

Powdered Sugar Skies

For me, home is a two-traffic light town perched on the side of a mountain in rural Pennsylvania. It's a blue-collar kind of place that used to thrive off of coal mines and train workers. When the mines shut down, most people left. But us remaining few stuck together, forming a tight-knit little community where everyone knows everyone else. None of us were wealthy, but we made sure no one struggled to put food on their tables either. From an outsider's perspective, we didn't have much to be proud of. Instead our pride came from within; from the satisfaction of hard work, loving thy neighbor, and healthy dose of grit.

At the top of a hill, a few blocks off of Main Street, resides one of our most treasured attractions. The Bar-Ann Drive-In Movie Theater has been in business since 1950 something and hasn't received so much as a paint job since the Reagan administration. Families drive from different states to watch summer blockbusters on a hill 5 minutes from my driveway. Teenagers brandishing shiny new driver's licenses roll slowly through the narrow, rusty gates and immediately to the back of the parking lot, in the hopes of getting lucky with their high school sweetheart. There's something to be said for preserving Americana, for which the Bar-Ann is a glowing example.

The summer after my freshman year of college, I begrudgingly left my urban sanctuary and returned home. In need of cash and an activity, I took two jobs. In the mornings, I lifeguarded at the local public pool. At 6:00 on the dot, I walked home in bright yellow Crocs, ate dinner, hugged my parents, donned a seriously ugly green t-shirt, and drove to the Bar-Ann just in time for golden hour. I parked my pre-Y2K Volkswagen Beetle (named Doug the Bug) and began my evening.

Most nights I worked the snack counter. My coworkers were a gaggle of lunch ladies from my school district looking for extra cash during summer break. We hit it off immediately. Sweating alongside Angela, Rosie, Bonnie and Connie, I popped endless amounts of popcorn and swapped gossip about my former classmates. Our clothes oozed a sickly perfume of funnel cake batter, imitation butter, and fryer grease. My ugly green work shirt was quickly stained from lost batter battles, and often sprinkled with powdered sugar. To this day, even the thought of deep-fried dessert brings bile rushing up my throat from the pit of my stomach. Burns from boiling oil were as common as cigarette breaks at the snack counter, but the lunch ladies and I took care of one another as best we could.

Around mid-July, I was scheduled for a week's worth of shifts at the ticket booth. The booth stands at the entrance of the parking lot, separate from the main building by about 50 yards. Three plexiglass walls support a screen door with rusty hinges that scream as you step inside. Entering the ticket booth felt like digging up a time capsule from 1987. In short, it put the "dated" in dilapidated. A digital alarm clock/radio combo sits under several decades of dust on the booth's main shelf. A lamp with a pull string (that occasionally even worked!) sits beside the clock so I could count my nightly sales. Under the shelf sits a 4-legged barstool, with one leg bent slightly so that it puts the seated individual at an angle similar to the Earth's axis. I'd escort

my leather money bag into the booth, slowly shut the door to prevent any rust-induced hinge songs, and wait for the cars to arrive.

After the movie began, I found myself alone in my time capsule of a ticket booth. Unamused with my phone and no newcomers in sight, I dragged my stool into the gravel parking lot. This week we were showing *Cars 3*. (Did you know they made a third *Cars* film? Yet another childhood classic being beaten into the ground, dead-horse style, by Disney. Oh well.) With no other light except for Lightning McQueen, I sat alone in the brisk night air. The movie's dialogue warbled through the windows of the sedans parked next to me. I had no need for it though. This was my third ticket shift that week, I already had the plot memorized. My mouth moved along with the red racecar's as he geared up for his final grudge match. As Rotten Tomatoes could tell you better than I, the movie itself isn't anything special. So instead, my eyes turned upward.

From my seat on the hill, I could see everything there was to see. (It's not much) Over the tree line, I squinted and found the intersection of the two highways at the edge of town. One went East, one West. No matter where I ended up, one of the two were my ticket home. Why we need two highways in the first place I'll never understand, but I digress.

The night sky wasn't pitch black just yet. The backdrop to the Pixar special faded in spectacular colors as the July sun set behind the Appalachian Mountains. The horizon line burned bright orange, then melted into maroon, finally shifting into the deepest of navy blues directly above the massive movie screen. Layers of stars dotted the sky like the powdered sugar that coated my uniform on snack counter nights. The biggest stars felt the closest. Gazing intently, I picked out Orion, the North Star, and a few other constellations I learned to identify during 5th grade science camp. The smaller stars felt much farther away. Those dots of powdered sugar were miniscule compared to their prominent brothers and sisters. I wondered if we humans would ever be able to reach them. (Or maybe someone else will reach us first? That's a space race I hope to live to see.)

Alone with my thoughts and Mr. McQueen, I finally felt peace. The beauty of solitude is a quiet one. With the stars looking down at me and I up at them, I wondered where life would take me. I hashed out plans for the future, creating a bucket list of travel destinations. If the sky was this beautiful in central Pennsylvania, I was itching to see the stars hang over Greece. Italy. Thailand. Anywhere but *here*.

My mind wandered its way from earthly destinations to heaven and back. If what the Catholic church taught me was true, the Creator of this world put those stars in the sky for me to enjoy. The existence of a Divine Presence felt dubious at best; but regardless, I hoped He knew that I appreciated the handiwork.

Then, to my bewilderment, a meteor shower began. Streaks of white light shot in all directions across a sky made of black velvet. Night's chilly breeze sent a chill from the back of my neck to the base of my spine and turned my arms into gooseflesh. On my crooked barstool, I stared in awe as I witnessed a stream of angels falling from grace.

For a second, I am reminded that I am small. In an ever-expanding universe, what could I possibly contribute? If stars can implode into black holes, did it even matter that I went to college? Held down a job? (For Christ's sake, I was making minimum wage!) Feeling defeated and a little nosy, I craned my neck to eavesdrop on the neighboring car and saw its passengers looking up at the same miracle as I. We collectively forgot all about Cars 3 and became enamored with the angels tumbling down from above.

Then It hits me like an ACME anvil in a Saturday morning cartoon. Yes. I am small. We all are. Alone, I am a sole ant on a picnic blanket; surrounded by delicious opportunities but too puny to do anything about them. Too young to make an impact. Too innocent, too naïve to make it on my own. But together an army of ants can devour entire rainforests. I closed my eyes and wished for a future of ant-like collectivism for the human race. Because if Disney had taught me anything, it's that if you're lucky enough to witness a shooting star, you better make damn sure to wish upon it.

To survive, we must rely on one another. The lunch ladies had taught me this, I just hadn't realized it yet. During those long nights under the yellow heat lamps, they worked hard for the benefit of one another. When one needed a break, the rest of us picked up her slack. A few weeks prior, I found myself on the receiving end of some nasty words from our manager. Rosie overheard, then took off to the milkshake machine and came back with a delicious frozen mocha concoction to cheer me up.

“Not all of us can do great things. But we can do small things with great love.”

The smell of the deep fryer wafts from the main building as the credits roll across the screen. Two LED headlights pierce through the privacy of my thoughts, illuminating my stool and I in an unwanted spotlight. My body jolts awake as I half-jog back to the booth and am reminded that I am indeed on the clock. Bills shuffle hands, and they drive off in search of parking. I put away my tilted stool and let the screen door slam shut, its hinges yelling wicked profanities to anyone within earshot. My sales for the night are totaled behind the snack counter, I shout my goodbyes to Bonnie and Connie and return to Doug the Bug. We drive home, my eyes wandering from the road upwards to the powdered sugar stars.