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Canon  
English 12 Period 6  
2 June, 2020

*“There is a time in every man's education when he arrives at the conviction that envy is ignorance; that imitation is suicide; that he must take himself for better, for worse, as his portion.” – R.W. Emerson*

The essay from which this is excerpted, “Self Reliance,” might be the only old-timey thing we ever read in class that actually spoke to me, so I am going to quote the hell out of it. I didn't really get it at first, another lame nonfiction piece my teacher tried to make us read. When I heard that quote, though, and once I followed what Emerson was saying, it was like he was in my soul. I think he's been in there for a longer time than I would have ever imagined.

When I was a little, I was big. The worst part about it wasn't being out of shape or unhealthy. (Those were bad, though. I dreaded gym class so hard.) No, the worst thing was the way people treat you differently. After all, everybody knows that little girls are supposed to be thin and pretty. As we get older, we're supposed to be thin and pretty and have big boobs. That's the template, this set of traits we assign to the ideal person type, the criteria we agree to aspire to and judge ourselves accordingly.

When I was big, other kids called me names, which still piss me off so much I can't retype them even for this dumb assignment. My parents were always giving me this Look when I snacked on anything. When boys started noticing girls and vice versa, I got laughed at when I told the first boy I had a crush on that I thought he was cute. He wasn't even popular or anything. One of the pretty girls laughed right in my face and said I would die a virgin, which at the time I didn't even know what it meant. She probably didn't either. I was humiliated anyway though. My teacher Mr. Embree saw it happen and told everybody they had to be nice to me, and then he took me aside and tried to make me feel better about my size, because that's what teachers have to do for fatties and dorks and losers. I really liked Mr. Embree, but he didn't like me. He pitied me. So he protected me.

So in middle school, I dug down and made myself thin and pretty. I timed it exactly right, too, because by 8th grade I was the only girl in class who had D cups and wasn't also a cow. My uncle told me I looked like I was 20 when I was 13. Creepy, yeah, but he was sort of right. By the time I started high school I'd worked off the last bits of excess baby fat, and voila. Killer legs, flat tummy, big boobs, thick hair. Even my face had lost weight, and it made all the difference in the world. You can stick ScarJo's face on Rebel Wilson's body, but no, it ain't all about that bass. It's about girls like me.

Boys didn't laugh at me any more. My parents looked surprised, not concerned, if they saw me eating candy. I didn't need protection from teachers any more, and though I still got called names, it was from flatties and fatties who called me a slut. I hadn't ever even kissed a boy then, but those jealous nobodies were only hating because they knew I could simply say “yes” and get all the action they wished they could. The boy I told I liked in grade school, four years and 5 notches higher on the babe scale later, asked me to go to homecoming with him

freshman year, and even had the nerve to talk smack about me when I did the laughing that time. It didn't stop his friends from throwing their digits at me, though. So I did what thin, pretty girls with big boobs are supposed to do and went to the dance with the cutest boy I could land. We danced, I let him feel me up, we made out some and thought we were super grown-up and cool. Everything like it was supposed to be.

The only problem was, I hated myself for it. I'd become the kind of shallow, petty, self-important and totally uninteresting c\*nt I'd always been treated like crap by. My reward for doing everything I was supposed to do, becoming who I was supposed to, was to find out I was just as lame as all the other thin, pretty girls with big boobs. Those things had become my identity. I'd wrapped up all my emotional energy in becoming *that* to the point where I wasn't anything else.

That was difficult to swallow, but what really sucked was finding out that somehow, nobody else minded. People actually seemed to *like* that empty, pointless, hot person I'd turned into. Even strangers were way nicer to me. I have no idea how it gets in a man's head that if they give this random girl an unsolicited compliment, even if it wasn't straight-up sexual, that it's going to get them somewhere. No matter how sincere it is, it can't, because girls like me hear that crap a bajillion times, along with a hundred bajillion more who *are* straight-up sexual. Personally? I prefer the second guy. "You're so beautiful, Taylor" is just wimp code for "Your tits are amazing and I wanna motorboat them while I f\*ck you." At least it's honest. Either way, it's all directed to a body, not a person. I'd played the world's stupid game and I'd won, and my prize was getting to be the prize in everyone else's games.

"Imitation is suicide," warns Emerson. He was right, because by thirteen, I'd killed that fat, weepy kid. I don't even remember her all that well any more. What I do remember, she wasn't any more interesting than the tweenager. She had pink walls in her bedroom, a unicorn poster on the wall, and idolized Taylor godd\*mn Swift because omg not only did we have the same name, but the same initials, too! \*gasp\* So suddenly, I was thirteen, made straight A's, a three sport athlete, the body of a hot 20 year old, and no clue at all about who I actually was. Home life was hella easy, too. I don't think my dad ever loved me as much as he did when I was in eighth grade.

It was my sister Abbie, of all people, who saved me. My dad married her mom when we were in sixth grade, right as I was struggling to reinvent myself. Having a new stepsister in the same grade, one who was way prettier than me, who was funny and clever and made friends at our school really easily and picked fights and won them... it would have been inspiring if it wasn't so intimidating. At the time, I told myself I didn't want to be anything like her. She seemed mean, apathetic, and kind of dangerous. I wanted nothing to do with her. That she kept getting in trouble all the time only cemented that feeling. While I was finally gaining people's approval, she was always getting yelled at and sent home and lectured. I was the Brag To Your Coworkers kid; she was the Sure I'll Take the Weekend Shift one.

Abbie, though, actually liked herself. Too much, maybe, but she had this huge aura of confidence about her. Say what you want about my sister, but she's got self-esteem for days, and she knows exactly who she is. So while I'm floundering around freshman year having an existential crisis, she's repeating eighth grade at catholic school and can't get enough of making the nuns suffer for it. She was unapologetically herself, uncompromising.

Emerson writes that society is in conspiracy against its members, demanding that they surrender their liberty and conform. Conformity, I think he would agree, is the currency of conventional success, in all its mediocre glory. That was how I felt in those days. Like everyone around me only valued me for conforming to the ideal. I started resenting them for it. They'd hated me when I was heavy, and they'd hate me again if I broke from their stupid template. I know this sounds sort of pathetic, and yes some people had it way harder, being handicapped or retarded or whatever. The assignment is to relate a text to my life, though, so that's what I'm doing. Knowing other people have it harder didn't make me any less unhappy.

One day freshman year, we had this sub. I forget his name now, and he doesn't work here any more after this incident when he had Abbie in two classes in one day that I won't get into. Anyway, our class was being rowdy, and he got nastier and nastier with everybody, even us kids who weren't doing anything wrong. I was getting stressed out and plus I really had to pee, so I raised my hand and asked to go to the bathroom. He laughed. He literally *laughed*. He told me that the class had given up bathroom privileges because of how we were behaving. I said it wasn't fair; he said he didn't care what I thought, and then he got distracted by somebody doing something bad again. I sat there and squirmed in my seat and started asking myself what Abbie would do if she were in my shoes.

So I stood up and walked out. Once I peed, I was too afraid to go back, so I didn't return for the rest of the period. That was how easy it was. Nobody chased me. He got my name, or maybe he just remembered me, and left a note for Mrs. Fedoro. When she got back the next day she told me she was disappointed, but that was it. I was blown away. I hadn't just done a bad job or made a mistake, I'd flat out disobeyed a teacher and the world hadn't ended. "The power which resides in [her] is new in nature, and none but [she] knows what that is which [she] can do, nor does [she] know until he has tried." – Emerson.

It really did feel powerful. I had never thought of the world as a place where I could do what I felt like doing even if I wasn't supposed to. Abbie was that way, and she got in trouble all the time and was always getting yelled at. It had always seemed like the worst way I could be. Until that day, I'd never gotten why she kept doing it, kept going out and pissing everyone off when it was so much easier to just do what you're told.

The next day was the first time I ever skipped school. I didn't even do anything bad with my day off. I just waited until my parents would be gone at work and went back home and watched TV in my underwear. Daytime TV is lame, but finding out that I had that power was better than any drug. My parents flipped out, but I'd already decided I wasn't going back. It was like what we read about the allegory of the cave, spending my childhood chained up in a hole and thinking that these rules on the wall were real, but they're only shadows of rules made up to force conformity. Sit in your assigned seat. Diet and exercise. Shave your legs and armpits. Smile more – you're prettier when you smile, don't you know. I had believed in those things for so long that it felt like everybody who had left me chained up in the dark was either an @sshole for keeping me prisoner, or was another pathetic loser chained up there with me. I didn't want to have anything to do with either kind. I'd broken the chains and come into the light. Even if it meant I was alone, it was better than what I'd been before. Like Emerson said, "When we have new perception, we shall gladly disburden the memory of its hoarded treasures as old rubbish."

Some people who've only gotten to know me more recently might have a hard time believing some of this, that I was a good kid and a rule follower and a people pleaser, but it's all true. It hasn't been easy, though. There's a lot of reasons to slip back and do the "normal thing." I remember when my dad looked at my report card junior year. I'd gone from honor roll first semester frosh year to C's, D's, and F's in two years. Instead of yelling at me again he shrugged and just said "I give up." Then he walked out and hasn't said anything about my grades since.

Not that my dad and I were ever super close, but that day still hurts to think about. Part of me hopes that someday when I'm out there living life my way, he'll see that I turned out good anyway and that I'm happy and he'll see I'm not a b\*tchy little f\*ckup like he thinks I am now. I'm not changing course, though, not even for him, or to get my teachers off my back, or to straighten things out with this guy I kinda like sometimes, or anyone. "No law can be sacred to me but that of my nature." – Emerson

Emerson also wrote, wisely I think, that "It is easy in the world to live after the world's opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the great [woman] is [she] who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude." It's definitely been lonely. Most people, almost all of them really, are still living by those shadow rules that they think will bring them as close to those idealized templates that they can get. They're convinced that if they learn enough trigonometry and don't use cuss words in front of adults, that bullsh\*t is going to make them happy or successful. Maybe they just hope it will keep people off their backs. I can appreciate that last one somewhat, at least. I felt like that before, too, but now my back can take the weight. Like in middle school, I worked at it and made myself stronger, except this time on the inside. "It is as easy for the strong man to be strong as the weak man to be weak," writes Emerson.

Junior year, I think it took me two weeks max to realize my English teacher had the hots for me. It's not surprising to find out guys want to sleep with me, even if they're way older. One time I caught my next door neighbor's kid watching me laying out in a bikini in the backyard, just peeking out between his blinds. The kid was maybe 12. Eventually I realized the upstairs window had a split in the blinds too, right in mommy and daddy's room. I'm pretty sure some guy recorded me in short shorts walking around the mall once. It could be on pornhub for all I know. It happens. In some ways, that's part of the game. They see a thin, pretty girl with big boobs, and they play their part according to their assigned templates. Creepers creep, players play. But when a teacher started noticing me, it felt like something outside the norm. He wasn't supposed to notice me like that, but he did, and he couldn't stop himself. He paid ten times more attention to me than any other member of the class.

I liked it, so I gave him reasons to keep noticing. He was cute, in an academic Yes Daddy kind of way, so I played back. That was as far as it went, though. He was still conforming. It didn't matter that he wanted to throw me on his desk and f\*ck my brains out. He was *supposed* to not want that, and even if I flirted at him harder than I'd ever flirted with anybody since that @sshole who laughed at me in grade school, he couldn't do it. So I did what I felt like doing, he followed his shadow rules, and life went on. I amused myself with my games, and I guess his rules must have done the same for him, somehow.

I don't think I learned much in his class (not that I was trying to) but I did like the Emerson essay we got to early senior year. Our textbook only had an abridged version so I

went home and read the whole thing online. I even clicked on a bunch of the links and footnotes. There's a lot of "god" in it, which is where Emerson and I go our separate ways, but reading it gave me a vocabulary and a mindset for how I'd been living my life. I'd sort of thought myself as this renegade bad@ass who didn't take crap from people, but then I saw that without knowing it, I'd been trying to embrace transcendentalism and live life according to my own rules, that the best version of myself was the version I'd chosen instead of being assigned. I have to say, seeing a respected philosopher tell me to "insist upon [myself]" made me see I wasn't some spoiled b\*tch going "YOLO" and flipping off the world, but maybe I was just the sort of person Emerson saw himself as.

Henry David Thoreau, in *Civil Disobedience*, which we read around the same time, let himself be thrown in jail instead of paying some stupid taxes for some stupid preacher. But while he was in there, he said that because he was in there by his own choice, living under his own terms, he was really the free man, while everybody else was a prisoner. Like sure, I kept eating right, working out enough to keep the pounds where I wanted them, but now I was only doing that because I liked looking good for my own reasons. Then there's all these other girls chained to their treadmills and starving themselves so they'll fit in a dress or get asked out by some boy or whatever, and if they weren't so disgusting and smug about it, I might feel bad for them. I don't.

I think that's part of why I don't get along with many people. Yeah, I can be a lot to handle, but also because I don't have patience or respect for these prisoners, paying their taxes, worshipping their shadows. It's why I gave my English teacher such a hard time. I could see exactly what he wanted plain as day, but he'd rather not rock the boat, settle for the same empty life all his coworkers had instead of trying to claim something great. (Not to be too arrogant, but I think he would agree with me.)

Until one day, out of the blue, he did. I don't even know why. Maybe he was feeling bored and depressed and unfulfilled like I was. Maybe he just got pissed because I didn't want to waste my time on another one of his stupid essays, or I stood up to him when he tried to embarrass me in front of the class, or because I accidentally hit some kid with my chapstick. Heck, maybe he went for it because I climbed into his lap and begged for it. (The chapstick, that is. I don't beg for *that*.)

Next thing I know, he's got me after school, and my head is just swimming. I didn't know why at the time, but my teacher, he took one look at the little blue gym shorts I put on for him and I slayed him right there. I don't think he could see how turned on I was, seeing someone have that same Emersonian (if that's a word???) awakening that I'd had. F\*ck the system that made us both unhappy. Anybody who wants to give the finger to the whole thing can chill with me any time. I didn't find out until later that he only thought I was playing along because he'd drugged my chapstick. At this point, who of us can say what they would or wouldn't have done before that stuff got pumped into them. We've done what we've done, and there's no point asking why. That day, though, as I felt his eyes drilling through my shorts and into my ass, I wanted to grab a textbook and tear out *Self Reliance* and shove it in his face and yell out "YES YOU FINALLY GET IT ABOUT FREAKING TIME YOU UNDERSTOOD YOUR OWN LESSONS!" Instead, I let him stare, and counted the minutes until my next detention. He was waking up. I could feel it.

It was at my next detention, the day after, that I actually found out what he'd done. I flipped out a little at first, because my head was telling me that he was going to force me back into the cave. Only instead of trying to remake me into the template, instead he started creeping on Abbie's naked selfies (slut), and made me take my shirt off and film it for him. He wasn't dragging me down. I was pulling him up. He wanted me so bad he couldn't help but ignore those shadow rules on the wall.

He'd gotten a taste, and I had gotten a taste of him. I wanted more. So yeah, I pulled. Maybe he would have come along on his own, but I wasn't going to let somebody throw themselves back in that prison. I knew too well what it's like in there, how false and pointless and dead ended it all felt. It wasn't easy bringing him out of it. Once again, it was Abbie who inspired me, only this time, it was because when she finally snapped out of that druggie trance that evening, she kept repeating stuff she'd heard me say while she was out of it. Not just repeating, but she actually meant it. My sarcasm about what a stud he was and how he objectified girls like us hadn't translated at all. Without even meaning to, I'd given her a bigger crush on the guy than I'd ever had.

It was weirdly exciting. Not the stuff about my sister (yuck!), but about seeing this man go feral like that. He couldn't help himself. Once he'd had a taste of that sweet air outside the cave, he'd gone nuts with it. "The secret of fortune is joy in our hands." – Emerson, though I don't think he meant it quite that literally. I wanted to see where it went. It made me nervous since he was my teacher, but I knew the consequences would be way worse for him than for us anyway. So I "loaned" my chapstick to Abbie that evening, let her get "high" on the stuff he'd put in it, and hatched a little plan. I parked down the street from his house and I hopped in the trunk, praying Abbie was still level-headed enough to drive the rest of the way. Sure enough, he bought it, that she'd gone mad with lust and had kidnapped me to stop me from stopping her. Then she threw herself at him. I hadn't told her to do that, but the seduction worked basically like we'd hoped anyway. I'd been ready to have her slather the drug-laced chapstick on him, but he got paranoid and made her improvise, finding his stash and using it ourselves. Still, it worked. We got him, and I tried to roll that boulder over his cave for good to keep him from slinking back inside.

Though we rendered him completely helpless, we didn't do much to him. Like I said, I really was vibing the whole transcendentalism thing, and it wouldn't be fun if I just made him trade his old template for a new one of my design. Instead, we gave him a little nudge towards what he so obviously wanted. "Don't be a p\*ssy." It turned out his idea of being a p\*ssy was pretty different from mine, but it would hopefully keep him going in the right direction. We weren't sure how he would react, though. He's not the not-a-pussy type to hulk out and try to kill us for dosing him or anything, but since he'd already drugged us once, I didn't want this new, liberated fellow turning me into a bondage slave or something freaky like that. So we let him think that Abbie had dosed the both of us and I gave myself hand cramps writing up some fake notes with fake commands. They said that Abbie was my boss, and that he could do whatever he wanted to me. I hoped it would give him the freedom to keep pursuing me, plus, if he got pissed off about anything, he would just blame Abbie. She was the "boss," after all. God knows she didn't mind pretending to push me around in front of him, but I kept her in line in private. Usually.

I wonder what Emerson would have said about all the wild stuff that followed during this past month. On the one hand, my teacher and I, and in a lot of ways Abbie, were more free than we had ever been. We had amazing sex, got to share real intimacy like I never knew I wanted. On the other hand, we also sort of took a bunch of other women and turned them into sex slaves. It would be fair to blame a lot of that on Abbie, since I'd accidentally given her those screwed up ideas about how hot girls ought to be the guy's "fantasy sluts" (although if I never hear those words again, it will be too soon). Still, I was the one who didn't stop her from lashing out. It ate at me at first, because unlike with my teacher/lover, we really did force them into some behaviors they never would have done otherwise. Except as time passed, I saw that even that, having these other women join this guy's harem, actually brought them closer to freedom.

My middle school PE teacher Mr. Baird told us during sex ed, "sex is a good thing, and I recommend you all try it sometime." He admittedly did then go on to encourage us to wait for a very long time and find the right person, but to a middle schooler, it was an eye-opening admission that this scary Just Say No wasn't a trick to make girls pregnant and give everyone AIDS. I was weirded out at the time, but in hindsight, I'm grateful. Sex is great. It's one of my favorite things. I don't believe in god, but the closest I've ever come to a religious experience has been sharing an orgasm with another person. I had some *gooooood* orgasms with my teacher. I honestly think these other women, pulled into this by circumstance and random chance (good or bad luck I can't say) moved closer to self reliance.

Take for example, this one student. We'll call her "Casie." You couldn't find a better example of a conformist than Casie. I'd bet that before we dosed her, in her whole life she had never thought about what she wanted for herself. Everything she did was because her mom said so, her teacher said so, her coach said so, society said so. Suddenly, someone green lit her for sex – for dirty, not-supposed-to, illegal teacher sex! – and she came *alive*. Cassie discovered her real passion. She shed her inhibitions. She probably even fell in love somewhere along the way. The drug took away her freedom to keep living as a prisoner.

Whatever Casie and the others lost, they made up for it in new perspective and a liberation from the template they'd been pushed to conform to. When I saw the life and purpose it had given them, even when it wasn't what I personally wanted for their contribution to our cause (maybe *especially* because of that), it told me that I was doing something good. In the spirit of Emerson, I persisted: "Let us affront and reprimand the smooth mediocrity and squalid contentment of the times."

Admittedly, I was a bit less charitable in one case. This one girl, I went all out. At first I thought it would be nice to have someone to give out blowjobs in my place (not exactly my thing, and I couldn't exactly tell the guy that no, I don't really have to let you do whatever you want to me, without spoiling the whole thing). Once I had this chick drugged up, Abbie actually had to reel me back in after a point. I took this intelligent, proud, passably attractive and conventionally "promising" young woman, and I re-pinned her entire sense of self-worth on her ability to satisfy her teacher. I made her his b\*tch, and my b\*tch too.

(In my defense, maybe the c\*nt should have thought twice before she told me I was going to die a virgin.)

She hated me for it. I know that. Still, gun to her head (by which I really mean I told her to be honest with me and she had no choice but to confess because once again, she's my

b\*tch), she's *loving* it. She'd never rebelled against an authority figure in her whole stupid pre-planned life. She'd never let herself chase her own pleasure, never realized what turns her on or gets her excited, never taken herself off the defensive and been vulnerable, or really worried herself over someone else's happiness. If I'd left her alone, she would have turned into another boring money-grubbing corporate parasite, just like her rich pr\*ck daddy. Who knows, maybe now she'll actually start re-examining her goals. We'll see.

It sure went over well with her teacher. It was naïve to think he would share my philosophical outlook, I know that. After all, he was suddenly drowning in more p\*ssy than he knew what to do with, and I suppose it must have been distracting. Besides, real people – real self reliant people – are problematic. We're unpredictable, volatile. The call of the wild doesn't cry out to everyone, just as I didn't read that stupid book when we were assigned it. Though he assigned us to read *The Road Not Taken*, just like every English teacher since sixth grade, he wasn't ready to walk down my road to where it bent in the undergrowth. Or, to get back to Emerson, he "shunned the rugged battle of fate, where strength is born."

Not everybody can be in it for the principle, I suppose. He kicked me to the curb and settled for a thin, pretty girl (one with unremarkable boobs, I might add), and also a thin pretty girl with decent ones, and a thin pretty cop with an actually pretty ridiculous rack, and a thin pretty teacher who I guess is doing alright. Also my sister, when he can sneak in behind my back like the p\*ssy he somehow returned to being, whose boobs I've seen way too much of since all this began. She's much too proud of those things.

When all is said and done, I'm glad for the experience, even if it ended in heartbreak. I learned a lot from him. I knew when I let him in that it would change me, but while I really thought those changes were going to come from my lover, somehow, they came from my teacher.

Thanks to the decisions I made about him, I am about to flunk my senior year of high school. However, I do so as a genius – at least according to Emerson, who defines it as, "To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men, that is genius." I did what I thought was right, and chased after what I wanted. I even got to have it, for a while, and hold onto it until it felt the need to squirm loose. That's more than most people can say, I guess.

I realize I'm way past the required number of quotes and maybe even getting to the point of too many, but I have to include one more. Emerson wrote, "Truly it demands something godlike in [her] who has cast off the common motives of humanity, and has ventured to trust [herself] for a taskmaster."

I am a goddess.