

Rewrite History (We'll Burn Bridges, You and I)

1. smart (adj.) —spirited, bright

Zero, and everything starts just like this; kicking and screaming and choking on the particles of consciousness that flash behind your eyelids like little explosions, *electric* you'd say if you could spit it out, *electric* because the world is a collision and you are the creation, yes—you crawled out of the wreckage vibrating with energy, atoms firing in all directions, and in this moment, right *here*, you could have been anything you wanted, anything if only you had known to ask for it. You are shapeless and volatile and that's scary because society likes control, it likes *order*, so the hospital staff fall into a collected frenzy, trying to pin you down with numbers and measurements. But that's not what you remember, is it? No, what we remember are the names we're given, the name that comes right after the 7 pounds and 5 ounces—the name that somehow, out of all the chaos of a beginning, becomes the thing that *sticks*. How something so simple could change us so irrevocably, I don't know, so I ask (belatedly); what's in a name? Some say a blessing, others say a responsibility, but whatever it is I know I had no desire for it, not when the hospital lights were too bright and the tubes curled around my arms like monstrous tree roots. In these early moments of awareness I was a butterfly scooped out of the universe, flitting in my glass jar until someone pinned me down by the wings—"What a beautiful name," the nurse says after my parents spell it out for the birth certificate. "She sounds like a superstar."

It becomes my first burden, and if I had known perhaps I would have cried a little louder—but as the story goes, my eyes were still too swollen and new to read the fine print, so in

the lingering exhaustion of creation I latched onto it without complaint, holding it to my chest until it rocked me to sleep.

2. smart (adj.) — very good at learning or thinking about things

Six, and perhaps this is when the change begins; I wake up to the sound of school buses and I eat my banana and cheerios in the soft light of mid-morning before being led hand-in-hand to my first classroom, a cubicle of inquisitive eyes that blur together because at this point everyone is still the same. There's a buzz of disorder but as promised we're soon separated into little learning groups on the sticky carpet, placed there by last name and this isn't so bad; our eyes peek at each other shyly but with a shared air of secrecy because all our name tags share at least one capital letter. A few weeks go by and we work together on packets of math problems, addition and subtraction and the numbers are a comfort to me because I recognize them from the activity books my parents made me do at home. "You need to know these," they had said as I grumpily filled out page after page in a book titled "Math for Second Graders," and as the problems got harder I protested the unfairness because why did I have to do second grade math when I was only in first grade? The only answer I ever got to that was a pinched brow and a reiteration of "Math is important," and "There's no harm in learning ahead"—and because I had nothing to say to *that* I would crush up the bubbles of frustration in the back of my throat and grind them into the curls of my "6's."

I never get to understand why math is in fact so "important," but I have to admit that it feels good to finish the packets before everyone else in my group. A few days later my teacher calls me to her desk in the middle of silent reading, and it turns out that I'm not going to work in my math group anymore. Instead, I'll be going to this thing called "Math Club"—a place where other "smart" kids like me would go to further improve our "advanced math aptitude."

Now, being labeled as a “smart kid” was new to me, but I liked it right away. It tasted sweet, melted in my mouth too fast like candy floss, bright pink and sugary with gratification. I craved it. I coveted it. Once I had it, I didn’t want to let it go. What it really did however was put us into boxes. It turned our first grade “everybody” into “somebodies” and “nobodies.” You were either smart, or you weren’t. Us and Them. The school was pulling us apart.

But I didn’t know this. Why would I want to? I was simply doing my duty. I went to school with an air of superiority, and I wore my label proudly. Like a medal. Like a stain.

3. smart (v.) — to cause or be the cause of pain; to suffer

Fifteen, and I’ve been thinking of words that start with letter E, words like *excellent* and *epitome* and *education*; *egregious*, *encumber*, and *eloquent*. These are good words, words I need to know, *smart* words they say and that’s fine, that’s something I know, that’s something I *am*. I ink the words into my forearm, the hollow of my cheeks, the spaces between my fingers, pushing them into my skin and counting them like prayer beads because numbers are good too, numbers are *excellent*, numbers are success. Big words and numbers make me the “smart girl” I’m meant to be, and while I once said the name with pride I say it now with compulsion, like a reminder. I think too much and I know too little and I long for the days where learning didn’t feel like a chore—now, I’m tired of having to get up every morning, to go to school with a plaster smile and be the person that everyone expects to do well, the person that everyone expects to succeed. “Smart girl” turns into “Ivy-League bound,” and even as the label gets more and more foreign, I hold it close to my chest because it’s the only thing I have left, the only thing years of schooling has made me believe I have—the label is tied irrevocably to my self-worth and I’m afraid to let it go because that means letting go of who I am. So instead I swallow my fears until I can’t swallow anymore, gagging on the sickly sweet taste of pride and tripping in the mismatched

footsteps of people who have “succeeded” before me in hopes of garnering similar results; rinse, repeat. Take the SATs, they say, do a sport, start a club, volunteer twice a week, save the world—it’s a checklist, a staircase that everyone else is climbing, *faster, faster*, and no one wants to be left behind but no one has the courage to say *slow down*. We steal heaving breaths and cool our brows with promises of the future, spilling our hopes on Scantrons and holding them aloft like dream-catchers. *You can do it*, they say, *this is you*, but the farther I go the more I stumble, exhausted and miserable because who is “they”—*they* don’t know who I am because I don’t even know myself, this monster that screams at her parents and can’t get straights A’s, who looks in the mirror in the dead of night and can’t recognize the person looking back—

I’ve been thinking of words that start with the letter E, words like *effort* and *eternal*, but tomorrow I’ll wake up to the letter F, to words like *fear* and *future* and *failure*. *You brought this on yourself*, they’ll say in response, *you could have worked harder*, and I grimace because the reply is as easy as filling out a test; *I know, I know, I know*.

Welcome to the 21st century, where we make our dreams out of fancy construction paper and we find our realities in the scraps leftover.

4. smart (adj.) — marked by vigorous strength

Eighteen, and pause here, full stop, rewind; I revisit my old self in increments, zero, six, fifteen, and within the calculations I see the question put on an endless loop: *was it worth it?* I can’t say for sure, but it’s staggering to think that who I’ve become stemmed simply from a few extra math problems, a higher grade here and there, a tiny face desperate for approval. I never made it to the Ivy League school that everyone said I’d go to, but because of this I feel like I can finally breathe, shake off the layers I’ve wrapped around myself and see the sun for the first time.

Walking into a classroom feels different than it ever has because at last I can be a new person, erase what twelve years of compulsory schooling has written into my name; *backspace, backspace, enter*. I look around at the fresh crop of faces and see myself in every person, the lingering exhaustion and the battle-weary scars of test scores and labels. We are *survivors*, and while there's still fear in the lines of our eyes, we have learned to *fight back*, to listen to the "they" and spit right back in its face. We talk about our experiences, talk about the scars left by compulsory schooling and talk about people like John Gatto, who understand the demons we've been running from and put them into words. He blames school for turning us into "addicts," and while I recoil at the word I remember the sweet taste of praise, the craving and the flare deep in the pit of my stomach, and it's true, isn't it—for once I am not controlled by a "they" but only by an "I," so I'll scream it for all the world to hear: *I am addicted to approval* (37). I created the monsters inside of me, stuck the labels into my skin because, as Gatto says, we have come to believe that "'success' [is] synonymous with, or at least dependent upon, 'schooling'" and that, right there, is the crux of the problem, isn't it (34)? We spent so much of our time buried in standardized tests and learning right from wrong that we forgot what we were learning *for*, forcing us to put our lives in the school system's control and turning us into machines, packaged neatly into boxes only to find that there was never actually anything inside. Here is our chance to break free, to restart our hearts to a different rhythm, not "what do I need to do" but rather "what do I *want* to do," and take the first step towards rebellion—or as Gatto would say, simply "grow[ing] up" (38).

There is no set of instructions to say what to do next, but that's the beauty of freedom; it always keeps you guessing. We'll come to find that the most certain thing about the world is its

uncertainty, but there's no need to be afraid. Breathe. If something breaks, you'll fix it. If something changes, you'll adapt to it. It's what we do best.

Eighteen, and this is me; fallen bridges, kingdom come. I can't tell you where my story ends and I don't know where I'm headed, but by god I'll dream loud and I'll run free; after all, no one else is going to do it for me.

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