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Imagination, Reality, and Hiding: Chasing the Monster that Never Was

I have always been a dreamer. Whether it came to treasure hunting attempts, plans on finding lost cities and sunken vessels, or wishing to travel to mysterious lands. In my imagination, I was always on the move: On a plane, on a train, on a ship. Anywhere but where I really was. Most people in my life supported this. The few people attempting to bring me “down to Earth” failed miserably, as I never seemed to be grounded into reality. Needless to say that one of the people trying to “wake me up” was a woman who, being simply a random friend we made on vacation, knew nothing about me, and only annoyed me by her remarks on how I was “talking nonsense”.

In around 2008, I had the chance to watch the 1996 TV Mini-Series *The Beast*, which concerned a giant squid terrorizing a Pacific resort community. As an eight-year-old Ukrainian boy who was crazy about action and monster movies, I was mesmerized by the film, and by the prospect of such a creature actually existing. It was during that same year that me and my grandmother took a vacation to the Crimean Peninsula, in a sanatorium in the city of Yevpatoria. Aside from participating in therapeutic procedures, we also regularly went to the beach, where I either played with my toys in the sand, in shallow water, or was being taught how to swim by grandma. The beach that we went to had two white railings, to make coming out of the sea easier for people. One day, as I was happily taking my red toy diver for a swim near these railings, I noticed something very curious: An unknown object was floating in the sea, and heading in my direction. The object was transparent, and had three separate, elongated sections tied up together at one end. The end where it was all tied had two dots on it, one blue and one red, placed next to each other. I had no idea what the object was, but, after about a minute of watching it, my imagination turned the three sections into tentacles, and the two dots into eyes. I don’t remember whether I called for my grandmother, or just told her when she came later, but I informed her that I had just seen, with my own eyes, a giant squid.

Coming back to the resort that day, I kept telling everyone I met that there was a giant squid on the loose, that Crimea was in danger, that everyone had to stay out of the water, and that something needed to be done. In case you’re wondering, I wasn’t scared at all. Moreover, I was ecstatic! Imagine that, living through the plot of a monster movie! For the next few days, I couldn’t stop talking about it. My thoughts, stories, and drawings were revolving solely around that event. In terms of film characters, I was like the scientist everyone calls mad as he is trying to warn people of danger.

My grandmother, of course, understood right away where it all came from, having watched *The Beast* with me. Playing along, she said we should capture it, even suggesting ways it could be done, and telling me a thousand stories about it to make me eat my food. For the rest of the vacation, I became obsessed with capturing the creature. At the docks that we regularly visited, there was a blue yacht named the *Malibu*, which was my favorite vessel to observe. Dreaming once again, I vividly imagined our mission: We would buy the yacht, head out to sea with weapons, diving equipment, and poison, and kick that Cephalopod’s behind. My mind visualized a battle of the ages, with yachts, submersibles, helicopters, Navy, diving assaults, ships pulled down, tentacles slamming, and gigantic explosions. One day, grandma decided to use my passion for my own good, and asked me to write an essay describing my plan. It possibly was the first piece of writing I ever wrote voluntarily. For the first time in my life, the roles were suddenly reversed, and I was the one wanting to write more and expand the story, when grandma thought it was finished. It was also the first time I expressed my imagination in writing.

However, despite all of the effort my grandmother took to elaborate on the squid incident, I still understood she wasn’t taking me seriously. She actively planned the mission, gave all these big ideas, but never actually took the time to prepare for them. She even created small models of a yacht and a submersible out of random materials we had, claiming they were the base for the actual equipment. However, deep inside, I understood this was just an arts-and-crafts project. I kept waiting for us to finally head out to sea, but the time would just never come. Weeks were passing, and I was dreaming. That was the state in which I spent the rest of our vacation, still telling everyone about my grandiose plans. When the time came to leave, I believe grandma told me we would capture the squid next time. I remember us tossing a coin into a local fountain for luck in coming back again. Strangely, however, I did not feel any disappointment or anger for not having reached my goal. On the contrary, I was happy to have lived through an adventure, just like the ones I’d seen in so many movies.

To this day, I frankly have no idea what exactly I saw on the beach that moment. I can tell it certainly was no giant squid. In fact, I highly doubt it was a living being at all. It might have been a fishing net or a cluster of garbage. However, the identity of that object is not important to me anymore. Today, I finally realize *why* I made myself believe it was a squid. And the story of that began way before 2008. Medical malpractice resulted in me being born with cerebral palsy, not able to walk independently. My physical limitations, however, are but one aspect of my condition. It has had a severe impact on my social life, making me an introvert for as long as I can recall. To add to that, it has deprived me of access to places most able-bodied people can visit, further isolating me. And as I sit here, writing about my life almost 13 years after the events occurred, I finally understand that my entire “battle and capture” plan was not about the squid at all. It was a scream, a most sincere desire of my soul, to have an adventure. A true, thrilling, Hollywood-style adventure. And while my feet could not go places on their own, my mind did everything in its power to escape from this truth, even if it meant tricking itself with bizarre misidentifications. There was something within me, a bizarre craving that my young mind was unable to grasp, filling the blanks with vivid action fantasies.

When it came to my condition, I have never been particularly upset with being disabled. In fact, I did not feel like it mattered at all. My parents, grandparents, and other people around me always took the best care of me, sheltering me from any possible harm, offering me everything I needed or wanted, and making sure I have the best life possible. But as I am writing this, I realize that, after all, my Cerebral Palsy did, and still does, impact me. It is just that the blows I received were made much softer by family love and imagination. All of the pain, disappointment, and hardship that I *could* have experienced were carefully covered by a blanket of dreams and desires. They were safely locked away by incidents like the “squid sighting” or my “living room expeditions” to the Congo. I finally know that the reason my family supported my imagination, instead of telling me to “grow up” like many parents do, was to hide me from the possible discomfort and emotional impact of my situation. Even when they finally began steering me into reality, they were doing so in a very specific way, selecting which fantasies I should let go of, and when. With all of that said, it seems to be true, after all, that even though I’ve never directly said to myself “I want to walk”, deep inside my heart, I’ve always had that desire.

Returning to the “squid incident” after so many years, even in my memory, has revealed many things. As I said, I now understand the origins of my adventurous nature better than ever before. I also understand that, although it is nice to be able to afford a flight of fancy, imagination is not the answer to all of my problems. To be able to actually do at least half of the things I’ve dreamt about, I would actually have to get up and improve myself. I would be extremely foolish to miss that opportunity, considering my condition *can* be improved. There are people in this world fairing much worse than myself, and who would be jealous for having that chance. So it is time, for me, to get rid of the tentacles of laziness and procrastination pulling me down, so that I can go out there and battle the real monsters, whichever form they may take. The squid incident was a pair of pink glasses I loved to see the world in, and today, these glasses are way too small to wear. And, taking them off, I see a world where one should create their own adventure, instead of waiting for one to come. I see that confidence is not given, but gained. I see the picture. I accept the challenge. I am starting my preparations. And I encourage all others, disabled or not, to do the same.