

Where the Sidewalk Ends

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The gym is yellow and smells like milk cartons and Popsicle sticks. All the parents have filled up the foldout chairs, including my dad, sitting proudly with his new video camera perched on his shoulder. I'm standing backstage in puffy jeans and a blue sweatshirt with a giant shark running across my chest and along my sleeves. But I'm wearing a pig mask. That's how you can tell I'm in character.

The steps onto the small platform look so huge. I'm one of the first to go, an essential moment in the formation of the plot. I'm the one who sells the straw to one of those three little pigs. I'm excited, we're all excited! We're putting on a play! The crowd suddenly quiets and our music teacher hits the cassette tape and the speakers crackle and hiss, blasting the kindergarten choir backing track.

I know the words, we rehearsed them all afternoon. I won't forget a thing. This is what my sister kept telling me on the ride to school—the performer, our diva, the expert who was in fifth grade and could sing long choir songs at the Christmas concert. I'm going to be a phenomenon like her.

My moment comes. The same lights that illuminate our lunchtime murmurings to one another about the French toast boat and our dodge ball fights ignite my hay-colored stage. And there's real hay there for my prop! I enter from stage right, fall to my knees, and sing!

“Straw for sale! Straw for sale! Straw for sale!”

The music continues, the parents are all smiling; the little red light on my dad's camera is winking at me. Every young thought starts to fade. The faces in the crowd smear into one dark smudge, the walls grow very high, and self-consciousness dips down from the light overhead and flirtatiously pokes me on the nose. The song is ending, but I continue to sing.

“Straw for sale! Straw for...sale! Straw———”

The kid after me starts to inch onstage, into my silence. I wait for a moment, as if we could restart the track and I could do it over again, like when we were rehearsing. But a little voice whispers for me to get off the stage. And I do just that.

In his iconic interview with Madonna in the August 1994 issue of *Esquire*, Norman Mailer wrote, “There is nothing comparable to living with a phenomenon when the phenomenon is you and you observe yourself with a cool intelligence, your own, and yet are trapped in the cruelest pit of the narcissist—you not only are more interested in yourself than anyone else alive, but suffer from the likely suspicion that this might be justified. You could be more interesting than anyone you've encountered.”

Now, we envy these narcissists. We are the grandchildren of MTV. We are the sons and daughters of 1990s pop culture and excess. We are the viewers of reality television, readers of *People* magazine. Part of us wants to be a star. A cultural mainstay. An icon. We want Norman Mailer to interview us.

This is why I mimicked my sister until midway through high school.

Amy was a singing sensation as far as the choir department was concerned. She wasn't afraid to sing, with other students or solo, in front of a crowd! She could hold a tune—tend to each note as if it were individually vital for the song to continue. She made it into all the advanced choirs, went to state competitions, ended up a senior in high school singing in the madrigals choir with

only seven other classmates, all of them poised to finish high school, pack up their belongings and varsity jackets, and head to a career in showbiz.

Understand the pressure on my end.

I'd found out early on that singing in a large group was easy. Just mouth the words if you couldn't remember them. And since music class was forced upon us once or twice a week, we didn't have much choice as kids.

But when time came to choose my classes, I picked choir if for any reason to please my sister, who would constantly renege my idea that choir is not right for me.

"We come from a family of singers, Gregory," she would say. "We can sing! Look at our aunts and uncles." My uncle Larry sang "Can't Help Falling in Love with You" at every wedding reception we attended. My aunt Deloris was the president of Elvis's fan club in Michigan back in the middle 1900s. My mom and dad sometimes sang along to Garth Brooks on the radio. But I would nurse her hopeless idealization.

"Right," I'd say, and start another year with Dr. Borst.

Originally it was Mr. Borst. But in the course of my time spent in his classes through middle and high school he managed to earn a doctorate degree, so he joyfully requested that we switch the M to a D and recognize his stellar achievement. And he was never shy from comparing my sister's performance to my own.

"I just saw Amy this morning, man, she was wonderful! Now c'mon man, stand up straight and form those vowels! Be like your sister!" Then he would whisk across the room and harass another kid with his commands, or when he'd grow extremely frustrated, begin shouting to his invisible T.A. who always had the answer to why we were so incompetent. He had the posture of a butler, so he looked fit for conducting a chorus, but when he'd dart around the room he resembled a duck impatiently searching for a stream.

Now, there were times when I would dig the songs, find my voice lost in the chorus with all the other students, enjoying singing as much as I was the harmony. But like any high, it eventually passed, and was replaced by the jarring notion that I was being forced to watch *The Sound of Music* again on the day before winter break, another concert over, another set of songs forgotten.

But it was in the spring of my sophomore year when me and the rest of the men's choir were asked to sing "You're Sixteen, You're Beautiful and You're Mine" (one of Ringo Starr's biggest solo hits) and choreograph the dance moves based on our own stellar dance experience. Accompanied by a piano. Ten of us. Onstage. In front of the whole school.

I suffered through it, coasting by a possibility of utter humiliation and rejection by my peers because I didn't have a substantial posse. I was acne ridden and wearing clothes that were too baggy and ill chosen. In the end, the audience was left confused as to what had just happened. Why were those few guys just up onstage singing and semi-dancing in a semicircle? I made sure to keep my head down, form little vowels, and whisper the lyrics. When I walked off that stage my fantasies of music department stardom vanished. I joined the school newspaper under my English teacher's wing, picked up *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, fell in love for the first time, picked up a pencil, and started writing. I opted to make people up, make them do things I'd never do, in places and times I might never visit. I decided to look into my mind instead of into a crowd. I reinvented myself.

Simon Cowell recently told a reporter that "If you look into Madonna's eyes—or Whitney Houston's when she was at her peak—you see something there that other people haven't got. It's a steel, a sense of 'I am going to do it, whatever happens.' It's not necessarily a good character trait to have, but if you are going to make it in this business, you need it."

And who better to turn to career advice than the Queen of Pop? She's stuck around for twenty-five years, won Grammys, etched her sounds into the brains of our everyday lives. And she started out a regular Michigan girl, went to dance school at the University of Michigan, until she dropped out and moved to New York by herself with thirty dollars in her pocket and nowhere to

stay.

And this is what my artsy music friends were planning on doing when our last year of high school was coming to a close. I had enviously watched them light up the stage in our auditorium musical productions, had interviewed them for the school paper, shouted their names when they came onstage for our school's Battle of the Bands show, smoked weed with them in their parents' garages. Deep into a night of drinking we'd blast Rufus Wainwright and jollily sing in circles, and our class's officially voted best dressed stud, Mike, would eventually bring out his guitar and play us some of his songs.

We were in love with the music and the parties and the laughter and each other. This was the summer before college would begin, before we would all separate and get Facebooks and see each other only through our digital camera snapshots, or not even at all. This was the summer when it felt like the whole world was waiting for us in September and all we had to do was sit on the beach and dream.

And I knew what Mike's dream was late in August. We had made a road trip with two other friends to downtown Columbus to see Rufus for the first time in our lives. Afterward, rushing through the crowded streets, I could see Mike's inspiration. That's what he wanted to do. He wasn't going to go to college.

That night I sat up in our hotel bed and played solitaire on my iPod, its blue glow coloring my skin. I have never managed to sleep well in hotel rooms. Yet Mike and the others were passed out. I toyed with the idea of leaving with him when the summer ended, seeing the country with no money. But I had a good deal at a university—I couldn't even sleep in a hotel room. Again, I found my notebook and started writing.

This is how it works. After hurricane Katrina, Mike announced to everyone that he'd be tagging along with his brother to New Orleans to help with the relief. But I knew why he was really going. A man who snorts eight balls of cocaine at his wild house parties and misses out on a trip to the beach the next morning with his close friends does not choose humanitarian work without an intervention. It was a selfish endeavor. He was escaping. With no money in his pocket, nowhere to stay.

He was a temptation, a poison. My life in reverse. I could have thrown down my backpack on campus and driven back to Grand Rapids, packed all my things, and drove off with him. But I need structure, control. I needed to write. I had a job at the school paper and papers to write for my British Literature class. I had a Finnish politics professor who had watched the iron curtain fall breathing down my neck.

So I decided to send something of mine with him.

I burnt him a mix CD. Full of Rufus songs that he loved, in an order fit for driving down the road. "Instant Pleasure," "Heartburn," and a cover of "King of the Road." All the great live tracks from the show we saw were on there too. It popped out of my laptop and I wrote in bold, black Sharpie: "Rufus for the Road. For Mike."

I put it in my visor CD holder and planned on seeing him one last time before he took off. We'd made plans to get dinner, see a movie. But winter came, and he was gone.

The CD's still there—I listen to it when I feel like singing some sad songs. It's full of depressing love songs.

Later in her career, when she became a business mogul, Madonna wrote down her five strategic dimensions for achieving her success. They're framed in one of her offices somewhere, waiting to be memorized by young assistants and interns.

They read like the handbook to becoming a success: you must have vision, client and market knowledge, always be improving your competencies and lowering your weak points, attempt to coherently implement new products, and—this is the big one—continuously reinvent yourself.

This is where the "steel eyes" come in. You need that, as much as Madonna needs that, in whatever career you're planting yourself in. It's that fearless attitude that will allow you to trans-

form your creations into something fresh, to change your values to coincide with the changing times, to absolutely reinvent yourself to stay relevant and ahead of everyone else. This is how you become a phenomenon.

If you're a pop star you could hire new producers. If you're an artist you could switch mediums. If you're a writer you could give postmodern fiction a shot. If you're a lawyer you could take on a client at no cost. If you're a pastry chef you could learn how to sauté. If you're a college kid you could stay up late reading everything your teachers gave you and then attempting to mimic Billy Collins's voice with your own poetic swagger. If you're a transient high school grad you could pack up a car and head to battered New Orleans.

But none of those paths will guarantee you a spot next to Madonna, not even Mike. It's easier to win the lotto than get a record deal. It's easier to say you're applying yourself to your craft than actually sinking your bare fingers into the clay and forcing it into a shape you desire.

You need passion—love for your art. You must find what you love the most, what gives you those ferocious eyes, that willingness to try anything without fearing the consequence in order to succeed, in order to reinvent. Because you could go your whole life crippled by stage fright, failing to succeed where you never really wanted in order to please someone else. You'd end up clinging to someone else's goals in order to find satisfaction.

Or you could stand here, with your sneakers firmly planted on the university grounds, with your backpack slung over your shoulders, with the gentle snowflakes freezing your nose, the passing headlights lighting up your eyes, and the sidewalk winding ahead of you into the distance, with no idea where it will take you, only that you know you'll be happy wherever—if ever—it ends.