

GIFTED

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“Only take one if you think you’ve earned it.” The overextended and never-paid mother-of-some-kid-on-the-team explained. Apparently, she did not count correctly when buying plastic trophies for the gaggle of six-year-olds. Six-year-olds that now had a question to answer; *did I earn a trophy?* You don’t recall a single practice, a game, or a minute with the bat in your hands, but you do remember what you told yourself. *Yes. I’ve earned this.*

Being good at Kindergarten T-ball was like, well, like being good at Kindergarten T-ball. There couldn’t be an easier sport so long as your grapefruit of a head could see out of the helmet made for a slightly larger grapefruit. After that hump, you were good as gold. Gold like the plastic cup you earned. You earned it because you were good. It was proof that you were good at something. You remember it felt good to be good at something.

When you got older, you realized that sports are actually supposed to give this thing called a “challenge.” Well, that was okay. You didn’t need sports anyways. You had school instead—Times Table Records, “Most Awake Student,” Honor Roll. Your attendance awards were so wonderful that you refused to throw them away. You refused to believe they were merely participation ribbons. It never occurred to you that you’d be missing one—a leadership ribbon. Those were for students who accepted that thing called a “challenge.” It didn’t matter, you had plenty of ribbons and the best part was that all you had to do was arrive, memorize the instructions poured into your mind, and follow them. Simple. Your GED eventually hung next to those ribbons. A wooden-framed throne

with steps of shiny, colorful polyester. You never needed to be grateful for it. You earned it yourself. You were good at school.

Then it changed. Teachers made sure that their courses were a “challenge.” You kept driving yourself to class until, suddenly, that wasn’t enough. The only instruction they gave you was to impress them. They asked you to make something new, things they haven’t seen before. Things you hadn’t heard before. Ridiculous demands that you’d never done before. Never done. You received your first B+. You failed. You changed your major. A-. You failed again. So, you left. That was okay. You didn’t need school anyways. You had work.

You were a part-time night janitor for your college. Almost 5 hours a night, you did a job that only took 2. You were that good. Then they asked you to go full-time. A challenge. You had never worked full-time before. Well, that was okay. You didn’t need a job anyways. You lived at home with parents who had jobs. Parents who were so proud of your grades (only the ones you showed them), your technicolor attendance ribbons and GED, your Times Table Records, and even a miniature T-ball trophy that would sit in their closet for years. You were good at being their child. Good enough. Enough. A little less than that. Not enough. Soon, not even close. That little T-ball trophy could be anywhere right now. You could’ve been anywhere by now. If you were good at one more thing. One thousand things. Everything you didn’t do because you weren’t good at them. It felt good to be good at something. It wasn’t worth being bad at everything else.

You don’t feel ashamed, yet. You don’t have to feel ashamed because you haven’t failed. You haven’t failed because you haven’t tried. Friends and family tell you stories of the hard things they did and of their failures, and you feel vindicated. One of them, a man, said that he had just lost his job. He was a nurse and when the world got sick, they didn’t want him. It was wrong, but it made you feel good. You were right to never try. A trophy shelf exists in your mind, so full of awards that the little wooden screws that hold it in place tremble. They shudder in awe of your made-up achievements on the shelf. It couldn’t possibly fit anymore. Not a single ribbon. You’re still in some classes; you’ve chosen the easiest ones in the easiest major for the easiest degree. You refuse to believe they are that easy.

You want to tell stories about the hard things you did, but your stories are going to be without the failures.

The most valuable thing you find is time alone. Time that you can concoct these stories. The battles. The performances. The lyrics. The lies. The trophy shelf that no one else can see gets bigger. It has a spot for your guitar, now gilded in bronze. A spot for your follower count, now in the millions. A whole shelf is given to hold a Grammy, an Emmy, a Tony, an Oscar. Two of each, even. *Actually*, you think, *that's too much*. The spot for that leadership has long since been filled by these awards. Why wouldn't it be? These trophies are better than those ribbons you had before. So, you keep making them. Conjured from the thin ever-thinning air in your mind. Sometimes they appear on their own; you become obsessed with them.

You look away from that shelf but only when you must. Harmless hours dredge into days, mutate into months. Finally, a year. The shelf has taken up so much room that you can barely fit anything else in your mind. Not even another ribbon, this time even if they're real. It's a new feeling. No, not new, an old one. A challenging one. A challenge that cannot be run from, not this time. It slithers like an eel, but it's heavy like a bear. You can't be sure. It hurts too deeply to look directly at. So, it slinks around, shaking the trophy case and everything else in your mind for that matter. You try hunting it, but you can't seem to track it down at first. It's hidden and hiding. Darting out just to knock you over. You search and chase and search, but the feeling isn't anywhere you look.

The feeling can't be found because you built your trophies on top of it. It's been there all along, beneath the floorboards, beating like a tell-tale heart. It's the old feeling that comes with failure. It lives behind those trophies, the ribbons, the gilded guitar, the Grammy, the Emmy, the Tony, the Oscar. It left its shadow on the A-, the B+, all the grades that were too easy to earn. One might wonder if other people had beaten this creature. They might think that a leader is a person that faces it. You do not. You do not wonder; you do not face it. It's been marking everything in this room for your whole life. You told yourself it wasn't real, wasn't there. You thought you could avoid it forever. You were wrong.

What are you supposed to do when the one place you can run to, the place you've spent these months, becomes home to the one thing you've been running from? You actually don't have the attention to ask this question. If you did, you might have found a better answer. But better was never the objective. Easy was the objective. So, you find an easy answer instead.

You sit with that answer on a new shelf. You reach for it every time that feeling rumbles its way up. It doesn't leave, but it doesn't move either. It still hurts to look at. The two of you face each other, your eyes squeezed shut. A blind standoff. Neither one of you wants that trigger to be pulled. You've begun to realize that's the only way this ends. No one else could see your trophy case. No one could reach you when you were gone into your mind. You knew that. It's what made the retreat so common, so wonderful. You did not know, however, that someone noticed you when you were gone. A nurse. A nurse that no one wanted.

The nurse was watching when no one else was. They saw you disappear, and they decided not to let you go. You didn't think anyone could follow you in, certain that the door locked behind you. But the nurse had a key. They used to have a room just like yours. The night they came in, you realized that. You also realized that they faced that creature before. You also realized that they couldn't be a nurse no one wanted, because you wanted them there. You wanted them to take that easy answer from your hands and hold them as they walked you through the harder answer. You needed them there and they convinced you that you were needed, too. A leader is someone who can see when you've gone missing. The time you spent in your head was invisible to everyone else. Not to them. You've heard their stories—they inspired some of yours. A leader finds you in a blind standoff. They aren't afraid to move. To enter. The leader that found you held the door open with one hand and beckoned with the other. They weren't afraid to look you in the eye, not like you were afraid. A leader is someone who lives with that feeling you're afraid of. Then they help you live with it too. They see you as gifted. Then help you use those gifts.

A leader is someone who found me.

Now I'm looking for you.