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THE ROOT OF APATHY

Alfred Johnson

I used to hate myself. I hated my name, because it was the same as my father’s. I hated my height, it was stagnant and I always felt like more of a joke than a person. I hated my house and everything that lived in it, mainly because I was the only guy and after all of the “Alfred hate” (my father, of course) I found myself feeling even more misplaced than I would at school. I spent the first 7 years of my life in Hessville, a town on the “good side” of Hammond, Indiana. When I was there I was the happiest I think I’m emotionally capable of being. I was also extremely stable at the time. My family was poor, but we made things work. We’d eat canned tuna, pork and beans with crackers, or Ramen noodles every day, but we’d enjoy it regardless because we were able to eat together. My mother and father would take turns walking all four of us to school and sometimes we’d all just walk together as a family. We all did well in school and rarely argued or went days without talking to each other. Our situation was fine until our dad gambled with the bank (real life) and we ended up losing our Hammond house after filing bankruptcy. My dad always had money, and within a week before we were supposed to leave, he had already moved us to a house in Gary (which to me felt like a third world country). That’s where the emotional and mental decline began.

About a year before my dad left he took me with him to the Cadillac dealer. As a way of spiting my mother, who had been driving a Dodge Caravan 1998 since before I was capable of counting, went and bought a Cadillac XLR 2006. As awesome as an achievement as that is, it was a slap in the face to my mother, and it turned out to be a slap in the face to my three sisters and I as well. Having the dad with the cool sports car is an extreme status booster in grade school. However, the car was a two seater and all of us went to four different schools, so nobody cared about me, still. Also, instead of trying to stuff us all into the one passenger seat, he would drive along side us and watch us as we walked to school (yes, this actually happened on several occasions). When there was one of us left (Paris usually, because she was the farthest, but on rare occasions it would be me if she had gotten sick) he’d then drive them to school. This continued for about a year and a half. After
months of intense arguing, he left and moved to Las Vegas. It was as
relieving as it was heartbreaking when he left, but I was numb to it all and my
mom and sisters anticipated it. Shortly after, my mom held a family meeting
in our worn out kitchen and told us, “I found us a better house in Valpo. We
might all have to pitch in a little and do some yard work here and there, but
it’s going to be much better than this.” Immediately when she said, “yard
work” I thought of a cotton field. I was opposed. Surprisingly my sisters, who
had fought almost every week cried upon hearing this news. Valparaiso is a
much better area geographically than Gary, which has a better education
system, and an array of opportunities to occupy you that don’t involve getting
punched in the face. To each his or her own, I guess. Unfortunately for my
mom, that fell through and we ended up living in a townhouse on the south
side of Hammond (which they ironically call East Hammond or East Haiti for
some strange reason, but that’s another story). After my final day attending
Ernie Pyle Middle School (really just 5th and 6th grades) I walked home alone
and met my sisters outside. They were deeply sobbing. All of our remaining
items that we left in the house the day before were thrown out on the front
lawn, broken, chipped, or completely destroyed. I didn’t notice I was stepping
in a pile of broken eggs when I ran up to comfort my sisters, until they told
me I had ruined my last pair of decent looking shoes. Later that night we
followed the U Haul truck to our new residence.

I always wore bigger clothes because my dad convinced me that I would
eventually grow into them. This made me feel like even more of a joke. A big
head, accompanied by a distinct voice, generally long shoes, and weight-
watchers success level space in my clothes wasn’t a very welcoming look as an
adolescent. Along with all of that, I was extremely skinny because I was an
extremely picky eater, and I felt as if I was too good for canned tuna and
 Crackers (I still do, by the way). In middle school I was about average height.
That didn’t last very long. Teenagers grow like unibrow hair and by the time it
was the third week of seventh grade I was still 5'2 and most of my friends
were around 5'7 to 5'10. Physically and socially I was left far behind and it
offered even more ammunition to the burning fire of hatred I had for myself
and my family, due to the genes passed on.

By the time I got to high school I could no longer stand seeing the
same people I'd be seeing since 5th grade. I was officially a peon to them and
myself. Although I had exceptional grades at Hammond High and a better
educational experience in contrast to Eggers Middle School, I knew that I
couldn’t continue to go there if I wanted to retain the small ounce of sanity
that I had left. Usually being the butt of all jokes, you’re not often subject to
disciplinary action, but the one time I did get detention was the straw that
broke the camel’s back. On December 11th, 2013 I reached my breaking
point at Hammond High. Every week of my birthday is my official “cheat
Like a cheat day in dieting, I legitimately give up on all of my morals. I get easily irritated when people try to treat me in a different manner than they normally would when the setting changes. Regardless of who you are, if you display a character change towards me just because you're around different people, I will not take it lightly. A day before my birthday, a girl that I was always nice to because she was often made fun of because of her appearance (they said she looked like a young Josh Peck and the Michelin Man) had the audacity to put her purse in my assigned seat. I went over to sit down, and slowly reached down to remove her purse from my seat and she forcefully smacked my hand away. It was one of those loud smacks where everybody turns around and looks at you. One of the students said something like, “damn, she just smacked the shit out of you dude.” And yes, she actually did smack me to the state of teary eyes. That girl was strong. After she slapped my hand I almost instinctively jumped at her and shouted, “what the fuck!” loud enough to shake the substitute teacher out of her seat and to turn the girl’s face as red as Bob the tomato. I proceeded to death stare her as I threw her purse out of my seat. Before I could sit down she put her hand in my chair and told me to go sit somewhere else because she and her friend were holding a confidential conversation. I quickly barked back, “I don’t care about your friend and your conversation. Get your hand out of my chair before I spit on it.”

Of course, I could've told the substitute that she was holding my chair hostage, or I could've actually sat somewhere else being that the substitute didn’t even take attendance and that I didn’t even want to sit there. I could’ve been the bigger person, but I had been the bigger person for the whole year and every year before. Out of all the people that I refused to be disrespected by, I refused to be disrespected by her the most. She didn’t move her hand, but her face got even redder as her friend encouraged her to do so. I counted backwards from three. I’m not a violent person, but I am extremely witty. I tell really insensitive “jokes” when I’m bothered, and seeing that I didn’t really have much to lose in the moment since I thought the substitute already called the security guard on me. After getting to one, she moved her hand, but it irritated me that it took her that long to move it, so I hurled out minutes worth of insults about her appearance, voice, mannerisms, and family for the remainder of the period. She began crying profusely, but I didn’t care. After I ended up in the office and explained my side of the story, the counselor let me off with a warning, but didn’t even see the girl who bullied me! I was enraged. Looking back on it now, it was a miniscule reason, but it was still big enough to prompt me to change schools. Conveniently, the Hammond Academy for Performing Arts (Morton High School) sent me a letter that I received on the same day as this incident. I didn’t think twice before I accepted the invitation. I was happy to finally escape the customs of “East Hammond” and be school back where I was the happiest.
Everything was coming together. My dad came back home. My oldest sister moved out and became a manager at Jimmy Jazz so she’d always send me new clothes and shoes when I’d bring back a decent report card. My other sisters were happy and I finally partially of wanted to live. At my new school I was instantly popular at my school for everything I got made fun of at my old school. I found that strange being that I was just half a city away from where I attended school before. It was much easier to find friends at Morton because everybody was strange but extremely open to new things. To them, I was the coolest because I came from an area that none of them had ever actually spent a day in, (the bad part of the city) although it was in the same city. The curriculum was much easier to digest at my new school and everything seemed a lot simpler. My girl best friend at the time was strangely infatuated with this “social media famous” local girl. She was a small framed Mexican girl with curly black dense hair, hazelnut coffee creamer colored skin, pearly teeth that were almost perfect (the two front teeth on the bottom were kind of like a peace sign but her other attributes made up for it), and a singing voice was truly amazing. Her regular voice was a little raspy like Mariah Carey. I had better and I didn’t really understand the hype around her, but it’s always cool to have someone that nobody else can get. I was edgy at the time.

I approached her the next day after school ended while I was walking with Yazmine (the infatuated one) and I honestly was too lazy to make an actual effort to flirt with her so I was just like, “Hey, I’m Alfred and my friend stalks you on Instagram. What’s up?” Immediately Yazmine smacked me into the fifth dimension. I wanted to kill her but I was on a mission. Karina instantly busted out in laughter. Struggling to hold a straight face, she asked, “Why’d you just smack him like that? You seem guilty.” After hearing Yazmine stumble to arrive at an explanation, she looked back at me and asked, “Aren’t you Alfred from Facebook?” I was in. After that we exchanged numbers and we’d meet at each other’s lockers after each class. Sometimes we’d ditch our last class of the day, which was later than everyone else’s because we were in a performing arts program, and hang out in the gazebo outside of our school’s dining hall. One day I ditched basketball practice to hang out with her at her house and surprisingly, she lived on the same street as I grew up on, about 7 houses down. I was ecstatic. Everything was perfect, and although this might seem like a long time, this was only going on for about 2-3 weeks but it meant a lot to me.

The next week I asked her to go see a play with me and before I could finish my sentence she said yes. I asked for 30 dollars from each of my parents on separate occasions in advance for the night. They both said yes. We met up at the theater to watch the incredibly boring Guare Fest play. I couldn’t stand it by the time we got to the half so we left the play during intermission. She lived three blocks south of the school. Instead of hanging
out at her house or going out to eat, she opted to go to Phromer Park. Phromer Park was known for various crimes, such as robberies, rapes, drug deals, and various shootings (seriously, and this was the good part of the city). What lead me to walk to a pitch-black Phromer Park with terrible phone service and 60 dollars in my pocket? Even at that time I recognized that it was an incredibly witless idea, but when you hate yourself there’s really not much to lose anyways. Retracting my joke from earlier, I told the both of them, “If anything happens to come at us, I’m going to be the first one gone.” They both broke out in laughter, which prompted me to do the same, but in all actuality, I was as serious as college debt when I said that.

When we arrived at the park, she ran to the swing, Ahmad chased after her, and I scoped the area, as I always do, and then proceeded to walk their way. After a couple minutes of swinging and introspective conversation, I told Ahmad and Karina that it looked like three people were behind them. Karina jokingly said, “If they come closer I’ll just burn them with my lighter,” as she pulled out a Steampunk Skull Crossbones Lighter from her sparkling white and brown purse. I guess that topped things off, as the three tall and darkly dressed, intimidating figures busted from behind the bushes and pulled their arms on us. My only hope at the time was that their lives were flashing before their eyes so they couldn’t see me flash my way out of the park. Unlike most teens, I was infatuated but I wasn’t dumb. All three of us didn’t have to die if it came down to it. Before I could realize it, I was at the end of the gate of the park and I was looking at Ahmad, with a gun to his head, and Karina, with a gun to her chest. Surprisingly, I was calm about the whole situation. As one of the three-armed robbers yelled, “Get his little ass, too!” I was jogging blocks away in zigzags while dialing 9-1-1. After being disconnected several times due to horrible phone service, I accelerated for three blocks and ran back into the door of the school. The Gualre Fest play was still going on and the hallways were clear. I then, legitimately snatched the phone from a “little person,” hung up on whomever she was speaking with, and called the police off of her phone, while holding her head down as she tried to reach for it back. I’m not too proud of that. What made matters even worse was that when the phone was answered, they hung up because, according to the dispatcher, the police shouldn’t be called “jokingly.” Out of all the times to be taken as a joke, that was the worst. I quickly called back, still fighting back a furious and strong, grown “little person.” After the dispatcher answered I flooded her line with what seemed like a filibuster and I could sense the regret in her voice for hanging up on me the last time I called. I can vividly remember her saying, “Sorry, sorry, sorry. I’ll send a car to Morton as soon as possible.”

Minutes later I was in the back of the police car riding back to Maryland Avenue. Nostalgia and an unsettling feeling of failure rested on my shoulders. When we pulled past my old house on Maryland I began to refocus
and think about what I would tell my parents, or even her parents. Before I could conjure up an idea, I looked up and I saw that they were both at Karina’s house. When we arrived they told the officer that they had been robbed of all their valuables. Sitting on the porch, Karina was sitting by her family drowning in tears. As much as I wanted to fake cry and act like I felt bad for them, I didn’t. I actually thought about how ugly Karina looked as she cried. Rather than feeling sad, I began to become annoyed with myself. Out of all the times I hated myself, I hated myself the most then. Yes, my potential first date ended in a robbery, but at least it wasn’t a murder. On the bright side, I had finally made a decision that I had been on the fence for the whole of my first and half of my second trimesters of my sophomore year in high school; I was a track star. I had to have broken some type of record that night. However, when I returned home I wasn’t greeted like a champion.

“You out here running in the streets? Go run to them dishes,” I can vaguely remember my dad commanding. Instead of being sympathetic or concerned I felt irritation in his voice. My mom, who is usually very comforting at times, looked away almost instantly when I looked toward her hoping for kind words. I returned home just to be alienated again. I spent the night at my house wondering if I should’ve actually even run. After half washing the dishes, I went straight up to the room I shared with my two remaining sisters. I stayed up the whole night thinking about the alternate possibilities that would have occurred at the park if I would’ve stayed, or if they would’ve ran instead of me. More importantly, I wondered if my sisters felt the same emptiness I felt. I wondered if my dad had been living with it his whole life, doing outrageous things to compensate or fill in what he always felt was missing. Was my feeling a consequence of what he felt, or was it genetic? I thought about his word choice when my parents argued. I thought about my sister’s cuts. The more I thought about it the more I felt like my problem wasn’t even my problem. I no longer felt accountable for my lack of concern. However, I did realize that if I continued down the path I was going I would end up like my father.

Consequently, I realized that I had three options; I could continue to live and hate living, I could die, or I could turn things around and take control of my life. I know my life is no fairytale, but I also know that the farther you pull an arrow back the further it goes when it’s released. I chose that night moment to be my moment of release. After being through the worst possible situations in my life it was almost natural for me to shrug them off. The only way I had to go was up. All of these moments cumulatively helped me to realize my life was under my control and if I didn’t work toward change it wouldn’t happen.