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I have always been a bit of a munchkin.

Younger versions of me were shuttled to the end of the height-ordered line for school performances, seated on the floor for every single class picture (ever), and brought to concerts that seemed more like listening to the radio. They were limited by “You Must Be This Tall To Ride” signs, became begrudged armrests, and asked too many times if they were a “legal midget,” whatever that means.

These selves waited patiently for a growth spurt that never came. Eventually, I quit waiting. I still struggle with trying to flag down the bartender, being an authoritative presence around children because I’m “not tall enough to be in my twenties,” and generally living in a world designed for people quite a bit bigger than me. But fret not, reader: I have made peace with my reality.

Throughout each of these experiences and then some, I have always been me. When I was spoken to, the audience was me. When I was looked at (usually from above), the looker gazed toward me. Everything I perceive and do is through this exact me. I am inclined to believe my particular brand of me-ness skews how I am received by others.

Peaking at a proud five feet, I can’t help but think that being me probably also had a profound impact on my experience on this planet.

I have grown up in a world where looking and acting young/fragile/otherwise ~feminine~ is an appropriate presentation for those who are genetically female. A “good girl” is quiet, polite, modest, obedient, and non-confrontational.¹ The overlapped expectations for little girls and adult women are minimizing to say the least.

I keep noticing that society has this weird obsession with women who act like little girls (like Taylor Swift) and little girls who act like women (like Shirley Temple). People seem to dig it when female humans are cute/attractive/bubbly/whatever, but not outspoken.

For reasons that cannot be exhumed, I took this to heart very early on. This was evidenced by my consistent choice of the blonde, blue-eyed, infantilized archetype during playtime in kindergarten (Bubbles of the Powerpuff Girls, Baby Spice, and Britney Spears to name a few). All of the messages I'd received about humans like me said that I cannot and should not be taken seriously. So I began to embody that.

The idea that ladies are to be seen and not heard is not a recent development. As it so happens, misogynists have been dismissing the potential of women everywhere for millennia.

Aristotle told the ancient Greeks that, because of their biological nature, women are less capable and intelligent than men. According to this popular scientist and philosopher, women instead channel their inferior efforts into being emotional and reproducing. He also told scholars that the physical demand of producing semen is so exhausting that only men can actually do it, and that a failure to muster enough strength results in menstrual blood.² Later in the AD years, misogyny crept its way into the hearts of other prominent thinkers. Rocking the nickname "the father of Latin Christianity" since last century,³ Tertullian sprinkled this pleasantries on the world:

"In pain shall you bring forth children, woman, and you shall turn to your husband and he shall rule over you. And do you not know that you are Eve? God's sentence hangs still over all your sex and His punishment weighs down upon you. You are the devil's gateway; you are she who first violated the forbidden tree and broke the law of God. It was you who coaxed your way around him whom the devil had not the force to attack. With what ease you shattered that image of God: Man! Because of the death you merited, even the Son of God had to die... Woman, you are the gate to hell."^{4 5 6}

Homeboy was the author of many widely distributed publications, which, back in the Roman era, was kind of a big deal. Lady-hate was always really popular with the forefathers of Christianity, so when Martin Luther initiated the Protestant Reformation,⁷ places influenced by Anglo-Saxon culture (AKA America) were pretty unoffended by normalized misogyny.

As per the example of his predecessors, Luther endorsed gender roles. He married his wife not because he had any incentives to be with her but because she (as a woman) needed a husband, and no one else was available to take on the burden.⁸ What a pal, right? Luther's complaints about the theocracy preempted alternative forms of Christianity in Western Society. His emphasis on the family unit made his teachings particularly warm and fuzzy for early Americans.⁹ And with that, the fates of my American sisters and me were sealed.

Not that these things were outrageously offensive given their context. But we don't seem to be able to fully shake the tendency to pigeonhole women into smallness.

I would love to tell you, dear reader, that this normalized sexism can be left behind in the age of powdered wigs and petticoats; alas, my female peers in science are still enduring crap from peer reviewers,¹⁰ Wikipedia editors,¹¹ and Tim Hunt and his apologizers.¹²

So how exactly does all this affect Jess?

My smallness and femaleness, lending themselves to subordinacy, invited many instances of enforced power dynamics (most of which I received the fuzzy end of the lollipop of). Like the female audiences of Christianity, I, too, have been told point-blank that I am too emotional, unintelligent, and/or childish for my ideas to be significant. I have also been the recipient of more passive sexism.

I have been picked up and thrown around sans warning or consent.

I have been dismissed through shifting of a conversation to be occurring literally above my headspace (how's *that* for being talked over?).

People have more often than not been surprised to learn that I study neuroscience (or that I'm intelligent at all).

I was spoken over – a *lot*.

A young me maintained faith in herself. An unfortunate portion of my interactions suggested I was not worthy of power, influence, or knowledge. *But that can't be right... right?*

Having a generally more difficult time being heard than my peers, I turned inward to the space between my own ears. I funneled energy into the things I was good at (of which there were many), and thoroughly enjoyed the moments of validation.

But I was still me. I was still talked down to, both literally and figuratively. I became resentful of constantly feeling invalidated but never actually feeling invalid.

But why, unlike too many of my F-word (feminism, duh) rejecting cohort, do I allude to this resentment? Betty Freidan, a lone psychologist among housewives, also saw resentment in her stifled female peers. In 1963, she was the first to write of an unspoken trend in suburban women who were expected to glory in their femininity (their destiny to breastfeed, buy groceries, and keep their husbands happy) and “pity the neurotic, unfeminine, unhappy women who wanted to be poets or physicists or presidents.” That unprofessed question (“*Is this all?*”) provokes a hushed anxiety familiar to anyone who has ever sought change. It caught fire among women who rejected the role of the pretty fool.^{13 14} I arrived at the dusk of a long era of irked women. They were once directly discouraged from empowerment, and a deliberate effort has been put into encouraging girls of my generation that we can do anything that boys can do. But some still have a residual apprehension when watching us try.

My sister, eight years my senior, planted the seeds of feminism in me as soon as they had sprouted in herself. In embracing girl power, the lightbulb went off: *It's not me, it's them! I AM valid, and my smallness does NOT disqualify me from being important!*

The wise Mr. Feeny of *Boy Meets World* once said, “if you let people’s perception of you dictate your behavior, you will never grow as a person.”¹⁵ Mr. Feeny, representing many others raised by parents who had lived through the Great Depression, had been taught to work hard to secure his success and eventually did way better than expected. Fast forward to the 90s, when our overly optimistic parents introduced us to the world, truly believing that we, their children, could follow our dreams and be successful too.

Way back in the 1800s, a Danish dude named Søren Kierkegaard was skeptical of all the “universal truths” the Church was endorsing. Understandably miffed by Christianity (I remind you, reader, of the winners mentioned on page 2), Kierkegaard published his dissent. He philosophized that being a good person is based on your own definition of the idea rather than what the bible said it is.¹⁶ When existentialism started to be a hot topic circa 1930, followers pointed to Kierkegaard’s individualism as the beginning of the movement.¹⁷ My parents’ parents had missed that movement, but by the time my parents reached parenting age, the “follow your bliss” revolution was well under way.

In spite of all the emphasis of job security that the baby boomers had been dealt, my peers and I were reared to seek fulfillment. I was getting plenty of feedback from the world about who I am and who I’m supposed to be, but the world was evidently my oyster.

Tickled pink whenever I felt industrious, I was groomed to think and ask. I threw myself into nearly all the subjects I had in school and involved myself in a different student group for every day of the week. I believed I could pursue any of them. I just had to find the most fulfilling one.

Trying to narrow it down presented some issues.

Delighted by the magic of finding precisely the right words to represent myself, I nestled comfortably into my English classes. The club that won my deepest affections was the literary magazine, where I gushed over words with my fellow book lovers. But English spilled into art while I continually contributed drawn, not written, submissions to that magazine. Art eventually spilled into science classes when I realized that my labeled diagrams of the heart were positively immaculate.

I was at peace when doing art. Gratiated when solving math problems. Inspired in music classes. But for whatever reason (the doctor shows I loved, the creepy curiosity to dissect stuff, being female and therefore being forced to value myself based on how my body looks, etc.), biology really revved my engine. It provided answers to the questions posed by existence. It *clicked*.

My engine was also revved whenever I heard about Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory. It was founded by James Watson who, alongside partner in crime Francis Crick, was celebrated for Rosalind Franklin’s discoveries about DNA.¹⁸ My teacher had been a research assistant there, and mentioned it regularly. She, too, was rubbed the wrong way by the “boy’s club” atmosphere in many scientific spaces. Watson still hobbles around the campus in his salmon shorts grumbling that women aren’t fit to be scientists.¹⁹

I sat low in my seat in the back of the classroom and thought that if I chose science, I bet I could hold my own against the misogyny.

One class, Theory of Knowledge, was a little different than the rest. It was philosophy-based and had only ended up in my schedule as a requirement for an IB diploma. I was not being asked to seek a right answer anymore, but a derived set of justifications to a “to what extent...” question. I put the name *individualism* to the ideas that resonated well with me after hearing “do whatever you want, just don’t be stupid about it” from my father throughout my childhood. I was recommended to explore readings about psychoanalysis, utilitarianism, and existentialism. The latter led me straight to Søren Kierkegaard.

(Funny aside: I just took the Meyers-Briggs personality test during a leadership training last weekend and got the same result as Kierkegaard. It’s INFP, if you’re curious.)

With less than a year left until I would know I’d be coming to Northeastern, science eventually spilled into philosophy. What of my destiny is biological? What is spurred from my femaleness? What is determined from the map of cells in my head? And what about in other people?

Finally deciding that science was the most worthwhile use of my efforts, I made plans to follow a pre-med track. Those plans took a nosedive about two years into the attempt. I embraced the newfound epiphany that I do actually have limits, and I learned to love them for keeping me safe from things that don’t make me happy (like organic chemistry).

Shortly after starting my first co-op doing outreach for a fresh food access initiative, I was unceremoniously fired. My advisor hastily reassigned me to a lab assistant position at Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory out of pure convenience. I had never pictured myself as the lab coat type. I felt like a sore loser and it made me even more reluctant. But get this, reader: less than a week into the new job, I was absolutely enamored with it. I had found a space where I could dream and create, and, by what seemed like a miracle, for it to be meaningful.

My experiences on this planet said *psychoanalyze!* and, to make sense of the dissonance between what is expected of me and what I know I’m capable of, I said *yes*. So far, I’ve been my most useful research subject. We have a wealth of findings.

I think I gravitated toward science because the way I was handled (y’know, being a small girl) predisposed me to be interested in a) what people are *actually* like (on a biological level) and b) why they end up thinking/saying/doing some of the fucked up shit they do. After being denied a voice due to smallness for so long, I yearned to be heard. Science both explained my experiences and satisfied my need to be valuable.

Because of the chance reassignment to Cold Spring Harbor, I fell hard and fast for neuroscience research. I never looked back; I continue to kick ass and take names in this brodeo of a field.

I’m still a munchkin. But now I’m standing on the shoulders of giants.

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