Sink or Swim

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I've watched many people walk by me throughout the years. I've seen them at their worst, and at their best. I've followed them as they'd race by to get to class or go for a casual stroll to admire the scenery along the sidewalk. I've observed them as they all grow into intelligent young adults. Knowing this, one can infer what my favorite time of the year would be. Each year as fall rolls around, and a new school of students comes swimming in, I pick one to keep a special eye on. They always appear to be the same as all the other freshman at first, just going along with the current. However, this one stuck out, catching my attention.

My view of her is very limited. She walks by between 5 to 10 times a day giving me only a few seconds to observe her. But within these few seconds a few times a day, I can discover more about her than most can by spending the whole day with her. What gives me the advantage is the fact that she knows I exist as a wooden object to rest herself or her books upon, but she doesn't know that I am actually here. I have the opportunity to see her in her individual and raw state. Without any façades, without any outside influences, and that's my favorite form of her.

The first day she came into my view was at 9 am on the first Wednesday of classes. I could tell she was trying to fight the typical "freshman's first day" stereotype. She was trying her hardest to flow with the rest of the sea of students. She even had her most college-y outfit on, a maroon sundress paired with suede, beige booties that clicked when they hit the sidewalk with the iconic sound of maturity. But I could also tell that there was a deeper conflict preventing her from fully blending in. I know now that she's a very stubborn and independent person, which is the hardest thing to be on a college campus. Conformity is all around her. At times she doesn't even know she's conforming, and neither do others until it's too late. They've lost sight of who they really are. Her conformity started small. As I gazed at her on her way to class, I observed as she looked around and noticed everyone on their phones. Subconsciously and without reason, she too begins to thumb aimlessly through her various social media accounts. After sufficiently scanning anything from Instagram to Facebook, she still has a minute left to go in her walk to class but nothing left to distract herself with. This is when I see the realization wash over her. She realizes that even though this small act of conformity didn't have any real impact on her life, it could easily send her down a slippery slope of mass conformity. However, even with this realization, she struggles to find herself in this new lifestyle.
Over the next couple of days I watch as she lets the current drag her past my same bolted down spot. Her book bag weighing her down more and more every day. Slowly she begins to slip into a geriatric stature. The bags under her eyes getting darker with every hour of sleep missed. She quickly trades in her first day outfit for cotton sweatpants and a comfy, worn-down t-shirt. This is what I like to call the drop off. I see it in every freshman. It's the moment when they've reached their maximum tolerance of stress and workload. This is when they have to decide for themselves whether they'll sink or swim. Sinking is easy. Sinking is quick. It could seem like the best option to someone in such a sleep deprived, overloaded state. On the other hand, swimming is a lot harder. Swimming takes dedication. Swimming takes endurance. Swim is what she did...kind of.

These next weeks were my favorite weeks to observe. I got to witness her horrible, beautiful struggle on her swim back up for air. Each day brought on a new obstacle. You might be asking yourself, "Now, you said you only saw her for a few fleeting seconds every day. How could you possibly know what obstacles she was facing in those few seconds?" It's quite easy with this one. You simply look at the way her eyes and mouth are turned and what she's holding in her hands. However, you can't find her struggles if she's talking to someone. I have watched as her whole body language changes in a fraction of a second if someone addresses her. Whether she knows them or not, whether it's just to say "Hey" or to actually have a conversation with her, she immediately puts up a façade. Now, that's not to say that she's pretending to be something she's not. No, she's pretending to be a part of her that she isn't right now. She's putting on a happy face, as some might call it. Whether she does this to not worry others, or if she's trying to trick herself into being that happier side of herself, is still up for debate. But soon after that distraction moves on, I can witness this façade slowly fade out and her struggles creep back in.

The first struggle I noticed concerned genetics. Not her genetics specifically, please I'm just a bench not a psychic geneticist. I'm referring to her genetics class; BI 210 with Professor Grant. Very quickly, she realized that this class was going to be a lot harder than she thought. The first days or even week of classes are usually review days. Days that should help you get a smooth transition from dipping your toe into the water to completely submerging yourself. I could tell, that very first day, that her journey was more of a forced cannon ball. You know, the kind of cannon ball where that one uncle, who's more of a kid than you are, picks you up and throws you
into the pool without so much as a warning or an ask of permission. You could see this in her eyes and her mouth, like I said. Her eyes were opened slightly wider than they were on the way to class, and they gave off an almost shocked, glazed over look. Her mouth hung a little lower than before, almost as if the corners of her lips were being pushed down ever so slightly by her fingers. She floated past me and down the sidewalk, just rolling through the motions almost hypnotized by the daunting amount of material unknown.

The next day I scanned impatiently for her, breathlessly waiting to see whether she’d return triumphant or defeated, as so many were. Finally I see her, and I settle comfortably into my wooden frame, as I can spot from a mile away a confident stride in her walk. She hugs a book boldly labeled *GENETICS* down its spine tightly against her peach polyester blouse. Her posture says she has now become the master of this obstacle. Nothing can stand in her way. Then I watch the walk back after class. Once again, she’s deflated. Any confidence she had has been drowned in the vast unknowing that is genetics. The book hangs precariously from one hand down by her side, almost as if she’d be perfectly okay with letting it slip through her fingers and never picking it up again. I gazed as she shuffled down the sidewalk back to her dorm, her safe haven. The next day, I once again am left wondering when she will pass by. However, this time I don't know what to expect. Will she return triumphant once more? Will she return equally as discouraged as yesterday? Will she return at all? This is her sink or swim moment. I peer down the path to her dorm, and I see her once again on her daily trek. However, she's neither of the things I thought she'd be. She's neutral. She has an average expression on her face to match the average look to her stride to match the average faded grey and black tones in her cotton t-shirt and leggings. She has decided to half swim. But you see, the thing about half swimming is that it's very difficult to keep up. The one arm and one leg doing all the work will eventually get tired. And the other half of you, having already checked out on the whole experience will not step in to help, leaving you to sink. So even though this method seems to be keeping her sufficiently afloat for now, it will soon leave her to sink. She knows that. She just needs time to learn how to swim.

Her body image was her next struggle. I find it very common among freshman females especially. In her case, she came in to college from a very active high school experience. These first couple weeks or so, she wore whatever she wanted with confidence in her fit physique. I noticed the switch in these last few weeks. Her clothes changed from anything to strictly baggy. If she were to wear a clingy blouse, I would watch as she lightly tugged at it, pulling it away from her body so as not to form to her curves and rolls. I would see her peer from left to right, suddenly becoming aware of everyone else's body type compared to her own. Unfortunately, this is another sink or swim situation. She knows it too. She could either choose to make a change
so that she's comfortable with how she looks, or continue down the path
she's on accompanied by lack of self-confidence and self-esteem. Once again,
she decides to half swim. I observe as she carries a salad with her for lunch,
and leaves Starbucks with only fruit cups in her hands instead of her usual
Venti White Chocolate sugar laden Mocha. She knows that this won't be
enough. She knows that this is only half of the problem. She knows she has
to exercise like she did in high school. She knows she has no more room to
sink. She just needs time to learn how to swim.

As the days add on like miles walked, she is worn in to a daily groove.
Now she only shuffles past me, lacking any energy. She clings to her books as
if they're the difference between life and death. Are they? I see her
contemplating which will be more important today, her schoolwork or her
health. Her schoolwork seems to win over as her hair is left tangled and the
imprints from her nap, instead of a night's sleep, are still left on her face. It's
funny how to be successful in the future she jeopardizes even having a future.
She sees the irony, it shows in her eyes. They seem to laugh with exhaustion,
cry with fear, and smile with promise. She finds each day to be a new struggle,
a new battle, a new obstacle. Some days, she crumples under new tasks.
Others, she rises above. But each day she's faced with the question; should I
sink or swim?