

## Time Well Spent

by Emma Piersanti

I have lived most of my life inside my own mind. Dreaming of *one days*. How one day I will be *somewhere* else. How one day I will look *this* way or *that*. How one day I will know *these* people and do *these* things. I have mastered the talent of my body being rooted in the present, but my mind being completely lost in some other time. Maybe the past, maybe the future, or maybe somewhere else altogether. Somewhere that doesn't exist. For a long time, I believed this to be a gift. These walking daydreams gave me hope; hope that although I may not be satisfied in this exact moment, there would be a time when I could be - a time I can tap into just by closing my eyes. It almost made me feel superior, this gift. I had these wild fantasies I kept close to my heart, fantasies I could climb like a ladder, so that once at the top I could look down upon everyone around me. One day these dreams would not be merely a ladder but a plane that would take me far away. A plane that would transport me from this town and these people and would make everyone still stuck there say "wow, look at her".

I'd hold on to this particular dream whenever someone would ask me what exactly I planned to do with a writing degree, or when I found myself alone at a party as my friends went off with someone or another. I never realized how spiteful these dreams had become. The comfort I found in them had overpowered my senses.

But the joke is on me.

That's the issue with ladders made of dreams and malice: you fall right through the cracks, the spaces between rungs. And that plane, the one that was meant to take me so far away and make me feel so much better than everyone else...where is it? Because I'm still here; and everyone else, it seems, has gone. Or they're looking down on me. Looking down at all the

places I've stayed stagnant. Because the hideous underbelly of having a wild mind is that you end up getting stuck in it. Stuck in its web of ugly, constant, tedious thoughts - not just lovely fantasies. I didn't realize until recently that I was a perpetual over thinker. And that therefore I was, and for the most part have always been, an exceptionally anxious person. It's sort of ridiculous. The other week, I told my dad for probably the 100<sup>th</sup> time that I just felt kind of weird, nervous. It was a Sunday afternoon. I was in my pajamas. The sun was shining. I had no responsibilities to attend to. He said to me, "Emma, you really are an anxious person." I was surprised. Like someone who walks into a storm and is astonished that she gets soaking wet. Was I? Was I really an anxious person? What did that mean? How did I get here? I knew then that I had probably over-thought every moment in my entire life. Every single fleeting, temporary moment.

It's startling to think that I have spent most of my time in the recesses of my mind, either wishing the moment away or thinking too hard about it.

Overthinking and dreaming – two concepts that couldn't exist farther away from one another – turn into an incredibly attractive cage for an anxious person. A cage that stops you from changing, that perpetuates your regression: the perfect bait for regret.

Regret.

It gnaws at me. Because I think I got it all wrong. I've anxiously tracked my days by steps, by words, by time wasted and spent. I didn't think about changing. Well I did, but in this big, expansive way that only day dreams allow. I thought about where I would live when I had enough money in my bank account and who I would spend my days with and what I would do for a living. But I never thought about everyday changes. Molecular changes. Week-by- week changes. Driving-out-of-town changes. Eating-by-myself changes. Talking-to-a-stranger

changes. No, I missed and continue to miss these strange, stranger, stranging changes and exchanges because my eyes are never focused on what's in front of me. I'm never satisfied with what's in front of me. I'm too scared of what's in front of me.

And where has it all landed me? The over and underthinking? Not nowhere, exactly. But not somewhere, either. I'm in the middle. Maybe you think I'm being melodramatic, that every 20-year-old feels this way - too close but too far from everything. That doesn't make it any less true. It doesn't change the fact that the number of days I've spent embraced by the same four walls makes me feel embarrassed. That I have lived thousands of lives inside my mind but only half of one in reality.

I'm stuck. Will you help me? I'm stuck here in my room, holding something that's more than a memory. It has to be more than memory, because I can feel it. I can smell and taste and see it. It's heavy, and solid, and slipping from my grasp.

It's me. It's me and my friend from middle school driving home from the beach, listening over and over again to this song we heard in an indie movie. The sun is warm, the song is sweet, and when I fall asleep my friend takes a picture of me leaning against the window. We laugh at how funny I look all the way home.

It's me in grade 12 English class. The teacher's handing back our final essays. I wrote mine on this peculiar Margaret Atwood novel about a woman who becomes a cake. Or something like that. She bakes a cake that looks just like her and eats it. Consumes herself. The edible woman, I guess. The teacher begins to tell us that he showed one of our essays to a friend; a woman he knew who was perpetually single and felt doomed as a result. He said this particular student's essay had given the woman some sort of new perspective. I sat at my desk, looking down at the glossy wood, thinking – knowing – he was talking about this boy who had top

grades and made everyone acutely aware of that. But I was wrong. Because my teacher, before returning to his desk, came over to mine and said, "It was yours, by the way." It was mine. I blushed like an idiot for a solid five minutes.

It's me in my friend's basement at 2am. We're all sitting in our pajamas, laughing at something. Everything. Anything. It's dark. The only light comes from the T.V. playing some show we're not even watching because we're too busy talking. I'm exhausted, but I feel light, and nowhere near ready to fall asleep. It feels as if this dimly lit room is exactly where I'm meant to be. Like it's mine and will forever belong to me and these smiling people.

My friend no longer lives there. She no longer lives *here*. She's in a different world. On a different plane. I mean, she really only lives 30 minutes away, but those 30 minutes hold a lifetime of changes. We won't sleep in her parents basement again, shut away from the rest of the world, completely content with just one another's company. Because nothing is the same. Because I'm stuck here in my room, and the memory I'm gripping so tightly is suddenly a phone. I'm alone. The walls are closing in on me, and the screen is swallowing me whole as I scroll and scroll and scroll, experiencing life through pixels. Pixelated. Not experiencing life at all.

That girl I went to the beach with? She's in a bar. She wears a black dress and is surrounded by people. And the girl who used to live in the house-of-sleepovers? She's at a posh restaurant surrounded by happy, shiny, friendly faces.

Everyone seems to be everywhere. Moving on. Through time and in time, smoothly, seamlessly. Living their *one days*. Even though I was the one who thought about it relentlessly. They are there. While I'm here. Stuck. Stagnant. In the middle.

That's the problem, isn't it? Thinking of myself in these imaginary times and spaces. In the middle. On that plane. Atop that ladder. So focused on finding the perfect place to sit and peer down at everyone around me that I didn't see the steps ahead. How they go on and on. I can't see where they end; maybe they never do. I look back down from the steps that seem to lead to oblivion to what's below, and suddenly I can't see anyone anymore. It's frightening; I want to grip the step in front of me so hard my knuckles turn white. How am I supposed to know where I am? Or where I should go? Or what I'm meant to do? I want to mold myself into the ladder itself and never be seen, let anyone who climbs it step right over me. It might not feel nice, but it would be safer under the soles of someone else's shoes than sitting on that ladder, watching steps go by and beyond, not knowing where they lead.

But what if I pause, and look out between the steps? At the space that separates the ascending levels, so that I could only see a small sliver? A small sliver of time, of space, of reality. Maybe then, I could stand slowly. I wouldn't let the wind that whipped at me scare me into sitting back down. I don't know if I'd take a step forward, or a step back, or if I'd fall right to the bottom again.

But I think that might be alright.

At least I would be standing.

Sometimes I remember that moment in English class, and I think that's what it felt like. I was finally standing. It was one of those moments where you're not thinking too hard or drifting inside some made up "one day", but *here*. Standing proud. Proud you got a good grade, impressed the teacher. But it was only recently that I stumbled upon the crux of the matter: words. My words - a measly 17-year-old's words had touched another person's life. I tried to explain this once to a friend, but they didn't get it. They didn't get how profound, how

unbelievable that was to me. How it made me feel like I was actually *doing* something - with words. With writing. Standing on a ladder floating precariously high in space. I had this strange, quiet feeling of optimism, of change. An "I can do this" kind of feeling. An "I *will* do this" kind of feeling. I will go out in the world and be seen and heard. People will see me and read me, my words, my world - ascending. Easy, right?

I was standing on that ladder, wind whipping at me, arms thrown out at my sides, fearless.

I didn't dream that three years later I would still look back on that moment so fondly. That I would still be holding on to it like a vice, not letting it slip slip *slip* from my grasp. I didn't dream I would be like a starved woman, squeezing the last dregs of inspiration, of affirmation, out of those words. A starved woman, with only a cake to feast on, a cake that looks just like me. A woman who, seemingly unconsciously, sat back down on that step, and has been there ever since.

I think that's why you're reading this right now. It's as if the overthinking and the daydreaming and the obsessions have turned solid, into objects I've been holding over my face like a shield. But they've started to lose their wear, and I've finally caught a glimpse of where I have been all these years. Sitting. Static. On this step. I need to release my grip on those mental afflictions that have turned into tangible weapons. Just for a second. Because without my hands clutching at wistful thoughts and daydreams, I think I can make better use of myself.

I can put my words together like stars in a lost constellation and see if someone else might take pleasure in reading them. And maybe, just maybe, the words of a measly 17-year-old - now 20 - can have some sort of effect, an impact. Because I know I will regret it if I don't write *this* and share it, even though it's terrifying. If I don't write this, then a month from now on a

random Tuesday I'll be sitting between the same four walls, and holding onto a memory for dear life. Or staring into a phone screen's infinity. And I'll remember this day. I'll remember what I could have done but did not do, and I would be melting.

Melting into the familiar purple walls of my room, the unchanging view from my window, the chandelier hanging in the center of my ceiling, tinged with the colour of time. On this same step. I would be melting into the cracks that lie between change, that lead to deep rivers called remorse, that lull lost dreams and wishes never fulfilled.

But by doing *this*, by doing something other than falling into lost memories or being numbed by walking day dreams, maybe that Tuesday full of predictable regret will never come. I think I have finally realized the weight the stranger changes hold. The little things that pass by you everyday that actually have the ability to transform you, or at least a part of you. The stranger changes stop you from melting into the familiar, from molding into the steps of that ladder. Stranger changes invite you to climb the steps, ascend instead.

Maybe they'll let me be the kind of person, who when that random Tuesday rolls around, will look back on my days, and be able to call them time well spent. On ladders, on planes, on pages.