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The Beauty of Choosing Happiness

Ten months ago it seemed like my whole world fell apart. Granted, the world actually did fall apart just a mere three months later. I once thought it'd be an alien invasion or a zombie apocalypse like I'd read in my sci-fi books, and yet the world fell to a single bowl of soup. The second event shut down the world and will continue to impact us for years to come, yet the first hit me harder. The pandemic ruined my expectations for my future, and yet my best friend shattered my heart.

It all started on an average day. I went through the motions as usual; got dressed, walked to school, failed my AP statistics test, and went to my friends' lunch table by midday. You see, this table has been ours since freshman year. Us claiming that table was like Columbus claiming America. Others may have sat there during the lunch period before us, or even after school, but during those 30 minutes, it was undeniably ours. On that bench I started a new chapter of my life, joined colorguard, studied for my first AP test, became the president of my volunteer club, and had my first love and eventual first breakup. It was at that exact table that I lost my best friend. Now before you jump to the unimaginable, let me clarify: she's still alive and well. Yet during that fateful Friday lunch, she revealed that her family was moving to Florida. Our senior year was halfway done and she was about to leave us. That meant we'd be separated for our 20's themed prom, grad night at Disneyland, the symbolic senior sunset, our last high school football

game, and most importantly graduation. Ironically none of that matters now, but at the time it was a teenage tragedy that would make even Romeo and Juliet weep.

I'd never consider myself an introvert, yet I have a difficult time trusting others. After seeing so many divorces throughout my life, I'm convinced that everyone has a sinister motive behind every action. To this day I still believe that, but a select few have managed to break that suspicion. Daniela was one of them. I met her in the 7th grade when my short attention span thought it'd be fun to doodle on some random girl's paper. At the time, I didn't even know her name, yet I drew small illustrations on her notebook when she was preoccupied. I'm sure this irritated her to no end, but that annoyance eventually turned into a long-lasting friendship. Dani was there for me when my dog died, when my first step-dad tried to re-enter my life, when I came out as pansexual, when my OCD was at its worst, when I found out my dad cheated on my mom, even when life didn't seem worth living. She was there through it all. For heaven's sake she even caught me when I fainted at an assembly. Twice. I knew that whenever times got exceptionally tough, she'd be there to help me back up. And now my safety net was moving across the nation.

As stated before, I have an issue with trust and people leaving me. It seems like everyone in my life is leaving me for one reason or another. Deep down it hurts knowing that I'm not worth staying for. I know there are probably bigger things at play in other's lives, but just once I'd like to be a priority to someone. I know that sounds selfish but it's my reality. My view on relationships is such: why form a relationship when they're going to leave you? It's going to hurt less if you break it off now rather than later. Once people get too close to me or seem to know me too well, I usually stop talking to them. Yet Dani refused to let me hide back in my shell. I told her my darkest secrets and still she stayed.

I understand her reasons for leaving. As Cuban immigrants, her family wanted to be closer together in case our government goes haywire. I'm not entirely selfish. I truly understand why she had to leave, but it doesn't make it hurt any less.

Now I will admit that I have an extreme negativity bias. Negative situations have a greater impact on me than positives do. The day she left still hurts, yet the happiness we felt when performing with our band at Disneyland has long since faded. And those two events happened at relatively the same time. We performed at Disney a week prior to her departure and yet all I can remember were our last moments hugging each other with tears streaming down our faces. I'd like to take in the good more than I do at the moment, but I consider this a largely unrealistic expectation for me. Ideally, I would experience a positive experience, enrich it, absorb it, and link it to past positive/negative experiences, yet happy moments just seem to fly past me. Even looking back at extremely happy instances can make me feel a sort of grief knowing that I may never feel happy like that again.

In a perfect world, self directed neuroplasticity would fix my perspective. I'd focus on the positives instead of the negatives and finally revel in the moments of happiness instead of stressing about the hard times. Yet I don't know if that's possible. I'm a natural pessimist and wholeheartedly believing I could change my outlook would be a lie to myself. Yet despite this, I'm going to try a new activity when I think of Dani. Instead of missing her and reliving the person-related-homesickness, I'm going to attempt to reminisce on the good times we had together. According to Sonja Lyubomirsky, our general happiness is determined by these factors: 50% Genetic Setpoint, 10% Life Circumstances, and 40% Our Intentional Actions and Thought. That means that 40% of my happiness can be determined by me. I can't fully flip my views on the world, but working to improve that 40% could make all the difference.

Even now I seem to have this hefty focalism on Dani leaving. As much as it hurts, it was bound to happen eventually. I just automatically assumed that her leaving would be the ultimate end to a six year friendship. But what did I think would happen when we all left for college? I put so much weight on the fact that she was leaving earlier than expected, that I didn't realize that it was destined to happen eventually. We couldn't stay in high school forever. I still wish that she could have stayed just a bit longer, but we can't fight the inevitable.

No matter how many good memories you have with a person, the last negative moment you have will remain the most prominent. The conclusion is the most important part of the book and 90% of the time it's a letdown. Take *The Outsiders* by S.E. Hinton. What is the most memorable part? If your mind didn't immediately jump to Johnny's "stay gold" death, kudos to you. No one thinks back to when Ponyboy and Johnny used to play football with the gang or when Pony used to tutor Johnny in school. The sad moments always stand out more than the good.

I'd like to say that the same applies to my friend. No matter how many great memories we had, the sad ending will leave the greatest impression. As you surely know, the corona virus came along and cancelled all of our senior events. Whether she had left last December or this October, we still wouldn't have been able to attend prom or graduation together. Yet I still can't help but think the end of the world would have been a bit more bearable with her by my side instead of across the nation. Even now when I sit at our old lunch table months after graduating, I can't help but ponder the what ifs. As I sit alone with my thoughts on a barren campus, devoid of life and littered with social distancing signs, I can't help but think, would I change the ending of our story?

Without a doubt I would, yet that isn't fathomable in real life. All I can do now is appreciate the time we had together and treasure those moments when we are able to FaceTime or simply text. After all, happiness is all about focusing on the good instead of remaining stuck on the difficult times. This doesn't mean that I'll forget all that has happened; the hard times are what have truly shaped me as a person, yet instead of reflecting on all my trials, I'll choose to reminisce on those moments when my heart felt light and happy. Aristotle once said that "Happiness depends upon ourselves," and that is entirely true. I could continue to remain stuck on the negatives, or I could choose to find joy in the moments filled to the brim with positivity. The choice is a simple one, yet it will make all the difference.