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Don't Dream of Onions

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It was one of those nights where I was confused about whether my head or my heart was supposed to be beating. Probably because of the coffee. I was on the phone with my mom:

“Tired in big trouble,” I told her. I felt like I should’ve been able to hear her rolling her eyes at me, but she never rolls her eyes.

“Tell me your problems! I will fix them!” she cheered. Dad was at the gym and Jen was at dance, and Mom was too happy to deal with needs that didn’t belong to the dog.

“I don’t know what to write about for my essay and I don’t know what to do with my life,” I complained. Ah, the woes of a college senior.

“You don’t have to worry about the rest of your life right now,” she insisted, “just focus on your essay.”

I was frustrated that she couldn’t see how the two things I named were really the same problem.

“Hmm, okay. You should start with, ‘It was a dark and stormy night…” Snoopy does that. He sits on top of his dog house and is supposed to be this prolific writer, but then he starts every story with, ‘It was a dark and stormy night…”’

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It was a dark and stormy night and I was imagining how nice it would feel to face plant into the transplant grass on the hill outside the library. I was thinking I’d try facedown snow angels, even though there was no snow. That’s probably why they had to replace the grass there anyway. Some college senior must have been having a hard time coming up with an essay topic and had a hangnail and ate pasta with no protein for the third night in a row and then slept for fourteen hours straight and figured the only thing to do at that point was make snowless angels in the wet grass. I wondered if she also considered how satisfying it would be to take a stack of ceramic plates and just smash them full force into a brick wall.

I wonder if she also paused on the steps up the library, right next to that patch of grass so distinctly a different shade of green, and laughed out loud until she cried at how ridiculous she was acting. If she also tended to laugh and cry at the same time and sometimes not be sure whether she meant to laugh or cry in the first place. I wondered if she also could not figure out what to do with her life but was certain she needed to know by 4:00pm the next day when her essay was due. I thought about her and how much money it would cost to replace that patch of grass again, mumbled a quick, “pull yourself together,” and walked up the steps to the library.

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“What are you writing about?” David asked as he walked over, taking a break from studying. I was demonstrating my inability to sit properly in a library chair: I had my knees swung over one arm and my head against the other, my laptop placed on my thighs. We’re in a creative writing class together, and he probably thought it was something I’d share with him later.

“I’m writing about how I want to be an onion picker,” I responded.

“Oh, that’s cool. You should totally do that. Why onions?”

“Because nobody likes onions,” I started to explain.

I don’t really know David, and I didn’t want to get into how I wanted to be an onion picker because I liked the way my memory of onion picking was sunburnt. As if the sky somehow reflected the deepening pink on my cheeks or the blonding hair around my face from the only time I’d ever been onion picking. It was on a farm in Israel, when my teen tour group was picking vegetables to donate to a soup kitchen. We hadn’t imagined they had soup kitchens in Israel. We didn’t think about anything except how we didn’t
miss America and how we didn’t mind the dirt under our fingernails or the sand in our boots. I liked onion picking because I liked pulling something up from the ground, and the irony in my excitement when I found the vegetable, only to realize it was an onion and nobody likes onions. I liked the looking, the hoping, even the way the stems cut my fingers.

I liked how I knew I shouldn’t take a bite, how when I did it burned hot in my mouth, as if it had come from much deeper in the earth than just a few inches, or maybe much closer to the sun. I liked how there seemed to be an infinite number of onions. Every time I bent close to the ground I spotted more bulbs.

“How ’bout a parfait? Everybody loves a parfait!” David imitated the Donkey from Shrek.

I frowned, even though I love Shrek.

“Nah, that’s cool though. I’m sure you’d make a great onion picker,” he said. And then he let me get back to my writing.

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Charlie sat down in the chair across from me in the café that I’d migrated to for a midnight snack while continuing my work on my essay. He was a little late, although he said he would be, and I’d ordered mac ‘n cheese to share. I’d been speed-typing my essay, trying to write a full draft before 4:00pm the next day.

“What are you writing about?” Charlie asked, pulling his chair closer to mine and peering over my shoulder.

“How I want to be an onion picker,” I said, closing my laptop.

“You do not want to be an onion picker,” Charlie responded. I was a little surprised by how seriously he said it.

“Yes I do.” I have this tendency to believe strongly in whatever someone tells me is not true about myself. I stabbed the overcooked mac ‘n cheese shell with the plastic fork we were sharing.

“I bet you picture it as being a farmer with a small plot of land and a little farm stand out front. I can see that.” He smiled, probably imagining me the way I was when we first met: deeply tanned and sun-tinted hair after a summer of lifeguarding.

“No, I don’t want to be a farmer, I want to be an onion picker. Like picking onions in a field all day,” I insisted, envisioning sunburns and dirty fingernails.

“Do you really want to move every season?”

He tried a different approach, knowing how stubborn I can be.

“I don’t want to be a migrant worker,” I admitted. “I just want to pick onions from a big field.”

He laughed and kissed my forehead. “Where does a field exist where onions grow all year round?”

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I had this image in my mind that there’s a field that’s always growing onions—don’t onions grow year round? There’s a field in somewhere-that’s-warm that perpetually grows onions and I will work there and pick them and be happy, and at the end of the day I will come home to my house in 20-minutes-outside-of-Boston and we’ll watch reruns of “How I Met Your Mother” together.

I wasn’t sure how much water onions need to grow, but I knew that when I’m an onion farmer, it needs to be in an onion field in a hot place. Hot and dry because it needs to be a miracle that the onions are growing at all. It has to be a place where they can’t have water parks because it’s wasteful, where the women turn off the shower when they shave their legs or wash their hair, maybe even a place where the water tastes kind of chunky, like something other than water might be in it. For some reason, I feel like my onion field needs to be in South America, preferably Argentina. I’ll learn to speak Spanish and roll up the sleeves on my t-shirt so they’ll stay put.
But then I’ll remember that my t-shirts say things like “Hell on Hooves” and “Mule Mob! Code Blue!” because I got them from Colby College. And when my farmer friends ask me what “Code Blue” means, I’ll answer, “it means that I paid $60,000 a year for this shirt, and now that it’s sweat-stained, I better go get a job to pay for it.” So I’ll leave my onion field and take the cheapest flight to New York City, where I’ll live in a one-room apartment in Brooklyn that I can’t even afford and I’ll eat only Ramen and bagels because the Jewish feminist magazine I’m working for feeds me bagels at lunch and tells me I don’t have to be skinny. But I think they’ll complain that I reek of onions.  

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I blurted out to Charlie: “I just don’t want to be a lawyer.” And I meant it.

“The more you say that the more I think you’ll be a lawyer,” he responded.

The unfortunate truth is that I probably would make a great lawyer: I’ve been bred to be one. My dad is a lawyer, my mom is a lawyer; my brother, uncle, and two cousins are lawyers. We apply a statute of limitations to candy in the pantry—you have four days to eat your candy, but after that the statute expires and Dad gets the candy. I know to answer questions according to their exact phrasing. I can analyze writing not just because, I wanted to say, I have no idea what publishing is like and what if I can’t get a job in publishing and what if I hate the office and I swear if I have to buy coffee or post social media, I’d rather just be an onion picker. And I’m afraid of New York City because what if I get lost in those tall, tall buildings and I buy only Chanel and eat only salad or sushi and drink only coffee and see everything in black and white and bright lights?

“I don’t want to be a lawyer or an onion picker. I want to be a writer.” I looked at the ceiling when I told him, even though he already knew.

I looked at the ceiling instead of into his eyes because—unlike David, especially unlike myself—he took me seriously. Enough to tell me that I don’t want to be an onion picker when I’d spent all night writing wholeheartedly about how that’s the only thing I want to be. And thinking about how really I’d like to face-plant into wet grass and smash things. That doesn’t sound like someone who is ready to be anything except a college senior.

“Well then be a writer. Get a job in publishing and see other people writing and learn what it’s like to be a writer. Or just go be one, and understand that it’s not easy. You might invest a lot of time into something that won’t work out. You have to choose between going to law school and getting a job that will keep you comfortable and a job where you might not be comfortable. But if you want to be a writer, you have to try to make it work.”

That sounded so…grown up. Charlie had spent his night taking an exam and working on his honors thesis in Economics. And now he was offering logical, helpful advice. I pictured myself chopping onions that I had pulled up from the ground and remembered that onions would always make me cry. I pulled at the cheese stuck to the edges of the mac ‘n cheese tray.

It was 1:00am and the café was closing. Charlie walked home with me, and we laughed about how I’d argue the sky is purple if that’s how I felt one day, until we came to the part of the path where we had to walk separate ways. He kissed me goodnight and started up the hill to his apartment, but then called after me:

“Don’t go home and dream about onions. You need to have bigger dreams, Laura.”

So I went home and reminded myself that you just have to be writing to be a writer, and I rewrote my essay, beginning with the line: “It was a dark and stormy night…” [IM]