

Pretty Face

I couldn't move. Sure, my mind was racing, I was holding a rapid conversation with myself enclosed within my head, which was in excruciating pain, by the way, but I could not get myself to move. I felt like I was locked out of my own nervous system, and had to be slowly brought back to life by my parents. My parents, who had brought on what was likely the first migraine in my life by having a massive fight, the first weekend I'd been less than 1,000 miles away since I'd gone off to college. My parents, who I'd been elected honorary therapist of, proudly referring to myself as "the family translator" as I tried to hold all of their strings together.

"Had I taken something?"

No. There was ample opportunity, I was right next to the bathroom where my dad stores his blood thinners (literal rat poison). But I couldn't move.

I honestly thought that they'd forgotten about me to yell at each other in the basement, and I used the last of my energy to text 741741, the number I'd had memorized but never used until today. As soon as they saw me, lying helplessly in their bed, it seemed that they abandoned any sense of antagonism. That was relieving. They brought me a cold cloth, some migraine medicine, held me like I was still their baby. It took me nearly falling off my promise to fight for life for them to give me what I'd wanted so badly, to be loved. Not loved to spite each other, pulling me over to their respective motives, but loved as a collective, as my parents, not Paul and

Lisa. Hours of skull-shattering pain finally lead me to eventual solace and I migrated to my room, bare but for a mattress on the ground.

I had less than 12 hours before I needed to be in Greeley, face made up and ready for Miss Colorado USA. There was no backing out. I was held for a ransom of \$1,126, money that people had donated so that I didn't spend a cent on the monumental registration fee. I had no choice, I had to put on a smile for the weekend, then it was back to Chicago to dissolve into my bed.

I conveniently did not mention my breakdown to my fellow contestants. Instead, I warmed my spirit with shitty coffee, strutted the stage in rehearsal wearing tall heels and sweatpants, and somehow avoided crying for the entire weekend.

So how did we get here? What transpired to lead me to these extremely bizarre circumstances? The answer is, as it often becomes with me, because I am impulsive. Being in a state of constant evolution seems to be my top priority. I guess I have some subconscious goal to make my younger self as confused as possible if my older self were to time travel and visit from the future. 10 year old me would be surprised that I was gay, 13 year old me would be surprised that I was vegan, 16 year old me would be surprised that I am no longer vegan today. To put things into perspective, here was my list of rules for growing up that I wrote in 6th grade:

No dying your hair (broken in 7th grade)

No getting arrested (yet to be broken, actually, although I have been suspended)

No tats unless they have a goldfish on them (broken last year when I got a frog tattoo)

No cursing at teachers (I mean, this one was broken super early into high school, it's inevitable)

No going without internet for more than 3 weeks (I guess I haven't broken this one?)

NEVER. BECOME. A. CHEERLEADER. (Is a pageant contestant any better?)

Use the thrift shop attitude (Unbroken simply because I am consistently poor)

YOU BETTER BE A VIRGIN! (I literally broke this one over the summer after I wrote this)

Hold your allegiance to YouTube (I honestly really like Twitch now, does that count?)

In essence, I zig and zag like someone trying to run away from an alligator. I imagine that no action is unexpected for me to take at this point. So I suppose that's why I kept that letter from Future Productions inviting me to apply, or actually had a conversation with a representative on the phone, or was apparently so good at marketing that I raised a thousand dollars in a week. I had some contingencies, though. There would be no objectifying me. My swimsuit would be my old racing suit from the swim team, which is designed purely for speed and gives me these adorable little fat rolls on my legs because of the tightness and the cut. I wouldn't buy anything new (see: thrift shop attitude), and I wasn't going to wax anything but my eyebrows. That being said, I shaved my armpits for the first time in months, and nothing will ever be the same.

Colorado is incredibly dry, and that Saturday morning I find myself jonesing for my chapstick. My sister has reluctantly done my makeup in the car, nervous that the other contestants will somehow look past me and judge *her* makeup skills. I assure her I'll keep my makeup artist a secret. I am shivering in my interview outfit as we arrive at Union Colony Civic Center, a place that I have been before for a swim meet but will not realize this fact until day 2 of competition. The lobby is filled with an assortment of people: parents, girls in their makeup but also pajamas, boyfriends, and pageant staff. We first get the opportunity to meet last year's winners and pose for a photo. My sister kindly takes a photo for my Instagram story that truly captures my terror and lack of preparedness, and also my baby hands. We move through a line of people all trying to sell us something expensive and out of the corner of my eye I glimpse something familiar. Oh my god, there's another girl with a buzz cut here. My sister informs me that she, of course, knew this already and that our names are right next to each other

alphabetically so we will likely be spending the day together. I am appalled that someone would so intentionally steal my brand, and my name, so I just quietly pray that she goes home or something so I don't have to interact with her.

Here is a spoiler: we actually become friends! After a while adjusting myself and my giant backpack full of everything I packed for the weekend at home, she sits down next to me. Something shifts within my brain and decides "Fuck it, be nice and see what happens". We are virtually inseparable for the rest of the competition. I discover that she does some modeling work, she paid her thousand out of her own pocket, and she miiiiight be gay, still not sure. We walk on one after another, likely giving the audience whiplash with our lack of standard curls, but we hype each other up like we've been best friends our whole lives.

The first show is rather simple, spend two minutes talking to the judges in a bizarrely choreographed interview process, introduce yourself onstage, swimsuit, evening gown, goodnight. To be honest, I had no idea what the second show was even going to entail until we were rehearsing for it. There is a lot of waiting, or eating meals provided by sponsors like Subway and KFC (hot girls eat these too!!!!), or watching other people practice their walk. When I finally get to walk, I am washed over by the familiar sense of performance, bathed in the lights, but also beaming, visualizing every person who made me insecure and crushing them to death with my pointy stilettos. Here I am, fucker, people wanted me to be here, and I am WORKING IT! After the show we enjoy some celebratory pizza and then it's off to our hotel, where I almost immediately fall asleep. Being pretty, I have discovered, is an exhausting business. Sunday morning arrives, we eat our hotel breakfast, and then it's back to the civic center, now with a light dusting of snow. Ah, snow, it's been a while since I've seen you. I do not miss you. We are then briefed on what exactly happens on finals night. We reintroduce ourselves, the top 16 are announced, they show off their swimwear and evening gowns again, top 16 is narrowed to top 5

and is asked a question on stage, we all show off our evening gowns again, awards are given out and the crowning happens, ending off the night! After the top 16 is announced, and I am not one of them, I feel somewhat relieved. Now, this is the kind of performance that I am used to, and I am no longer being judged by the group of people I have spoken to for 2 minutes and who have stared at my little swimsuit fat rolls. I get some time to relax in the dressing room, continually chugging coffee to keep my soul from falling out through my aching feet, and talking with my fellow contestants. One of the girls at my table made it to the top 16 but not the top 5, and that's really when I stop being invested in who wins.

Now, there's one more time to head onstage, to show off our gowns and to stand for an unbearable amount of time waiting for other people to win awards. I have devised a strategy of waiting until the last possible moment to put on my heels, as they are death machines and the longer I wear them the more I look like a baby deer. This, combined with an old and tight evening gown, does not go well. I hear a pop and I am suddenly able to breathe again. Shit. I finish putting my shoes on and a few girls try, in vain, to zip my dress back up, but the clasp on top has officially busted and this dress is now officially backless. I tuck in the sides and laugh to myself, partially because this is genuinely hilarious, and partially because I am holding onto control of my brain with a single thread.

Standing and smiling while someone more important than me talks: that's something that my choir days have prepared me for. I imagine myself with my cat, or soaking in a warm bath, while I try to keep my face from twitching.

“Director's Award... O Stecina!”

What? Huh? Excuse me? Yes? My hands instinctively go to my mouth as I reenact “The Scream” as cute as one can do such a thing. The MC says something about positivity, I cannot hear it. I do hear her use the wrong pronouns, c'est la vie! Smiling still, I pose for a picture while

every girl behind me can absolutely see my busted dress. Then, I turn around to walk back to my spot, showing it off to the whole audience too. This energy carries me through the long crowning ceremonies and the greeting of my public in sweatpants and tennis shoes until I am home again. It is only a brief moment until I am back on the plane, the train, the city streets, and my dorm bed, where I spend a week dissolving and regaining human status.

This was a peculiar weekend for me, because for once in a very long time I felt like I was supposed to be there, even though I absolutely should not have felt that way. Interacting with the other girls made me feel just as beautiful as them, and the wisps of bitchiness were quenched by an overwhelming positivity, as well as a shared disdain for long rehearsals in painful shoes. I saw more breasts in the shared changing space than I likely will in the entire rest of my life and proved my hypothesis that every titty is special and unique. I am in several group chats of people who are models or could easily be models. I have a new sentence on my resume that is bound to confuse any future employer. I've even been interviewed by a lady at Huffpost who wants to publish my story. Life is weird now.

I am visiting home for another, hopefully less stressful, weekend coming up for Thanksgiving. My parents seem to be getting along a little better, which means perhaps my suffering was not necessarily for nothing. I miss my cat dearly, and I cannot wait to show photos of my pageant days to my entire family, laughing about how unexpected everything was.