings.

## **BEGINNING**

*well or beginning poorly, what is important is simply to begin, but the ability to make a good beginning is also an art form, beginning well involves a clearing away of the crass, the irrelevant and the complicated to find the beautiful, often hidden lineaments of the essential and the necessary.*

*Beginning is difficult, and our procrastination is a fine, ever-present measure of our reluctance to take that first close-in, courageous step in reclaiming our happiness. Perhaps, because taking a new step always leads to a kind of radical internal simplification, where, suddenly, very large parts of us, parts of us we have kept gainfully employed for years, parts of us still rehearsing the old complicated story, are suddenly out of a job. There occurs in effect, a form of internal corporate downsizing, where the parts of us too afraid to participate or having nothing now to offer, are let go, with all of the accompanying death-like trauma, and where the very last fight occurs, a rear guard disbelief that this new, less complicated self, and this very simple step, is all that is needed for the new possibilities ahead.*

*It is always hard to believe that the courageous step is so close to us, that it is closer than we ever could imagine, that in fact, we already know what it is, and that the step is simpler, more radical than we had thought: which is why we so often prefer the story to be more elaborate, our identities clouded by fear, the horizon safely in the distance, the essay longer than it needs to be and the answer safely in the realm of impossibility...*

It was the most perfect thing that I could be welcomed back into the world with. I drove home, listening to 'return to innocence' and cried deeply, suddenly understanding the words on a deep heart level.

### **Wet hot carnivorous summer**

Everything in my life was going just swell. I felt like a superhuman, with a connection to something all-encompassing and amazing. The cornerstone of this amazing time was a change in my diet. I had begun taking in podcasts and other propaganda for a carnivore diet at the end of December, and had begun working my way back into a ketogenic way of eating to complement my ultra marathon training. After listening to everyone share their amazing experience, I took all of my fake sweeteners, diet foods, and vegetables, and threw it all out. I was a meat boy.

Unlike most diet changes in my life, I came at this with excitement and curiosity. I was fascinated with these folks who had forgone plants and received incredible health. The desire to lose weight was always present, but pushed farther down the totem pole than ever before as I explored a new way of feeding myself. I was ready for my carnivore super saiyan powers, but instead, I got food poisoning. Yes, in my eagerness to try everything, I went too fast, too furious and ate raw liver from the supermarket. I spent the first week on the toilet, with no appetite. I was humbled as I had to retrieve my cane once more and slowly amble around as my body recovered.

Once everything in my stomach settled down, I felt incredible. I took a trip to Oahu (with some vegan friends) and took in the wonders of the island while living on mcdonalds burger patties and decrying the price of restaurant meat. I had incredible energy, drive, and focus, but was often cold from not eating enough. After returning home, I rewarded myself with a 'Butcher Box', treating myself to all the ribeyes. I even ate one raw, and it was a very strange experience (grass fed steaks are very soft and it took a long time). A simple meal of ground beef in a bowl

went from bizarre to normal, and after a month I felt indestructible. One morning I just woke up and biked 20 miles, just because I felt so great.

The great feeling didn't last. My hands would often feel cold, and while my mental fortitude was high, the lack of weight loss and inability to get warm shook my confidence. I was glued to the carnivore reddit forums for the best and most efficient ways to get what I wanted, always on the lookout for the little tweak to make it all work. I eventually found myself a naturopath, and after some fancy lab work, began to tweak. Data came in, Low testosterone and a genetic abnormality to processing b vitamins. My inflammation markers were nearly non-existent. I felt like this way of eating had merit, and I wasn't finished. I began taking my temperature regularly, and taking cold showers to see if I couldn't build my circulation. I was determined to go from surviving to thriving, and optimize my life.

I decided to up my fat intake, often up to 80% of my daily intake or more. This had the incredible effect of reigniting that MDMA high again after meals, giving me a euphoria and zeal reserved for only the upper echelons of religious folk. I remember having lunch with my wife in the city, and coming back to see a ticket on my car. I just smiled, laughed, and went home with joy. My brain was doing great. I tried to keep proselytizing to a minimum, but if you had asked me, I was a convert and carnivore was life.

As the summer went on, I harnessed the power of my men's circle for accountability. From the goal of eating on a plate and sitting down, I checked in with a partner and was strict on myself, celebrating my newfound habits. This was all well and good, and within two days I had just decided to eat one meal a day. Thus, a new level of disordered weight loss pursuit began. I would often fast for 1-3 days, then eat a giant meal and return to the cycle. After a day with no food the level of control and pride I had was unreal. The level of disciplined confidence I gained from prolonged fasting was huge, but this was a dangerous and unsustainable prospect. After something like 3 days of no food or water, feeling euphoric by day I was insomniac by night, and I finally broke in the early morning, alone, and the animalistic survival-mode binging that ensued brought on a most familiar shame. I pushed it under the rug and continued on. Atlas stones at the gym after two days of no food? I am a badass. Breaking down around free snacks while camping with friends because I can't just sit and be? Less than stellar. These hiccups

were few and far between, and each time I opted to put the cap back on the bottle, letting the pressure continue to build.

September 2019. My wife had been invited to the ultimate Hawaiian trail run with our gym! By extension, I was in. We would all rent a house and stay on Kauai, be fit and awesome, and then do the thing. I was stoked, both to be back in Hawaii, and to be included with all these cool crossfit people. We arrived at the incredible house and made a perusal of the local markets, where I picked up all the meat that I thought I'd ever need, and called it done. By dinnertime the next day, I was triggered, and eating chocolate. Co-existing in a house with super fit people, with constant body and fitness talk, conflicting messages about what I should do or be, and unable to stay grounded as myself or relax.....I was powerless to cope. The vacation became a shame spiral, going from restriction to binge and back again, while wondering why I was broken inside. In the midst of all of this I decided that now, in the depths of my greatest self hatred, was the time to tell my wife that I didn't find her sexually attractive. While at my lowest, I decided to hang all of that on 'you're fat and I'm afraid of getting fat, so you remind me of my failings.' It was less than eloquent, and full of tears, all from me. To her credit, she didn't run away, lash out, or anything dramatic, and while hurt, she listened. We discussed couples therapy over burgers that neither of us really wanted, and went home with a temporary satisfaction. You can't fix everything at Kalapaki Joe's.

## -Chapter 4: transformation-

I arrived back from Hawaii shaken up. Clearly, my relationship needed help, but I, I was fine. I put the cap back on the restriction bottle and began to search for a couples therapist. Two days later, via the magic of telehealth, I'm bawling on my couch next to my wife. As the weekly sessions would uncover, I had a ton of shame, especially around sex. Discovering porn at a young age, and subsequently hiding it from my parents, led to a whole bunch of bad feels I pushed down. Thus began some delicate work of untangling that stuff. Listening to sex podcasts, talking about sex, what did I find sexy today? Out of the comfort zone and into the naughty fire. Each session was like pulling teeth, together with my wife at my side, we pulled out my shadows one week at a time. And here I thought it was all her fault. Projections, eh?

A few weeks came and went before October was upon us. The one year anniversary of my NWTa was at my doorstep and I was ready to leap off the precipice once more, returning as a man of service to cook, clean, and support the great work being done during the weekend. I was a seasoned pro at this by now, but I had no idea what kind of woopin' I was in for as I packed up my meat and headed to the mountain.

### **You don't know what you don't know**

I made it a whole night before getting triggered. I had my safe foods, my steak and eggs. I was hand picked for the glorious privilege of going into town, leaving the container of camp, for a Costco run. I was thrilled. I zipped all around the modern shops and came back happy as a clam. Upon my return, a man approached me, asking if I could help with an event that would most definitely be taking place past midnight. A bolt went through me, and where boundaries could have been, there was nothing. I hardly paused before caving to an affection-seeking 'totally!' while inside I was freaking out. I did NOT want to stay out that late. This was the moment things unravelled.

36 hours later, I was bloated and shameful. The eatbeast had returned. All that year of MKP and Carnivore didn't fix me at all. I was still flawed. That was the message I told myself. I was broken, and I couldn't trust myself around food. That I would eat like a dog when something delicious was put in front of me. That week, I sobbed to my therapist, who helped me identify just where I was triggered, and somehow this was the first time bringing up food problems, completely blindsighting my therapist. I had been very good at avoiding my work. It was time to face it head on.

### **Asking to be changed**

Overeaters Anonymous felt like the antithesis of everything I wanted in a healing experience. It was the epitome of white-knuckling, restriction-based fear tactics. I showed up for two meetings, and food was never discussed. People simply owned their compulsions, content with meal plans, and read a pamphlet of steps. Everything they did reinforced my old story that I was trying to banish: I was broken. There had to be something more.

One afternoon on the couch, in the midst of a couples counseling session, something happened. I asked for help. Right in the middle of our therapy, my wife was down to forward me a list of eating support groups she had received from her personal therapist. I began to look into some local resources, noting the Emily program. They offered weekly support groups for adults, and it seemed like something I could get into. I identified the problem, and now I was to fix it. I gave them a call, describing my life story to someone over the phone. They were ready for me. Was I ready to change?

And so it was that I found myself in the Emily program offices. Overlooking lake Union on a beautiful fall afternoon, I described my patterns, routines, and habits around food to a discerning therapist. After answering her questions, she sat back, processing. It was like plugging my data into a human computer, waiting for a diagnosis and treatment plan. She handed down the verdict, summarizing my internal struggles with a tidy label of 'Orthorexia.' An intensive outpatient program was recommended. 4 nights a week I would be at the Emily Program, eating dinner in a group and showing up for whatever therapy they deemed necessary. I said yes.

Things moved quickly, and within a week I started my new adventure at the Emily program IOP. I had dietician appointments, in which my food rules and judgements were closely scrutinized and questioned. I had talk therapy sessions, with the complete opposite of my current wellness therapist involved a lot of awkward pauses, blank stares, and little to no woo-woo. The main event was dinnertime. That first evening I showed up with my dinner from home, lamb bolognese. It had no carbs, so I was advised to eat some bread with it. It was bland and added nothing to the meal, but I could already see what was going to happen here: I was going to have to eat differently. At dinner, motivations were suspect, rituals were questioned, and judgements were voiced. The dietician and therapist gently guided us through mindful eating practices such as noticing hunger, fullness, tastes, and textures, and kept a watchful eye on those who were prone to restriction and not finishing their meals. And then they told us to eat dessert. The horror!

I was surrounded by women. There was one other guy, briefly, for the first week, and then he disappeared due to insurance reasons. I felt out of place on my own, awkwardly sitting in discussion groups after dinner. This wasn't MKP, where everyone was ready to be vulnerable and open, it was a drawn out pause in which maybe, just maybe, someone would take off a mask. At the beginning of the week, goals were set. I still have my SMART goals from that first week:

- Eat a cookie from the cabinet, mindfully/Buy and mindfully eat a sweet
- Journal after program every night
- Don't weigh myself
- Eat with friends (not my food) at upcoming cabin trip
- Circle and share at cabin trip

It was a bold list, already addressing several sticking points, from the ritual of data collection to the fear of sweets. I was even coming up on a yearly cabin trip with friends, which was notoriously home to awful binging, being surrounded with 'good food' and with so much down time to myself. I would show up, eat with the group, and even attempt to circle up and share deeply. I began to commit to my healing, to put aside my rules and restrictions in the name of 'fixing' my disorder. Slowly, the de-escalation of my internal food police took root. Things began to shift.

## **A personal transformation**

That cabin trip was an amazing revelation. I could eat my safe foods, but also eat with everyone else. I returned to program that next week bubbling with confidence and excitement. I had a win, proving that the cycle was not forever. It was a magical second week, going out for dinner with my wife, having a halloween party at program....I felt astonished at what I was stepping into. I'm cured now, right? Turns out, no. I got a lot of work to do.

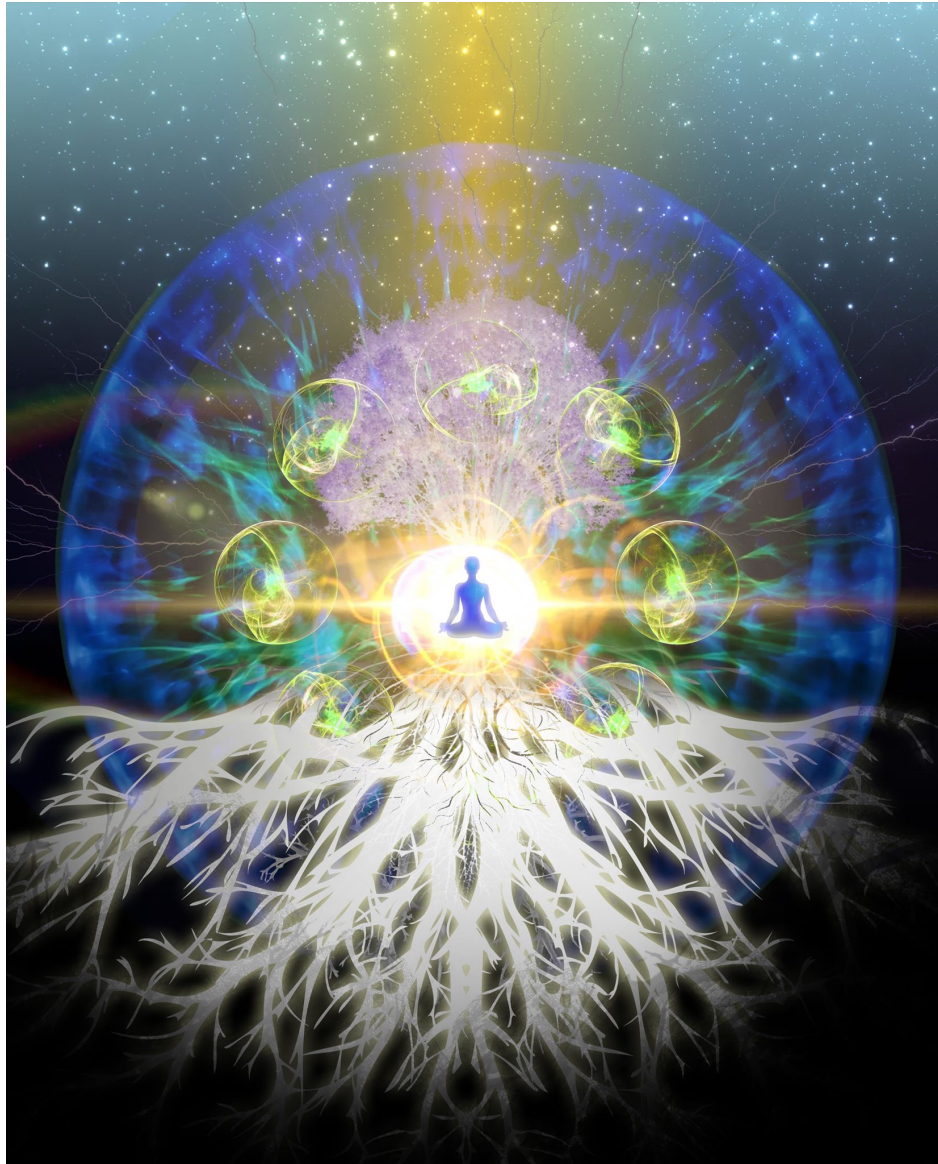
Some time before the adventures of the Emily program, I was sitting in my therapist's office, trying to do some visualization around my inner child. It wasn't working, my mind was blank, and I was frustrated. My therapist took this moment to float an invitation to me, a suggestion for something new: a personal transformation intensive. "Therapist training for the non-therapist friends" was the pitch. It really resonated with me, and shortly thereafter I looked it up. As with the weekend, the price almost shocked me right out of considering it, but the wise adult part of me was receptive, and knew my healing was worth it. I signed up, and marked the date on the calendar for november.

This personal transformation intensive came up the weekend after my cabin trip. Not even three weeks into this intensive outpatient program, I was scheduled for a life-changing weekend retreat. Cool. I came in with little to no expectations, driving out to frog creek to await my fate. Once I arrived, I sat upon my bed, and the fear began to seep in. Terror. What have I done?

Turns out, I had signed up for a lobotomy, as far as my ego was concerned. All the shadows, assumptions, old patterns that didn't serve me, and poor coping mechanisms were under attack. First and foremost? Food. Dinner was a wonderful home cooked meal 'buffet style.' Right away, the conversation turned to weight and body image, while I stewed in my head, triggered as heck. I shoved down my dinner, overfilled myself, then ran outside in the darkness, aimless pacing the trails. Fight, flight freeze? I was running. I came back inside, filled with shame, and ran into one of the PTI leaders. A professional looking man, business with a touch of outdoorsy ruggedness. Caring and open, he heard me as I shamefully sobbed. "My work is around food," I

said. "I need help. Please, buy me some meat so I can eat without bingeing." Bless his soul, for I was able to enjoy ground beef and eggs the next day.

The weekend went on, subtly working off my armor. The drama triangle began to make sense. I slowly began to move out of shame and gently connect with the other participants. I was still sitting pretty in my tower of ego, sure that I had already done my personal work and food was my only problem. This was thoroughly addressed, because I remember an exercise that would have made my Emily program dietician proud: blindfolded partner meal serving. It was one of those moments that produced a kind of split reaction, the cognitive dissonance of "nononono" and "yes! This is exactly what I need to work on!" It was a wonderful time, and I left the weekend with rock solid boundaries and a deep sense of confidence in who I was.



The monday after PTI weekend, I woke up with an extreme calling to recreate this scene from my meditation. Needless to say, I had developed some boundaries.

Group therapy and goal setting felt a bit different after returning from PTI. I had this massive sense of delineated boundaries, and I heard others judge my experience. Too much too fast, reckless, what was I trying to prove? I regarded my colleagues with a detached, empowered listening. Wise adult. I was certain this was the way, and I would continue down this path.

If this book had a montage, it would go right here. The next few months were full of triumphs and struggles. I left the December PTI in a state of 'needs shock'. Turns out, when I binge and feel shame, the story in my head immediately becomes "I don't matter and nobody likes me, because I don't like me." Once again, the leader found me before I ran away and convinced me to keep showing up. I had victories in the Emily Program. Surprise dinner outings, mindful meals, setting me up for more empowerment as the food holidays rolled by. Christmas was a turning point. Two PTI weekends in, I had some skills, and had begun to accept my personal disorder with food as my story, owning it as a cornerstone of my being.

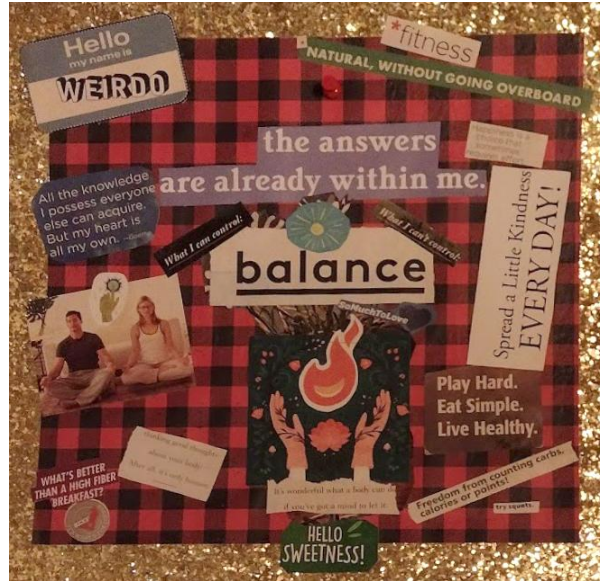
For the first time I wasn't killing myself at the gym in order to justify my eating, and just....enjoying the food. It was terrifying, and definitely not pretty. The cognitive dissonance of holding information about carbohydrates, hyperpalatable addictive processed food, and health advice I had internalized as canon while at the same time allowing myself to eat anything and everything was at times almost too much to bear. Christmas day brought me new discoveries of just how far up the high water mark of the hunger/fullness scale really went, with seemingly endless sweets doing nothing to sate me. I moved through the day in a daze, briefly inconsolable, but reaching out my support at the Emily Program brought relief. "I don't know what recovery looks like but it probably involves accepting yourself no matter what."

That afternoon I took the bathroom scale out into my parents backyard and shot a hole in it with an airsoft gun. Then I took a sledgehammer to it, filming the whole experience in slow motion for posterity. I floated through the day, blood sugar dancing, until I found myself waiting for dinner, ready to head home and end this suffering. I was upstairs in my old room, now an office, and found a stack of home movies. I grabbed a disc and popped it into the media player. What I saw on screen moved me to tears. Me, the golden child, unwounded by trauma and untarnished by the world. I watched myself grow up, from a scrabbling toddler to an enthusiastic schoolchild, playing piano in his underwear for an audience. I was in love with this pure, perfect boy. The reel of my life played forward, and my siblings came into my world. I saw the change in myself almost immediately. They dominated the footage as new gifts into the world, but whenever I came back into frame, I was sullen, hurt. I lashed out at the new arrivals. Their trespass into my perfect life turned me into a jerk! Watching this all play out over home movies brought me a sense of validation, that all the work was real, and I felt a deep connection with my inner child. I

took the collection of home movies back with me, and spent the weekend reliving my life story beat by beat.

I came out the other side with a sense of lightness. A defragmented harddrive, or a sorted bookshelf. I had properly summed up everything that had happened up until that point, and zipped it up into an easy archive, dealt with and tidy. The past was bookmarked and addressed, and I knew what I needed to do next. I would leave the Emily Program and invest into inner work. Therapy and inner child work was the answer to my food freedom question. I wouldn't get where I wanted to be by eating dessert a few times a week with a bunch of women downtown. I showed up for a surprise new years party, and gave them the news, eyes on 2020 and the change ahead.

## 2020: The Year it All Popped Off



I went into 2020 with excitement, intentions, goals, and hopes. I spend the last few days of 2019 recapping my incredible year, and crafting a vision board for the year ahead with random thrift store magazine cuttings. Balance, acceptance, answers from within....I had powerful messages for what I would embody in the new year. I went full woo woo, breaking out the tarot cards, and doing a comprehensive reading for each month of the year, noting it all in a journal and excited for change and growth. I set goals, places I might go, things I might do, stuff I might make. Little did I know how wild things could really get.

One of the first big challenges of the new year was moving. My lease was up in march, and the rent had just kept climbing. I didn't think it was worth it anymore, to be the part time trash man and still have to pay through the roof just to keep one over my head. My wife and I dreamed of somewhere new. Cheaper, with space to dance, and room for an office. In the first week of January we went on a whirlwind tour, visiting three possible locations and feeling priced out of town. In-between appointments, my wife spotted something on craigslist that seemed too good to be true, meeting our needs in a quiet part of edmonds just 10 minutes away. The last caller had been rude, so the landlord agreed to meet us right then. Excited, we headed right over.

I was later told that from the moment I stepped from my car and muttered a few words, I had won over the landlord. I don't know what I said or did, but it was authentic. We were shown a small adorable unit in what looked like an old hotel, a horseshoe-shaped set of apartments set into a hill with no number 13. Not wanting to lose this opportunity, we jumped on it. By the first Sunday of the new year and several ATM trips later, we had secured a new home, with several months to move in. There was room to breathe, at least until I started to actually look at the oodles of stuff and try to logic my way around putting it all into its new place. I clearly had a lot to learn about releasing control.

January and February came and went with ease. We moved small things over slowly, then finally blew the horn of friendship to call for friends to aid us in the uhaul adventure that was furniture movement. We relaxed, somewhat stiffly, into our new home. It was a downsize, and we both felt a little rushed in our bid to claim our good fortunes. As the weeks went by it became a home base as I continued reaching out into the world, going to ecstatic dance, movement classes, doing my work remotely from the library, and seeing my new therapist. I trained my new replacement trash deputy, and made a clean break from the old apartment.

We were beginning to lay down roots in our cozy new home. Restless as ever, I searched for places to make a new start in my career, entertaining the avenues of massage therapy and professional cuddling. Through dance I had come to realize that touch was an oft-unmet need of mine, and rediscovering the satisfaction that had come to feel taboo and wrong was just another revelation that turned on more inner lights. After a short February break, I packed my things once more for Frog Creek, for our second to last PTI retreat.

## **The Big Sick**

The previous PTI in January had shown me what was possible. I was moving beyond my struggle with food, and rediscovering what it meant to truly own my experience while letting others' own theirs. Struggling with the discovery of a need for touch and my own sexual frustrations, I came into the March PTI jaded and without intention. It would unfold how it would unfold, and I sought nothing specific.

Frog Creek had a different vibe. There were now copious tissues and hand sanitizers. The world outside was beginning to whisper of a virus blanketing the land, but for this weekend, at least, we were off the grid and on our own plane of existence. Day one went as well as could be, and after a lamb dinner I took in the supermoon under light rain in a hot tub. I came in as they put on a movie, *The Big Sick*, a fitting title for the challenges ahead. As I sipped my bubbly water and enjoyed the movie, the biggest hurdle for me was truly believing in the miracles right in front of me.

I was up in my head. The hard part of PTI is the divide between the spiritual goodness of a group retreat and the isolated logic of the dream of domestication. It was all woo woo nonsense to me this weekend, and I didn't want to believe it. After a tenuous bit of hypnotherapy and the embrace of the group, I reclaimed a missing piece of my safety, relearned to let go, and to trust the process. I walked the labyrinth and contemplated my place. As the weekend closed, I returned home recharged and ready for anything.

## **LOCKDOWN**

Those few days after PTI, as the world began to close down around me, I felt it was my mission to spread love and joy. I pondered wearing a sign and walking an intersection, reminding folks love was real, that they were loved. I simultaneously felt the love of community and a sense of belonging, while feeling the pull of fear, and panic at the world shapeshifting around me. I lived with the constant anxiety of losing my social gains, to be returned to the isolated state before anything changed and I began to reach out and connect. Life, it seemed, would be changing.

As the world shrunk, I clung to the supports I had. I still remember the sign on Om Cultures door 'Last one for a while' as we danced, socially distant, an air of hesitant expectancy between us. As the dance space closed, silent discos sprang up to meet the need for connection and movement, and for a brief few weeks we shared a magical thread together in the park, all tuned to the same playlist, before that too was deemed too bold.

In the second week of March, we finally cleaned out our old 3 bedroom apartment and moved in officially to our new downsized home 10 minutes away, in Edmonds. Little did we know that we were settling in for the apocalypse. I had my computer desk and workshop crammed into the spare room, but my wife didn't plan on working from home. She snagged the office plants just as the lockdown went into effect, and while our shelter in place didn't quite feel like a shelter at home, some nature made things more comfortable. We put up a photo wall of our life together, arranged our furniture in a way that made sense, and settled in.

One day I woke up and the gym was closed. I was proud of how well I took it: in past years I might have immediately broken. Thus began the saga of working out at home. Zoom workouts, completed daily and frantically, as if movement was the panacea that would keep the malaise away. Within 2 weeks I had exercised myself into injury, and while the physical therapist was all too happy to prescribe a 12 week treatment plan, I simply had to shrug my sore shoulder and leave; my insurance plan didn't roll over until april. There were lots of walks. I tried to get my wife to join me, and while we shared one or two zoom sessions during 2020, it did not fit into her world: home was not a place to do workouts. This worldview did not align with my own, where I was 'building resilience' with movement and 'celebrating my ingenuity' by working out wherever I could. This would be a source of conflict, in our ever shrinking life together...

Two weeks before the first lockdown order, I was in a weird place with food. With the Emily Program behind me, I had been happy to return to experimenting with the exhilaration of fasting, eating meat, and being slightly more aware of my internal motivations with food. I had entered into a partnership with a new wellness therapist to work specifically through food issues. I was playing with all sorts of things, and not particularly grounded in one way of eating. The week before everything closed down, I had started a week of only potatoes. For nearly 5 days, I lived off only potatoes, had terrible gas, and felt cold and euphoric. Potato ketosis? Despite the lack of energy intake I had quite the spiritual kick, really feeling in touch with the idea that I was my own god. Why not worship myself? My week of potatoes ended with the last therapist appointment of 2020, in which I insisted I felt amazing (I really did) and everything was fine (I agonized later that day over what to eat at pcc, and felt terrible in my stomach and brain after eating a sandwich).

Two weeks later, still obsessed with my flabby thighs and determined to get a level of discipline back into my life, I had my initial client consult with a coach, a high protein advocate and Keto bodybuilder turned carnivore enthusiast. Again, I juggled the cognitive dissonance of seeing past the diet culture world, but being unhappy in my body. They were professional and direct, and offered a simple plan tailored to my needs. Carnivore with less fat. Who knew? I fired up the calorie trackers and proceeded to go stir crazy for the next month.

Fast forward to mid April. Weeks of low fat high energy lifestyle. I looked considerably more trim than in my first zoom workouts. I had adapted to this new normal and had energy, purpose, and focus. If quarantine had narrowed my areas of control, why not make it out of this pandemic a little stronger and better looking? I knuckled down hard for several weeks, then decided to relax for a week. And then, suddenly the quarantine bread baking phase began.

It seemed like I was just in a new yo yo. I would scrimp and tighten my belt all week so that I could have one blowout day. Sometimes the carb-up day would spill into two. Come monday, it would look and feel like all my progress was gone. The way my previously obese body retains water bouncing back from carb depleted is incredibly disheartening. My thighs hang from my body like sheets and swell like pillows, and I wonder if I will ever accept this body of mine completely. I ponder surgery, and even one night go so far as to send an inquiry to a doctor. I read the response the following day like a sober man looking back on last night's debauchery. I push down the shame and thank them for responding, and no I don't have an extra 15 thousand dollars to come in for elective surgery during a pandemic. What price can I put on self love?

All of this was my background as I moved into the meat of 2020. I started my days with ritual and sought to ground through movement and meditation, listening to affirmations and putting miles on my feet. My wife, feeling constricted working at home in our smaller space, teetered on the precipice of the black hole of depression. Even with all this and a myriad of microaggressions over food and movement, our relationship was looking better than ever. Couples counseling had ended, and somehow a lot of the big vague problems that were really not that important just faded away. We had each others' backs, and that was enough. Love was all there was.

## Slothy

As the spring turned to summer, our love and appreciation for each other really solidified. Through my therapist, I remotely learned of the Imago method, and together my wife and I began to construct a framework for staying deeply connected. Date nights were few and far between, but a Sunday check-in paid dividends for understanding my partner's worldview and getting on the same page.

One day, during a therapy session, I got a suggestion. Grab a stuffed animal, and just project my inner child onto it. Bears had been handy at PTI, but I had never really given this a deep thought. Close at hand was a sloth, given to us at our wedding 3 years prior. Up until this point, he was less than an afterthought, a wonder that we still had him around. In this moment, he became the anchor for my inner child. I began to take him everywhere, strapping him to my back as I went out for runs, and carrying him as I walked. We became inseparable.



With slothy at my side, my inner child was always just a glance away. As I became more playful, my 7 year old was there to cheer me on. Slothy supervised handstands in the grass, went ziplining with me, and was there in my arms to remind me of my adventures before bedtime. He was a big hit at the nearby church, too. In the middle of February, I took my beloved Prius down to the auto place for an oil change. Not too far away to walk, I opted to return on foot. As I crested the hill for the first time in my new neighborhood, I saw a sign for Annie's kitchen. Volunteers were needed for a weekly dinner. Stories ran through my head, but faded away. This wouldn't be a repeat of the square dancing fiasco. I found an email address, and asked if I could volunteer. What would ensue would be a mutually beneficial, fulfilling experience that still warms my heart on a weekly basis a year later.

I was the youngest volunteer, by a wide margin. The makeup of the kitchen was primarily silvered haired sweet ladies, backed with the male cast of the ever present goofball cook, the self appointed dishwasher, and Bob. Bob's tough as nails, a no nonsense, nice guy. Allegedly in his 80s, he has all the grit, jokes, and emotional withholding of an old ww2 pilot, or a sea captain. When I arrived, Bob was in charge of the freezer, a chaotic wooden ice box filled to the brim with banana boxes. Some of these boxes are labelled: most of these boxes are not. Bob would heft these full boxes of various frozen meats with a silent, focused strength. Old man strength. When I showed up, he knew just where I fit into the equation. I quickly became the freezer guy. We worked together, sorting through the meat and other things gleaned from local grocers, making it accessible for the dinners each week.

And so, it became routine, that every wednesday, around 10 am, I would show up and help for an hour or so. Sometimes I would chop things in the kitchen, enjoying the frenetic restaurant energy without the commitment of restaurant wages or restaurant responsibilities. I would help sort produce, bread, sweets, and have my fill of whatever came in from the various other food banks. I would parse through the meat, filling my own banana box and thus my freezer and fridge, and I trundle down the hill back home. This continued, unabated, even as the pandemic set in. Masks were in place, and a lot of volunteers left, but the kitchen never let up. Feeding nearly 200 people a week, we were more in demand than ever. And slothy was there to supervise.

Sloth has been on ecstatic dances, mountain climbs, cold plunges, and on ferries. Slothy has been to a cantina, a church, several doctors offices, and a cabin in the woods. This little boy has been swaddled, cuddled, chewed on, lovingly admired, and danced with. Slothy is a conversation starter, a point of pride, a symbol, and a handsome boy.



## **-Chapter 5: The More We Get Together, the Happier We'll Be-**

Armed with a PTI's worth of resources and my inner child at my side, I floated into the last quarter of 2020 with excitement in my heart and love in my eyes. I began to embrace my needs for freedom and expression, enriching my life with little changes to my home. My workshop began to hum again, and I churned out thing after thing. My home became more creative and fun, and just as Animal Crossing sparked a beautiful chord through the summer, I viewed the space around me as something to customize and design.

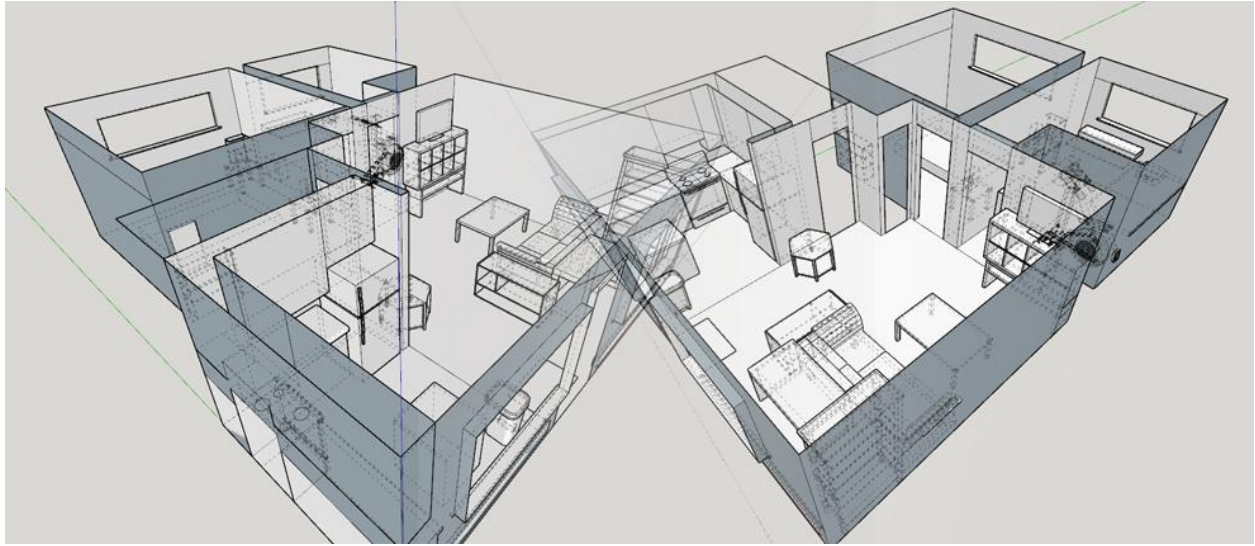
### **Sawdust and Cat Trees**

It started with a cat. At the end of July, overcome with the enormity of the year, my wife was finally ready to stop looking at cats for adoption, and finally bring one into our home. I immediately said no. My gut reaction was to push back and veto this entirely. I couldn't explain it, but I went outside and sat on the feeling. Within 30 seconds, waves of grief filled me. I wasn't ready to let another cat into my life after losing Rosie less than a year prior. How could I open my heart only to hurt so much again some day? As I sat with the feeling, I felt my heart open and the sadness settled. By acknowledging the grief, I relaxed into the idea of welcoming a new cat into my life. I announced my healing, and not too soon, Coco came into our life.



Coco was a tiny wonderful 1.5 year old glowing white cloud with a black nose spot just crying out to be booped. She spent the requisite few days hiding in our bathroom, but eventually, she showed us she was down to cuddle in between zooming around and cursing at birds. Soon, we had a cat tree, cat toys, and our space was fast becoming cramped. I decided one day to design and build a new shoe tree so that we could organize things a bit better near the door. That one fateful decision changed everything.

How does one design a shelf? My mind went with sketchup. A simple 3d computer crafting program, I picked it up quickly and began sketching out a simple design for shoe storage. As I built, I began to dream. What if I started taking measurements everywhere? What if I redesigned my entire home? It quickly went from one room, to the entirety of our apartment, with scale accurate furniture and even things we didn't own but pondered acquiring, such as a rowing machine.



I began to arrange my virtual home for maximum awesomeness. It showed me that not only could we live more comfortably, we didn't have to throw anything out, despite downsizing. As we followed the computerized plans, more and more little changes were realized, building and creating and dreaming and solving problems, and before long, there was floor space to move, dance, and breathe.

My newfound design powers imbued me with a confident sense of manifesting anything I needed. Yoga stuff piled on the floor? Let's design a shelf to take up that weird hole between the closet and dresser. Too many coats? 3d printed coat hangers for the modular shoe rack. I designed and built a desk that clipped onto the back of my car, just so that I could just find wifi and stand on the back of my car, working outside. I was totally in the flow, ideas breathing forth into reality on a weekly basis, totally without preplanning. I built cat furniture. I built my wife a desk. Within a month, I was living the life of a sawdust covered craftsman, totally as if I had been doing it all my life.

### **Best year ever?**

I finished out 2020 with everything that I wanted. My spiritual life was booming, and I was manifesting things smoothly and easily. I decreed that I would have a 3 second freestanding

handstand and a new job that paid me a living wage, while still allowing me the adventures I had via working from home. It was almost as if stating it so made it happen. I ended the year in a cabin somewhere beautiful, holding that handstand.....and looking forward to a January start date at a brand new remote position with a tech startup.

Everything on my vision board had been called to pass. I had a sweetness in my life, balance between things I could and could not control, and I had learned to really trust myself without as much fear or hesitation. I deleted instagram, removed calorie counting apps from my phone, and adopted simple but effective movement practices to keep me grounded in morning magic. Through curiosity and being myself, I had cultivated new communities, through the church, om culture, and my sunday circle. Filled with gratitude and excitement, I rolled over the calendar into 2021 under the light of the moon, burning ast year's pages. I plunged into the icy waters of the sound in celebration.

### **Same stuff, different flavor**

For the first few weeks of the year, as I walked the streets of my new neighborhood, I couldn't believe it wasn't 2020 anymore. Everything felt the same, as if the film reel of everything before moving into this new home was snipped and joined to this one, creating a continuous loop of the low dread of pandemic life. But I breathed, grounded, and celebrated how much I had grown. I was now seeing humans on a daily basis, virtually or otherwise, working for a company that made a difference in the world. I more deftly balanced the venn-diagram rings of mental clarity, physical performance, and vanity, when it came to my food choices. I knew I could choose, again and again.

In a few weeks before March, I acted on a feeling. I was finally ready to revisit surgery. My previous doctor had given me a quote for a thigh lift, but it was just too expensive, and even working 60 hours a week and getting a second job, I almost couldn't afford the first procedure. Now, earning more in current salary than with all those hourly wages combined, I could pool my resources for amazing things. My surgery date is August 2021. It will cost \$16,000. I have

another \$10,000 procedures to consider for next year. It feels weird to think about anything more than a month out. By the end of March I had received my first dose of the Covid vaccine. As a particularly loud stranger at the gym said, I was now controlled by the illuminati. This was fine.

After receiving a new backpack for Christmas, little did I know how into backpacking I would get. April first marked the first trip of the year, marching 14 miles up the iron horse trail to share a cozy tent on snow covered ground with my wife. It was amazing, and I felt such wonder, at human ingenuity, and nature's splendor. As these words tick by on the page, I shiver, both in excitement, and from undernourishment, eating a sacred 'dieta', and preparing for an Ayahuasca ceremony with the same beautiful friend who facilitated my MDMA experience in 2019. This seems only too perfect to close this text, as the author will not return from the mountain.

I realize now, that my past doesn't have such a hold on me that it once did. How miniscule the sliver of time I've been on this earth, and even smaller still operating on my own out in the world. To have been operating on the constant comparison of one year to the next, feats that needed to be met or bested, to never be truly present, is a shame. I'm so blessed to have found this path, at any time, but especially now. I release shame, and celebrate myself for the good graces of simply existing. I am grateful for all those who have touched this vessel, each hand that has shaped my craft as I take my maiden voyage on the ouroboros-esque waters of a life already in progress.

I've let go of so much white noise, left behind so many pointless subroutines of self-judgement and restriction. I live my life with a much more open heart, ready to accept new ways of living, living from a place of grace.

May we all live enriched, satisfying lives, finding joy in things far and wide. May we be fulfilled, curious, playful, and creative. Bless you for all that you are, wonderful being!

