

Senior Quest

October 2014



Meredith sighed, resting her heavy head against the cold window of her parents Toyota Camry. She counted her breaths as they fogged up the glass and quickly evaporated. *One, two, three, four...* Her father pulled up to the ferry terminal and cleared his throat, interrupting her count.

“Here we are,” he said, his eyes worried, shifting to his daughter. She bit her nails and stared straight ahead.

“I have to go,” she said, to no one in particular. Her father nodded, nervously, willing her to lift her head off the window. Reluctantly, she did. The two stepped out of the car and pulled a big, obnoxiously pink duffle bag out of the trunk. She threw it over her shoulder with a grimace. Her father faced her and put both hands on her shoulders. “Good luck,” he said, sincerely.

“Thanks,” she responded without much thought.

Meredith headed towards the ferry terminal, noticing more and more familiar faces as she approached.

Her stomach filled with the dense weight of regret. She looked over her shoulder for her father, but she only saw blinking red tail lights. Walking into the terminal she saw a group of her classmates gathered on a bench, and she quietly joined them, passing off her obvious discomfort as sleepiness, yawning for effect. Her crew advisor and principal, Mr. Pierce,





bounded up to the group of students, his smile wide and goofy.

“Good morning, seniors!” He said excitedly, dropping his duffel at his feet. “Here we are!”

Here we are, Meredith repeated in her head, her tone varying greatly from her principal’s. There was nothing she hated more than a school trip, which made her high school a challenge for her. Casco Bay specializes in school trips. It’s known for “Junior Journey,”

the week-long trip students take their third year to volunteer for Habitat for Humanity and create documentaries about the people meet along the way. Meredith’s class of seventy had driven down to Queens in a bus far too big for New York City side streets and rebuilt homes destroyed during Hurricane Sandy. Most students found the experience life-altering, and an amazing opportunity to bond with their peers.

Meredith had come home with a different story. Though she hid her opposing opinion for fear of coming across as ungrateful or unworldly, Meredith had struggled immensely on Junior Journey. She’d only started at Casco Bay that year, transferring from the vastly different, far more traditional Portland High



School, which enrolled three times more students than her new high school.

Portland had been its own struggle. Not like the school was to blame for Meredith getting sick, but to her, it would *always* be the place she got sick. Experimenting with restriction and crash diets throughout middle school and freshman year, Meredith developed a “full-blown” eating disorder her sophomore year. In 2013, they called it “EDNOS”—eating disorder not otherwise specified—meaning she



didn't meet the criteria for a diagnosis of bulimia or anorexia, but was stuck somewhere in the middle. She wasn't thin enough to be anorexic, and while she purged plenty, she didn't binge enough to be bulimic. Even her diagnosis left her feeling inadequate. Her sophomore year was interrupted by a month-long hospitalization, after which she returned to Portland High School, where her old friends hadn't stuck around and the bathrooms were haunted by menacing ghosts. The only thing she knew to do was leave.



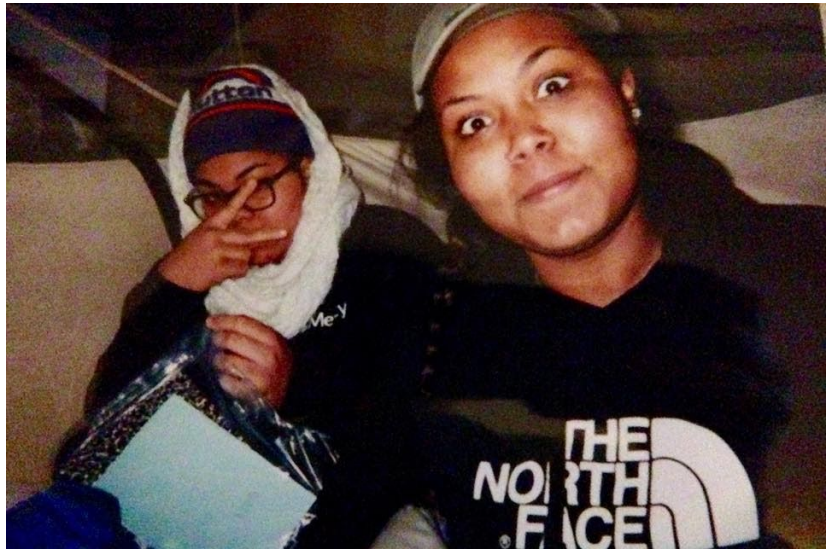
So, she transferred to Casco Bay High School; officially an “expeditionary learning outward bound” school, but unofficially a “hippie-dippie, dope-smoking, hug fest.” That’s how it’s critics would describe it, anyway. And they’re not entirely wrong. It’s impossible to walk down the halls of Casco without seeing a pair of Birkenstocks, someone with a neon pair of those HUF pot leaf socks, or two friends embracing like they hadn’t seen each other in years. Meredith wasn’t fazed by the hippies or the weed—she enjoyed both—but the hugging made her nervous. She’d never been a fan of sharing feelings, openly expressing emotions, all that touchy-feely bull-shit. She



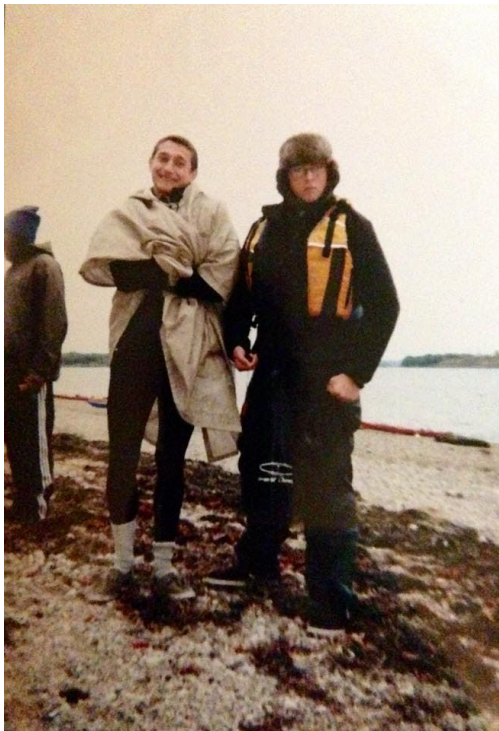
preferred to keep her emotions where they belonged, stuffed deep in the pit of her stomach, only to be released by fingers at the back of her throat, in the privacy of a bathroom stall. However, she figured she’d rather dodge peoples probing questions and outstretched arms for her last two years of high school than avoiding friends who wouldn’t speak to her and getting sicker. Casco Bay felt like her last hope.

Junior Journey threw her for a loop. While the documentary and volunteer work was enjoyable and meaningful, she felt lost at mealtimes. Ever since she’d been discharged from the hospital, about a year before, her parents had handled her food. Her meals were planned and made and forced down by her mom and dad, because they

knew if they didn't, she wouldn't. This trip was the first time she was in charge of her own food. In anticipation, she'd packed her go-to "safe foods": plain Cheerios, low carb, fat, and calorie pita wraps, apples. Meanwhile, her classmates ate the food provided by the organization that housed them. She snuck out during mealtimes to smoke cigarettes in concrete alleyways. The week turned into an excellent weight loss opportunity, her eating disorder distracting her from the experience she could be having, the one her peers were having.



The Casco Bay experience is bookended by Freshman and Senior Quest. Both begin on Cow Island, home of Rippleffect, an organization that runs outdoor adventure camps and programs for kids and teens. Freshmen camp out or sleep in yurts with their crew (crew is like a designated, Casco Bay family—you stay in the same crew, with the same group of kids, for all four years). Freshman Quest is meant for bonding, forcing unfamiliar and uncomfortable fourteen and fifteen year olds to perform trust activities on ropes courses and in kayaks. Senior Quest is meant for reflection, musing over how far you and your Casco Bay family have come together, while gazing at stunning Maine sunsets on rocky island beaches. Meredith missed out on Freshman Quest, for which she was secretly grateful. She didn't mind her crew, but she wasn't sure she'd love spending a week on an island with them. Yet there she was on an early October Monday, rocking back and forth in a painfully slow ferry boat, about to spend an entire week kayaking from island to island, sharing tents with a group of people she'd procrastinated getting to know, unsure if she'd be able to reflect on a bonding experience she'd never had.



The senior class of Casco Bay High School was dropped off at Diamond Cove, all seventy, plus a handful of teachers, collected on the small wooden dock like a cackling flock of seagulls. One by one, crews were shipped out on a smaller boat, the destination: Cow Island. Pierce crew arrived around ten a.m., and gathered into a circle, their duffels at their feet. Meredith looked around



the circle at her motley crew: Jake, Zach, Camille, Savannah, Noor, Mina, Zoë, Sebastien, Alex, Azari, Zahara, and Peter. She found herself wishing she'd taken the time to get to know them better. She'd seen them, talked to them, hung out with them every day at school, yet here, between the salty air and crimson, orange, and emerald trees, they felt like strangers.

They busied themselves selecting their kayaks for the week, figuring out who would share the tandem kayak. Mina, almost unbearably bubbly and talkative, and Noor, quiet but determined, agreed to paddle together. Zach and Jake fought over the extra-long, faded red kayak. Peter picked the light blue one, claiming it by crawling into the cockpit and sitting solemnly while the rest of us began to transfer the contents of our duffels into black trash bags, and then into our kayaks. The hustle and bustle of getting to Cow had distracted her from her nerves, but now they returned—she hadn't packed any food, knowing that anything she packed in her duffle would have to fit in her kayak,



travel with her on the ocean, without refrigeration, for a week. Packing her own food was an impossibility.

After packing their own gear, they began to pack away the group's gear into the kayaks. Then, Pierce handed out gallon Ziploc bags filled with our breakfasts and snacks for the week: Snickers and Pay Days, Chewy granola bars, oatmeal packets, ramen noodles, trail mix. Meredith panicked, searching for a single safe

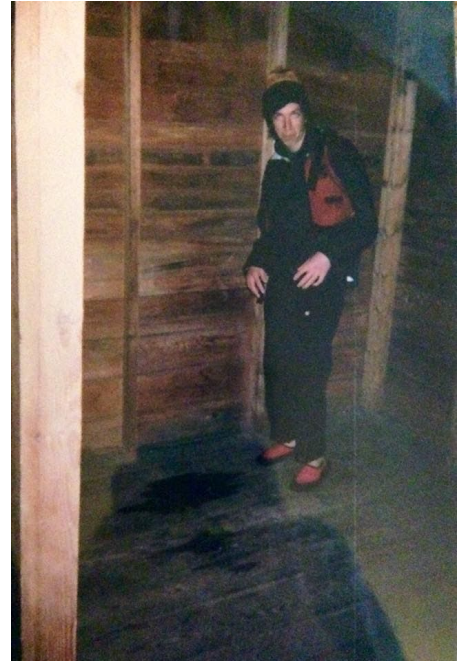
food in the bag, anything that wasn't laden with fat and carbs and calories. She closed her eyes, trying to shut out the fear. Before she had much time to fret, they were getting ready to haul their boats down to the waterfront. Meredith quickly realized she could barely lift hers off the ground. She'd always been strong, an athlete, but since the hospital she'd been noticing more and more how her muscles had deteriorated. Her strength had been replaced by an exhausted quivering. Jake and Zach carried her kayak to the shore while she carried an armful of paddles.

After all thirteen of them were arranged at the shoreline, the group was finally ready to push off. Meredith sat in her dark blue kayak, facing the Atlantic Ocean. The water was a slate gray, with a slight chop, reflecting the wispy but widespread clouds overhead. She closed her eyes again, but this time they fluttered gently together; sea spray had already begun to fleck her cheeks, and the tickle of the icy, miniscule drops against her pale skin made her feel both tranquil and alive. Her eyes opened as she felt her kayak shift beneath her as one of the accompanying Rippleffect guides pushed her kayak into the sea.

The group paddled gracelessly around the edge of Cow Island, their destination undecided. The plan was, simply, to paddle until they tired or the sky began to darken, choose an island, and camp there. Her crew had formed the diamond shape she'd learned to make when she had gone to Rippeleffect for camp as a kid. Zach and Jake were in the lead, secretly competing for the alpha-male position. Mina and Noor were in the back, struggling to paddle their tandem kayak; the Rippeleffect guides eventually

tied a rope to their bow and dragged them. Meredith hung around the middle, trying to find a paddling grove.

Meredith's mind, for the first time ever, perhaps, was completely vacant. Usually it felt stuffed, overflowing, ripping at the seams with thoughts, words, ideas, and images; she rarely found peace in the solitude of her own mind. But here, bobbing gently atop grey waves,



sealed into a plastic boat with a neoprene spray skirt, surrounded by classmates, on a *school trip*, of all things, her brain had been swept clear of the dirt and clutter. Not a single thought raced through her head. She could hear her heart beat rhythmically in her ears; she could see the section of the horizon that was open ocean, a straight shot to Portugal; she could smell salt and brine and cleansing rain; she could feel her muscles contracting, releasing, building, strengthening.

For the first night, they settled on Jewell Island. They'd had a long, but uneventful paddle across the Bay, and were eager to settle in for the night. As they pulled their kayaks up onto the beach, the sky began to darken quickly. They hustled to set up their tents for the night. The boys shared a big tent, while the girls split into two tents. Meredith was in a tent with Zahara and Zoë. The group ate a hurried dinner on the rocks, a flavorless vegetable soup, worsened by the fact that someone had forgotten to pack salt and pepper—no one ate that night.

The next morning they prepared to set off further into the bay. Everyone had devoured their breakfasts—pancakes hot off the camping stove, granola bars, candy bars, oatmeal packets. Meredith choked down a dry granola bar and bundled up. It was freezing, the wind was harsh and relentless and there was a constant drizzle hanging in the air. Her body ached; muscles she didn't know she had were cramping and sore.

The ocean was choppy, gray, intimidating. Mina was reliably cheerful, and happily dragged her kayak down to the shore first—after her and Noor's tandem trouble the day before, Mina decided to take a single. Excitedly, she pushed out into the chop and promptly tipped over. Her kayak hung upside down, suspended in the steely salt water. Pierce crew froze. Suddenly, Mina appeared, all smiles, coming through the water like a mermaid, her dark hair dripping.



"I'm okay!" She yelled, trying to contain her laughter. Everyone rushed to help her flip her kayak. The water was *ice* cold. She joked through her shivers.

An hour later, half the group was bobbing about one-hundred yards away from shore, waiting for the rest of the group to catch up. Meredith turned around just in time to see her principal, Mr. Pierce, a six-foot-plus man wearing Crocs, flip his kayak in the middle of the water. Meredith watched in horror as the guides paddled to his rescue. Finally, the group managed to gather together, two of it's members wet, shivering, and yet still, somehow, smiling. Meredith admired their positivity and resilience.

They paddled all day through the difficult weather and daunting waves, stopping once for a quick lunch—which Meredith skipped. At the end of the long day, they pulled onto the shore of Crow Island. Everyone was exhausted. They hurriedly unpacked their kayaks and searched for a place to set up their tents. They came across an abandoned shack one-hundred feet back from the water. The boys



claimed the shack as their spot that night. Sore and tired, they gathered on the porch of the shack to make a pasta dinner. Meredith was shaking from cold, dehydration, and low blood sugar. A dull ache had flooded her cranium. She picked at her pasta—it was one of her biggest fear foods—but found herself thoughtlessly eating faster and faster, and going back for seconds. She was so hungry. Her stomach was overpowering the eating disorder thoughts.

That night she battled with feelings of guilt and shame. She couldn't believe she'd eaten pasta, and so much of it, and in front of other people. But her body relished the nutrients, her stomach was quiet and content and her head felt a little sharper. Her hands were still, and her legs weren't twitchy. She slept soundly.

The next morning she woke up hungry, and made a choice. Today, she was going to try that crazy thing her therapist was always talking about: she was going to *listen to her body*. It was saying it wanted oatmeal. Before they'd even left Crow, her body let her



know it wanted trail mix too, and instead of shutting it down, she gave it what it asked for. Climbing into her kayak and picking up the paddle, her arms and hands felt sore, like they'd been working hard, but they weren't tired. She felt ready, and strong. The seemingly perpetual clouds had begun to disperse, shrinking to white, wispy brush strokes

across the deepest, brightest blue she'd ever seen.

The rest of the week flew by, a montage of inside jokes and happy memories. Like when Pierce had a suspicion that they'd snuck vodka on the trip, but really they were just trying to savour Zach's "Portland water" (Cow Island water is horrible compared to Portland water). Pierce ended up using that one as the opener to their graduation speech. Or when Peter got so tired and grumpy that he fell asleep face down on the ground, too exhausted to crawl into his tent. Or the last fire they had where they shared their silliest childhood stories, like Mina throwing a watermelon out of her apartment window and breaking someone's windshield. Meredith could enjoy these moments clearly; she was alert and present, not fogged by hunger pangs and fatigue. Every night for the rest of quest, Meredith went to sleep full and tired. Every morning, she woke up hungry and awake. Each day Meredith made a decision: today, she was going to listen to her body.

Senior Quest, unlike Junior Journey, was clarifying for Meredith. She left feeling *different*. After returning home from Quest, she found it more and more difficult to ignore her hunger cues—something she'd perfected over the years. She wasn't miraculously healed, but she had a new awareness that made it difficult to engage in behaviors that had become second-nature for her. She also found herself with more friends than she'd had in a long time. She grew close to her crew and learned to appreciate their strengths and quirks all the same. School became easier when her crew became her friends.

Most importantly, she realized that food was actually necessary, something her eating disorder had convinced her was a lie, despite all logic and reasoning. She learned that in order to do the things she wanted—kayak, laugh, have friends, keep memories, feel the sun and the rain on her skin, sleep peacefully, explore, learn, grow, experience, *live*—she simply had to eat.

