

Poetic Justice Comes To Those Who Wait

Every now and then I am reminded of what it was like to be a child, and I am so happy to be grown up. Because I worried constantly when I was little, I believed adulthood would also be a pageant of unremitting anguish, with the added stress of a credit card, which (as I understood it) both was and was not money, which both was and was not mine. And there were grave concerns as well: the thought of leaving my parents' home horrified me. How would I find the store or know how to cook? In choosing Hunt's ketchup or Heinz, did I simply buy what my mother bought, or was there some scientific method I'd yet to be taught that would objectify these and other important decisions?

As I grew older, some fears morphed into other fears while others fell away. Terror over the prospect of leaving my parents' home became fear that I could not leave soon enough. I channeled my anxiety about cooking into becoming an expert Toll House cookie chef. Bolstered by this courageous turn in the kitchen, I made the decision that, when the time came, I'd put Hunt's ketchup on my list rather than Heinz (presumably because it was easier to spell). Turns out there was no scientific method to making these domestic decisions. It was nothing other than the march of time and my own growing sense of self that caused me to develop a skill, or lean into one option over another.

What started this latest reverie about the joys of being an adult was my happening across an article about a certain literature conference in a certain Michigan magazine's unapologetic celebration of itself. As I was reading about what is this planet's most revered and mind-altering literary conference set in the planet's most pristine, most awe-inspiring woods, I started to smell a rat.

And not the innocent kind of rat either, like the one that appeared in my laundry room last winter in search of food. What I smelled was the narcissistic, conniving kind of rat, who says he's there for one thing but who is really there for another. In this case, the rat was an overhyped marketer in the body of a conference leader whose primary intention, it seemed, was to make readers feel that if they did not get themselves to those woods pronto with a laptop and the last five revisions of a book-in-progress, then they might as well cease to exist.

Because this is a conference where people aren't writers, they are "literati." They clamor (presumably for the sake of their art) to sleep miserably in unheated barracks. They beg to have their imaginations not just "nourished," but "colonized" (something which sounded vaguely dictatorial to me). At what I thought was the article's climax, a writer (but not just any writer—a blind, naked writer!) was reported to have jumped into a lake for a swim. As if that weren't proof enough of creative inspiration, there was the evening a poet dropped dead at a podium while reading. While the other writers present were shocked and saddened (the author of the article did not mention horrified or shaken to their core), there was reportedly widespread agreement that the deceased poet would feel nothing but "satisfaction" that her life had ended mid-stanza in those remote woods.

It was perhaps here that my reverie about how happy I am to be an adult kicked in. At the moment it occurred to me that I was being fed a four-page package of overblown bull, I remembered my father's advice not believe everything I read. It occurred to me that more decisions than I could ever have imagined as a child were mine to make as an adult, and that this was not a scary thing, but an incredibly freeing one. I did not have to be envious of the "literati" in the mind-altering northeastern wilderness. I did not have to buy into the suggestion that my life is for naught outside the presence of insomnia and grave bodily risk and heart problems, regardless of how poetic it all seems on paper.

Because in the real world where I actually live, people (self included) don't have to do dire things for me to feel creative or satisfied or inspired. Here in grown-up land, I am happy to report that inspiration comes not from calamity and drama, but from their opposite. It's a realization I owe in part to the article. Which seems like poetic justice to me.