

99 WRITING

Finding My Wings

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TYPE
NARRATIVE

The Lancaster evening was bitter cold by my Southern California girl standards, easily forty degrees. My face was surely red from the sharp wind which felt like razor blades sliding across my skin. I had just recently moved to Lancaster, and I was still not accustomed to the cold weather that ruled the night. Wearing my navy blue school polo and khaki skirt was torture that made walking from the car to the pitch black glass door feel like traveling through space for a dragging eternity. But compared to the bare, chilly atmosphere outside, the restaurant was bursting with life and warmth.

In an instant, my face felt the very welcome wave of heat and my eyes needed a second to adjust to the bright yellow walls. All around the restaurant were a range of television screens that displayed different sporting events, beckoning the shouts of enthusiastic fans. I was ready to join in on the yelling, but we weren't here for the sports. No, we were here for much more.

“Welcome to Buffalo Wild Wings, how many?” asked a young woman who wore the very cool jersey required of employees. A part of me wanted to ask for a job application, just to be able to wear it.

“Five,” responded my dad and sister in unison. I hadn't bothered to answer. My mind had gone blank and my heart aflutter as my eyes fell on a table of teenage guys. My cheeks grew red and hot like they had from the frigid cold outside—it's funny how such different things can provoke such similar bodily reactions.

The waiting area overflowed with families much like my own, adjusting to the rapid temperature shift. We were packed like sardines, and it made me irritated at first, but then I settled into a feeling of ease. For most of my life I've been confined to tight spaces—jam-packed classrooms and my ultra cozy childhood home—so it gave me a feeling of safety. My mother, who has been sick for over seven years with a disease doctors haven't been able to pin down, struggled to find a seat. When the hostess finally led us to a booth that barely fit my older brother, sister, and me on one side, I felt relief to see my mom sitting down. But that relief was quickly replaced with anxiety when, with a sharp intake of breath, she commented, "Let's talk about that meeting."

Earlier that day, my parents and younger sister had stopped by my school for a mandatory counselor meeting. My meeting had been scheduled for a week, and I was a wreck. Every day leading up to the meeting, I felt a tightening sensation in my chest that made it hard to breathe. For me, there were innumerable reasons why it had to go right. For one, I was to be the first woman in my family to go to college. At this meeting, the counselor would take your parents through your coursework and credits since freshman year and tell them if you were on track for graduation. The stakes felt impossibly high, and the thought of disappointing my parents filled me with dread. I looked around for my counselor, but she was nowhere to be found. I was informed she could not make it to the meeting, but that it would go on as planned. To my dismay, it was with a woman who I'd never met before. My heart was already racing but when I saw her, I was confused and frankly a little scared. She didn't look as welcoming as my counselor did. She had a cold, stern look in her eyes, and all I kept thinking was that she

didn't know me or my situation at home, and might say something that didn't reflect the full picture.

My parents sat directly in front of this strange woman and I took a seat beside my dad quietly. My nerves were so high that I felt like I was going to have a heart attack in the abnormally stiff and freezing cold chair. As my parents were led through the information, I subconsciously felt myself nodding and bouncing my leg, trying to stay alert and present in this meeting, but my mind drifted to the mountain of assignments my teachers had doled out that week. As I snapped back into the meeting, I heard the lady who made me second guess every grade I received informing my parents that because I had taken core classes freshman year, I was above the credits that I needed, and that was perfect for graduation. As those sweet words entered the room, my body lost some of its tension and my breathing slowed.

The bell rang, signaling the end of the school day, and as if the ringing were meant to announce her presence, my usual counselor walked through the door and joined us at the table. A wave of relief broke over me and the heavy load I carried on my shoulders washed away. She saw that we had begun to talk about scholarships and she quickly brought up three scholarship options for which I was eligible. My parents were listening intently, as though these women were sharing with them a privileged secret. The scholarship that interested me the most was the one that required me to go out of state, which was perfect because I was just weeks away from visiting my dream school, Harvard. By the end of the meeting, my parents were extremely satisfied with my

academic performance thus far and I could feel the love and joy radiating from their bodies.

After parting from the office, my dad offered to reward my accomplishments with dinner at the restaurant of my choice. Naturally, I had a place in mind—the place where I have gone with my family since I was in the womb, literally. When my mom was pregnant, my dad took her to a tiny Thai restaurant called Thai Ocean, a place we’ve been going ever since. To the family, it was a second home, and we even began to call the owner of the place “Mama.” The place itself was sandwiched between two bigger businesses that dwarfed the hole in the wall, and it looked like it had seen better years. The glass tables were rocky and always wet from the cleaning they had just received. The booth seats had holes in the leather, but the wear and tear only made it more homelike. The wood walls made a sharp contrast with the giant mirrors that seemed to engulf the place. The giant mirrors on the walls made the valiant attempt to make the space seem more expansive, but I could see past the illusion and appreciate Thai Ocean for the tight, cozy space that it was. When my dad suggested that we go eat, I realized that my stomach was growling. The eager and expectant look on my dad’s face made it clear he expected me to pick Thai Ocean. Within myself I found that every cell in my body was shouting for the steaming rice that went along with the boiling seven sea soup that made your mouth water at the sight of it. But I had this nagging feeling that I needed something new, something different.

If I’m being honest, I don’t really like to try new things, especially things that I know that I won’t like. On my tenth birthday at Knott’s Berry Farm, I tried rock climbing for the first time. I didn’t want to go up on the wall, but my parents pushed me endlessly until I finally relented. I got about halfway before I started to cry and yell that I wanted

to go back down. It was embarrassing, and frankly traumatizing. And as for wings? They just aren't my thing. On the other hand, the rest of my family had an infatuation with wings and mojitos. Before the meeting, I would have stuck to what was familiar to me, and gone back to Thai Ocean for the millionth time. But my decision to wait three hours in bumper-to-bumper traffic that stretched as far as the eye could see, to jump from the 10 to the 405 to the 5 to the 14, to listen to Johnny Cash bellow from the car stereo on repeat, all to end up at a Buffalo Wild Wings in the middle of a desolate desert? It was nothing short of life-changing.

Okay, so I know what you're thinking: *how can a visit to a cheesy chain restaurant be life-changing?* But that trip to Buffalo Wild Wings sealed in the fate that I had been dealt in that counselor meeting, where for the first time, I saw the doorways open to new horizons. Coming out of that room, I knew that my world was about to expand in exciting ways. Soon, I'll be heading to college on the east coast, meeting new people, studying new things, seeing new sights. Maybe I'll even give rock climbing another chance! But that day, I was going to have fifteen classic lemon pepper wings and enjoy them. I realized after that meeting that it was time to take my first baby step into a life of new experiences—and it would all begin with a heaping pile of lemon pepper wings.