

Transcendent

I've always been terrified of heights. Ever since I went on a drop-ride at a carnival when I was barely in elementary school, I've known. It's the loss of control that scares me: being stuck up so high without any say whether you live or die psychologically kills me, no matter how many times I remind myself that it's safe. The only time anxiety over heights didn't grip me still was three years ago in Goblin Valley.

Earlier that year, I discovered that despite having been born a girl, I had been in denial about my true self, a boy, in fear of being unloved. I spent that year crying myself to sleep at night because I could feel breasts pressing up against myself, despite every instinct screaming at me to claw them off. Every word an adult would preach about the wonders of puberty would echo in my ears as I sobbed, feeling that my newest additions were more like glorified estrogen tumors than an exciting sign of blossoming womanhood. Every moment I was awake was like a living body horror, watching myself regress further and further from anything I recognized as me. The sight of a mirror was the emotional equivalent to a visit from Freddy Kreugar, except that it was actually sleep that was my only solace. My gaze could only remain at eye-level when taking a shower so that the pain of what lay below wouldn't haunt me.

I watched the news cycles anxiously as politicians led a crusade against bathrooms, declaring that my transgender sisters were pedophiles and rapists. They would call us trans men delusional and confused lesbians, if we were acknowledged at all. I read internet comments from people who described at length about how much they wanted to kill transgender people. I would force myself to read them, telling myself that I deserved it for being such a burden to my national community. I would watch cars roll by, wishing I could be dragged behind them in a bloody

mess so I could finally end it all. My body was my torture, burning my resolve down raw so the internet could apply its signature sting.

It's no surprise that that feeling finally overwhelmed me that day in Goblin Valley.

I stared over the striped red cliffs, open air rolling over my toes through my sandals. My feet were angled on the very edge as I peered over it; down and down and down it went, so far that I couldn't see a clear bottom. The world around me was so muddled that all I knew was the seemingly inevitable drop as an unknown force willed me over the side. My family had just moved on from this point of the hike, therefore it was a perfect time for the edge to seduce me to it. No railing protected me from crossing that forbidden barrier and there wasn't anyone around to catch me if I were to cross it. I leaned further and further over, tempting gravity to take its control, to reach out, take me, and not let go. For a moment, my body tensed as I commanded it over, but something stopped me. Finally, I stepped away without a single glance over my shoulder and went to find my family without saying a word of it until years later.

People always ask why. *Why would you want to do that? What were you thinking?* The simple answer was that I *wasn't* thinking.

In a suicide prevention program I took last year, the instructor said that within moments of the first plane hitting the Twin Towers, people on the top floor jumped. Rather than die by being crushed by a collapsing ceiling or burned to death by the raging fires, people chose to take their own lives to escape the pain. Suicides aren't always elaborate, methodical plans like you see in the media, but they're almost always for that same reason. The world felt like it was caving in on me, like I would never feel at home in my body or among people who silently wished for my death. I thought I was unlovable and broken, and that led me to feeling like there was only one way out.

I can't say that my suicidal experiences were pleasant or that I would ever repeat them, but I don't regret them. One subsequent experience that comes to mind was when I started prepping for my second half-marathon. My running team carpooled deep into the mountains as the sun was beginning to turn from apocalyptic to early morning blue. My running coach, Holli, and I were a little more than halfway through the run when we came around the bend of an outstretch of mountain. Despite my lungs aching from keeping up with the elevation and my thighs bellowing opera-level tones of agony, I kept swinging one leg evenly after another. The path had been narrow up until then with a canopy that blocked most of the view, so when we came across an open view of the valley, a new feeling struck me for the first time.

With barely a tinge of sunlight washing over me, the forest snugly pressed to my left in dark green clusters, and air roaring as it swept through the valley, I was almost pushed to tears. It's when the beauty of the world presents itself in subtle but impressionable ways when I'm hit with an overwhelming feeling of relief and gratitude. It's in times like those when I remember lying on the bathroom floor during the first and only time I actually followed through with my dark thoughts and think: *damn, I'm so glad I didn't kill myself*. You would think it'd be in the extreme highs of life that would make me grateful for that, but they aren't. It's when the world seems to settle for a moment, when the pain lessens and simple loveliness shines through the cracks. It's when that little voice that said *no* as I pushed myself out of the bathtub or stepped away from the edge returns with a victorious roar. It is in those moments when I understand what true happiness feels like.

Instead of asking why, I ask myself why not? Everything in me was guiding me there, telling me to escape, yet there was one instinct remaining that just said *no*. It was tiny, barely even registering consciously over the angst-ridden hypnosis I was caught in. That little *no* kept

me marching on every day, forced me to take showers when they made me feel like tearing my own skin off and made me come out to my peers in spite of being terrified of harassment. At first I assumed it was that good-ol' biological response that keeps you from eating your own finger or poking yourself in the eye. I realized, however, that if my fear of heights had completely vanished when I was literally about to throw myself off a cliff, it couldn't be that. Something else was driving me forward despite the intense pain I was feeling.

When I think about what kept me stable, the first thing that comes to mind is my family. My brothers, who were gung-ho about accepting me as their own brother from the get-go. My mother, who despite feeling as though she had just lost her only daughter, proved love conquers all when she became one of my biggest advocates. My father, who from the moment I told him, dropped everything to find me a therapist and research everything he could to be the best ally possible. It wasn't always easy and many hours were spent talking through all of our emotions, however turbulent or uncomfortable they were, until we've gotten to the place we are today. Without them, I wouldn't have made it.

So when it came to a place I could feel safe that had people I knew I could count on, I was covered. What pulled me from that ledge, though, was something else. In that moment when I stared death in the face and it felt like nothing would ever get better, I made my own choice. Simply put, a little voice said *no*, and that little voice was me.

To illustrate this, there's a children's book that I have always loved called *Ferdinand* by Munro Leaf. In it, a bull is different from the others, choosing to sit under his favorite tree and smell the flowers as opposed to fighting the other bulls. When he's picked to fight in a bullring in Madrid, no matter how much people antagonize him or try to rile him up, he refuses to fight them. At the end of the day, he's carted back to his favorite tree to smell the flowers and it ends

with the words “he is very happy.” He found his inner strength and masculinity not through giving into his pride and fighting people when they hurt him, but simply by being himself and continuing to push forward. He embraced the hardships the world threw at him and continued to be himself, which I deeply resonate with.

On my quest through pain to find the happiness holy grail, I dealt with anxiety demons at every turn. They clawed at me and demanded I clamp my jaw shut when I poured my heart out to my therapist. They threatened me with visions of rejection when I came out at school and decided to show my true self. Even to this day when I take my testosterone injections, they stay my hand with screams and howls to keep me from plunging the needle into my thigh. Instead of running from them or lusting over a state of being where they can’t dig their claws into my chest, I embrace them. I depend on them to show me the mountain I need to climb and allow them to ignite fire within me that pushes me to grit my teeth and get to the top.

Happiness isn’t something you can acquire or a result of eliminating the pain in your life. It is *because* we struggle, *because* we get beaten into the ground time and time again that we feel happiness. Joy comes from letting go of the things that don’t matter and embracing the simple things that do. Letting your walls down to accept the vulnerability and pain that comes with it is where you will find the genuine strength that was in you all along. Often we just allow our insecurities, worries, and society-imposed values to cover it up. Once we strip all of that down, discover our true selves, and find enjoyment in embracing our suffering can we be happy.

Now because of that suffering, my body has shaped itself into a form I’m beginning to not only recognize, but even *like*. Testosterone has broken the shackles of my old prison: redistributing my body fat, sharpening my face, deepening my voice, and has recently begun tickling my upper lip with hairs. Top surgery is on the horizon in the next couple of months,

when I can finally free myself from the dual flesh cages strapped to my chest. Now the endless wailing of politicians and edgy online teenagers no longer make me cower in fear, but snicker and shake my head. Most importantly, when I take a trip on a plane or find myself on a Ferris wheel countless feet above the air, my lungs catch and my eyes widen into a state of pure and utter terror, and I wouldn't have it any other way.

All of this came to be because I said *no*. All because I continue to say *no*. In the moment when every single wall came tumbling around me and I was thrown into hellfire, when I thought there was no hope, I found myself. I wouldn't take that back for anything.