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## **A Picture is Worth a Thousand Words, but it's Actually 2,703 Words**

“Why are you dissecting a french fry?” asks my friend, watching us break apart said poor french fry we took from Bubba Gump.

That’s a good question. Why *are* we dissecting a french fry? I honestly feel bad for the little thing; it did nothing wrong to us, but we’re putting it under a life-threatening operation of literally twisting its insides apart. This is a question that I simply can’t explain.

Another thing I can’t explain is the alternate universe that is my camera roll.

For example, I have absolutely stunning videos of the fireworks at Disney. Although the performance was shot from a shaky amateur hand with a light, cold drizzle distracting the focus, the fireworks still looked like a grand symphony of color, a galaxy of stars painting the large canvas of the night sky. Green explodes into the sky, simmering down to a cool red as it disintegrates. Gold bursts shimmer in the night as blue blooms into shooting stars. One firework sparkles spectacularly as it dies out (like a supernova!) and others form hearts as they burst.

For another, I like looking at chandeliers. Chandeliers are cool. Not only do they reflect light in a plethora of intricate, romantic colors, they also are ridiculously and unnecessarily gaudy, which is precisely why they are great. But yes, there’s something greater than that. Do you know what’s better than merely *looking* at chandeliers?

Well, that’s looking at chandeliers behind an also unnecessarily-gaudy red rope, surrounded with people pushing and shoving like helpless fish, that is! People pay *hundreds* to see and experience this particular phenomenon. Oh, and did I mention that we’re in Oman, and this bougie rope of absolute forbiddance is sheltering *the largest chandelier in the world* from our little fish flappers?

Not that I blame the rope. This chandelier doesn’t crown the room; it *is* the room. Light travels down the chandelier in a trail of magnificent gold. It then explodes into a fiery blossom of red and orange, and as the flames cool, the flower tapers off into seeds of green.

I think we get the idea. And yes, I did travel halfway across the world to see the world’s largest chandelier.

But this chandelier fiasco, Disney video, and french fry decapitation are all *years* old by now. Combined with staying home for over a year and a half, it feels like forever. And that forever just brings about how feelings change so much.

When I was filming those memories, all I thought about was how cold and inconvenient it was to watch the fireworks in the rain. How these fish people keep shoving into each other. How I didn’t finish my Bubba Gump dinner. How I lost my snow jacket in Chicago earlier that day.

I didn’t truly appreciate those moments then. But now, they’re everything to me. How just a small number of bytes could mean so much, I also can’t explain. But when I open the Photos app and scroll scroll scroll, I just let the videos do the explaining.

**You're aDOORable! Thanks, but the door is actually open.**

The lights are out. I snuggle in the bed, curling up on my side. Everything is quiet, save for my friends' shuffling near the beds.

I am close to sleep. It is going to be a long day tomorrow and we have to get up early. We are going to visit the Fountain of Youth (spoiler: the water tastes absolutely *disgusting*) and go atop that "big red tower". And of course, we always have to wake up early during field trips. Since I tend to wake up the earliest out of everyone, I'm getting up at 6 AM the earliest.

So, sleep is very important. Yes, very important. It's very late.

"I think the door is open."

My friend's voice brings me out of my stupor. "What?"

"The door is open."

I look at the corner of the hotel room and squint at the door. Only the light from the hallway illuminates the doorframe, and with my blurry eyesight I can barely see anything. It looks closed to me.

"I don't think we closed the door fully," my friend continues. "We should go check."

"I'm sure it's closed," another friend lulls sleepily. "You can go check if you want."

"What -- *you* go check."

"It was *your* idea."

The friend huffs. "Fine, I'll go check." She slowly gets out of the (really warm) bed and slipped on her slippers.

Then she pauses.

"Nah," she says after a moment. "We'll be fine."

Then she climbs back into bed and we sleep. It is going to be a long day tomorrow, after all. What's the worst that could happen, right?

This is one of the only times my attention to detail fades away. And, unfortunately, this is one of the only times it is useful.

It's the next day. As planned, I am the first one up, and I quickly get ready. We all down our hotel breakfast at 7 in the morning. As always, I get the usual: hash browns, cereal, eggs, and maybe some apple juice. By this time, we forgot about the door from last night. And as I'm writing this, I forget if we checked if it was actually open when we woke up.

We are in the middle of spooning our Fruit Loops when our teacher walks over to us. She asks to speak with us for a bit.

"Did you know that your hotel door was open all night?" she spoke calmly.

Us girls stand there. We blearily look at each other. Then we look back at the teacher. "Oh."

"A security guard wanted to tell you guys, but he didn't want to disturb your sleep. So he sat outside the room guarding the door all night," the teacher informed us.

A wave of guilt washed over all of us. We were all silent. That, and thankfulness. "Oh."

When the teacher leaves, we are all quiet.

Then my friend turns to us with a prideful look burning in her eyes. "I told you so."

— June 19-something -- July 5, 2018 —  
A lot of places in Europe

"Stop texting."

"Get off your phone!"

"Please put down your phone."

Those were the things I heard the most during this trip.

"Can you please take some actual photos so that when you look back to today you can see something from Russia?" my dad tells me. We were in line to get back into the cruise ship. I was, as any other eleven-year-old who just got a phone would do, on my phone.

"Sure," I say. I go to the Camera app and quickly snap a picture of a pizza sign.

"That's it?" my dad asks. He watches as I admire my picture like it's the next Mona Lisa.

"Don't worry," I respond. I look up at him and brandish my phone like a trophy. "I took *two*."

The thing is, he was right. I should've taken some actual photos. Now when I scroll back up to 2018, all I see are some k-pop memes, game screenshots, and saved artwork of fantasy characters (I still like k-pop, games, and fantasy characters).

When I *do* come across an "actual" picture of Europe, it's the most random thing you can find. For example, an exit door of a bus. A helicopter pad. A bookmark that says "Come to Jesus".

But Europe was *beautiful*.

The air was crisp and cool against our skin as we walked the old streets of Norway. Even high up from the mountains. Rainbow Pride flags flew proudly in the air from every street corner we went to. One day, we visited a cathedral and heard the most ethereal organ-playing in our lives. Almost every restaurant in every street had the World Cup on their TVs, with crowds of people cheering and shouting at every kick, pass, and score. We went to the prettiest restaurant ever in the most romantic landscape ever -- flowers were everywhere, and it was like the world was dyed pink. The Big Red Bus was our best friend.

Too bad most of the time I was stressed out on (*virtual*) clothing.

Over twenty percent of my life has passed since then. And those small moments are still ingrained in my mind. I dearly wish to go back to a simpler time. When all I had to worry about was taking pictures for Future Me. Now, Future Me is Present Me, and I am worrying about competitions and Harvest Drive and my chemistry grade and my community service.

I still look back at those times. Back then, sometimes I was texting so much on my phone that I didn't even look up from my screen to see some of the most historical and beautiful buildings in the world. I was stressing so much over my dress-up game that I didn't get to enjoy Russia, Sweden, and Norway to the fullest. In fact, I was looking for an internet connection on the cruise ship instead of enjoying offline, cruise-ship things.

— November 28, 2019 —

## The Golden Age of my life (so far)

We're in the middle of nowhere.

Actually, that's a lie.

We're in the middle of a tent.

It's almost dark. The air is quite humid, as Florida always is, but the night cooled the normal inside-of-an-oven temperature. A Nintendo Switch is propped up against a bunch of books and *I'm Still Standing* is blaring out its speakers. Sherie, Sonia, Devon, Tom, Eddie, and others are squished near the sides. Devon is adjusting the flashlight to illuminate the entire tent. Then, there's us.

A stage is set.

I'm gripping the red controller. Wei is gripping the blue controller.

Not that it makes a difference, I would win either way. No one beats me at a Just Dance dance-off. And anyways, it would be very embarrassing for me, an avid ex-dancer that still likes to dance, to lose to someone with no dancing experience.

Eddie is recording, watching Wei flail his arms around like a fish.

"WEI! YOU. ARE NOT. EXPRESSING," Eddie scathes from behind the camera, pointing the phone at Wei. Wei is only moving his arms, like what a Just Dance normie would do.

"Come on, now dance!!" Sherie yells from the side.

And dance we do. I almost whack Wei in the head around twenty times during this time. Wei repeatedly screams. I feel bad for the fellow campers trying to sleep near our tent.

But who could blame us? We were in seventh grade for three months already, and we needed a *long* break. We also were going ziplining and exploring in St. Petersburg the next day, and to an amusement park the next week, and we felt that rollercoaster adrenaline already.

"You guys have been dancing for two minutes," Eddie announces after a bit. "I've seen you guys on tape for two minutes!"

"I'm gonna win," Wei says naively.

"I can't wait to rewatch this," Eddie raves in his then-high-pitched girly voice. Then he gasps dramatically. "I'm gonna put this on my status!"

Wei's confident facade instantly shatters. He stares panickedly at the camera while jiggling his arms. "STOP! NO! NO, EDDIE!"

*"I GET TO PUT THIS ON MY STATUUUUS!?"*

I don't mind. All it'll do is show me winning this game.

"I'm doing this for my reputation," Wei states stonily while sillily moving his arm diagonally.

*"I'm gonna put this on my statuuuuus!"* Eddie yells anyway.

The song ends, and the results are in.

"*Did I win, did I win?*" Mr. Naive Person pushes. He crouches down to the tiny little Nintendo Switch with me

right in tow.

I'm sure everyone in the camping area could hear Wei screaming with his loss.

But I didn't know that these moments would turn out to be one of my brightest. We still tease Wei about his dancing. And Eddie, now with a much deeper voice, winces whenever he hears his old chipmunk squeak.

This, a random, unimportant scenario, is one that I actually learned to appreciate. I lost my glasses that night, and I didn't find out about it until I got back. I remember spending time frantically worrying about where it had gone. But, in my head, I thought that it was worth it. The dance-offs we all had are among my favorite memories of seventh grade. I still open my Nintendo Switch to play Just Dance, and I can't help but be reminded of those times when we all danced the night away. I'm so glad we actually took videos, so Future Me can look at them.

And so Future Me can have some blackmail for Eddie's voice.

--- Jan 1 - Jan 7, 2020 ---  
**It honestly didn't feel like 2020**

I remember, back on that cruise ship, at exactly 12:00 A.M., January 1, 2020, feeling absolute *relief*.

Fireworks erupted above the flashing Burj Khalifa and all around Dubai as we watched from the top of the deck, some ways from the shore. The sky was glittering with ounces of hope and a new era -- it was a new decade, after all.

I remember thinking *it's finally over*. I never really felt anything like it before, but I legitimately felt my chest get lighter. I felt relief coursing through my veins like it was the first time I've ever felt relief.

Of course, we all know how 2020 went. Oh, how the tables turned. Now *I'm* Ms. Naive Person.

I didn't know anything then. So all I had in mind was to party!

And we did.

We went desert-riding in a large car. We rode on a camel (for thirty seconds, but we don't talk about that). We went shopping in the largest mall in the world (there was a large gold section of the mall and I felt like royalty for a millisecond). We went to the gold market in Oman. We (well, I) ate all the ice cream in the world. I got a keratin treatment. We rode the world's fastest roller coaster and the roller coaster with the highest loop. We had dinner in the "most luxurious hotel in the world".

And I'm glad we did that.

Because two months later, everything would be shut down. When will I go on a cruise ship again? Will I ever ride the world's fastest roller coaster again? Will we ever go back to the times we weren't worried about getting infected?

I don't know.

And that's scary. Just because I'm two years older doesn't mean I don't want to eat every ice cream in the middle of the ocean.

--- October 25, 2021 ---  
**Hello, I'm in high school now**

Every weekday, I don a black N95 mask and hitch my backpack higher up on my shoulders. The same backpack I used in seventh grade. Today, there's no Disney fireworks to see. Today, there's no hotel door to close, no French fries to dissect, no cruise ships to board.

However, *yesteryear* there were. And I was lucky enough to be able to experience those moments. The videos and photos in my camera roll are all proof of it.

But when I was actually *there*, recording everything with my phone, I didn't think I was lucky. In fact, sometimes I felt stressed because negative things kept bothering me. I didn't realize that I might never be able to experience something like that again. Those times were actually happy times, golden times that lodge stronger in my heart every passing day.

Today, we can't really go anywhere. Today, there's piles of homework and competitions and tests and sports and service hours and everything you could think of.

But --

"Bestie?"

I look up.

My friends, all masked up, look at me with smiles in their eyes. They seem expectant. I'm with people now. The classroom has never felt livelier. There's the purple air diffuser in the corner. There's the fake slice of cake on the teacher's desk. There's the annoying bell that I've (unfortunately) grown to miss.

Today, life is not so bad. And I don't have to dissect a french fry to realize that.