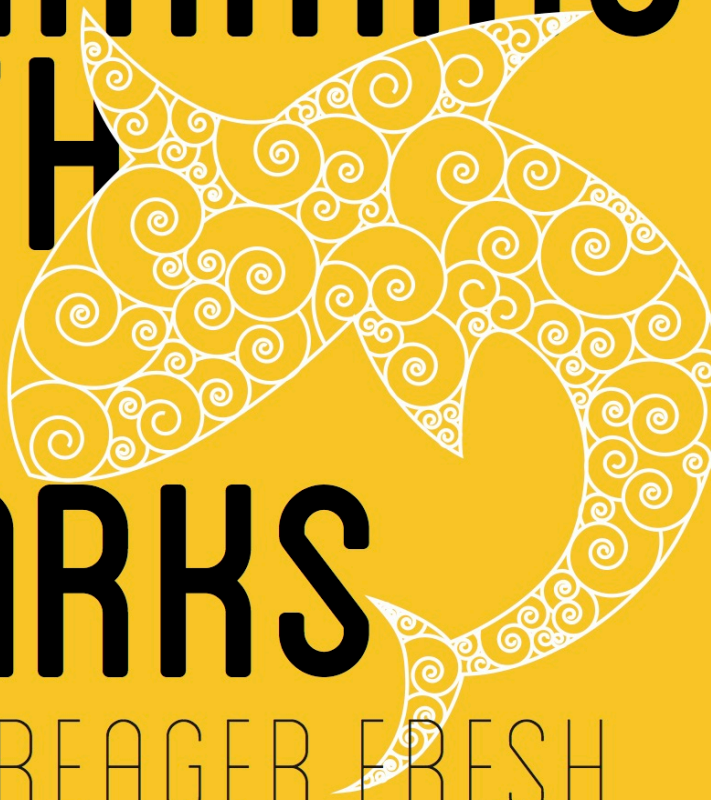


# SWIMMING WITH THE SHARKS



AN OVEREAGER FRESH  
GRADUATE'S TAKE ON  
LIFE AFTER GRADUATION  
**MARCELLA PURNAMA**

# **Swimming with The Sharks**

an Overeager Fresh Graduate's Take on  
Life after Graduation

**Marcella Purnama**



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writer

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Interior layout: Marcella Purnama

Cover design: Kim Chung Ho

“Relax. You will become an adult. You will figure out your career. You will find someone who loves you. You have a whole lifetime; time takes time. The only way to fail at life is to abstain.”

Johanna de Silentio

# Contents

## Prologue

### Part 1: Welcome to The Real World

Chapter 1: A Cold Wake Up Call

Chapter 2: There's This Thing Called Respect

Chapter 3: The One Makes It Worth

Chapter 4: Swimming with The Sharks

Chapter 5: I Quit

### Part 2: The Things You Don't Know... Yet

Chapter 6: It's Not a Matter of Starting Right

Chapter 7: You are Not Your Work

Chapter 8: Passion? It's (Not) Overrated

Chapter 9: Being 'You'

### Part 3: To My Fellow Fresh Graduates

Chapter 10: You are Not Alone

Chapter 11: Not All Those Who Wander are Lost

Chapter 12: A Silver Lining

## Epilogue

## About The Author



# Prologue

It was the end of October on a Monday morning when I felt utterly lost and spent. All my university life I was planning my way out, thinking as soon as I threw away the student profession, I would be on my way to some grand adventures, on the path of success paved with gold, glitter, and bling.

It wasn't, to say the least.

Like all the rest of Monday mornings, I woke up at 6.45am after trying to resist the temptation of snoozing the alarm once, and dragged my feet to take a shower and get ready for yet another day at work.

I had a full-time job, quite a well paid one in fact, and I was dragging myself to work.

That was not how I envisioned my first year of working life would look like.

I arrived at the office a couple of minutes past nine and even though I was late, I was the first one. It reinforced the idea of Monday – of another day at work and another day that I would rather spend elsewhere rather than doing this.

Turning on my laptop, I checked my emails and replied them. After an hour or so, the clear sky was suddenly dark, and a few minutes after, it rained heavily. "Just like Melbourne," I thought to myself. I reasoned that this was the perfect time to get my hot Grande latte at Starbucks, because, you know, it was Monday morning.

And Monday morning was a good enough reason for you to get your fix.

I went downstairs, and ordered my coffee to the lady in her 20s that had served me countless times for the past two months. I never did know her name. I was not even sure if she recognised me as a regular, despite coming here three times a week.

As I made my payment and sat at the nearest table from the pick-up counter, I wondered what my life had turned into.

I was unhappy and unfulfilled. My mind was constantly thinking about the good old days or the supposedly awesome new ones. My mind, or worse, my heart, was not at present, and I was feeling stuck.

Where did the hype go, I wondered. My entire university years I dreamed of the time when I finally had a real career. And now all



I had was a career without passion. To make things worse, it had been just ten months after graduation.

I suddenly remembered about my interview session with the CEO at the place I was working. He was checking out my writings and one of them was titled, "Life after graduation". On a candid, full of irony and yet perhaps truth note he said, "Life after graduation? You just graduated, what do you know about life after graduation?"

He wasn't expecting a reply, and I just made a small laugh, trying to hide a little hint of bruised pride in my voice.

Noted, he was more than thirty years my senior and obviously knew more about everything in this life than I did, but in that moment, my fresh graduate attitude made me chuckled silently in my heart, "Well, I've graduated. And I've lived to tell the tale. I may not know everything, but it is as good as knowing."

But as it is with everything in life, the more you know, the more you actually don't.

That morning in Starbucks with my burnt hot Grande latte turned out to be one of the turning points in my life. It was when I decided to write this story – the one about an overeager fresh graduate who always rushed to live the next best thing. Similar to all overeager fresh graduates out there, I felt lost, unfulfilled, unhappy, and plainly, I didn't know what to do.

But coming back to one's feet starts with accepting that we are indeed, lost.



# **Part 1:**

# **Welcome to The Real**

# **World**

In Developmental Psychology you'll learn Erikson's stages of psychosocial development. It starts with you, as a baby, trying to develop a sense of trust to your primary caregivers, usually parents, and a sense of mistrust to strangers who want to kidnap you. It ends with reflection at the end of your life, trying to justify if

whether you have indeed lived a fulfilled life or channeling the regrets you might have.

Before we get there, we have our puberty years – the period where our schoolteachers label as "searching for one's identity period", taking place at 12-18 years of life. Those are the slightly crappy and confusing times – full of anger, denial, betrayal, first time falling in love and first time getting hurt and other firsts.

They tell us if we have survived this period, we will grow up with a strong sense of identity to discover the world, or to borrow the cliché, to spread our wings and fly.

Yes, we might be having a mid-life crisis 35 years down the road. But with our eyes fixed on getting to Friday after school, what is the meaning of 35 years?

It might be safe to say now that those stages are not entirely wrong, they are just not really accurate.

I am just a wanna-be psychologist who is fascinated by all things developmental, but really, each one of those stages doesn't happen only at a specific period of time. They happen again and again as one grows older.

I had an identity crisis when I was 14. I have another one right now when I am 21.

Today marks the anniversary of my two months in this office, and I haven't had a single light-bulb moment that I am meant to be here. The clock shows that it's 2.30pm and my colleague in front of me has been swearing loudly since morning. My workload is not

that bad actually, although I reckon my colleague's is. I would move to the local Starbucks to work when the internet is down, which if you put Jakarta and lousy internet access into the equation, it actually happens quite often.

I have the glorious nine-to-five job. Despite vowing to never become one of those clerks behind the desk who spends her life staring at the computer, I have held not one, but two of these full-time jobs since graduation.

Honestly, this is not what I thought life would look like when I was still dreaming away in university.

Like, you thought graduating is the cure you seek, as a mean of escaping all those never-ending assignments and exams. Getting your first paycheck would mean the world, as if suddenly you are given a ticket to the adult world. You would have the best job there is that marries your passion and high-billed wage and get promoted in three months' time.

You would wake up early in the morning, kicking your blanket while getting excited for the day's awesome events to unfold, ready to spend another eight or perhaps twelve hours in something you truly love.

Your colleagues would love you and your boss would fancy you. In fact, everyone would adore you and talk only about your success and accomplishments in front and behind your back.

Some random journalists would call you then, asking for an interview as you are one of the few people who manage to become a millionaire at the age of 21.

Sorry pumpkin, truth is, they ain't gonna happen (highly unlikely, to say the least).

Your first year transitioning from being a student into an employee is hard. Yes, some people embrace their roles quickly and blend in like they have been living as chameleons their whole lives.

But for the others? It's hard. It's doable, but it's hard. There are a lot of lessons to be learned, and so little time. It feels like rapid fire in a war zone even when we finally do have money in our wallets to spend for drinks on Friday nights.

And if you are a little bit like me, the transition makes me feel lost.

Some nights I wonder how seven billion humans learn to suck it, man up, and transform into this highly responsible adult in a black suit and climb the ladder.

Other nights I wonder if these seven billion humans ever have any difficulty in settling in, because if they do, they don't show a single thing.

Some mornings I wonder if I am such a crybaby for complaining for a good job that I just don't love.

Other mornings I feel like I'm not ready, and wanting to throw everything, take a gap year, and just become deeply in love with the world of words.

And in this process of searching for my soul and figuring things out, I realise I'm not alone.

# **Chapter 1:**

## **A Cold Wake Up Call**

The weather was perfect. The wind was blowing gently. The sky was cloudless. The sun had come up from its hiding place. The temperature was a bit low considering it was already summer, about 14 degrees of Celsius, but that was what made it perfect.

A week ago, it had been cold and raining. I remember, because the week before was the day of my graduation. My whole family went to Melbourne to attend the ceremony, including my parents, my two sisters, and my grandparents from my Dad's side. My boyfriend even flew in from Singapore to witness his girlfriend in her graduation robe that didn't look even a little bit like Harry Potter's.

I should have seen the sign, it being raining when we walked proudly to the stage to receive our long-earned certificates. After



three years, we finally made it. This was the day when we said goodbye to endless assignments and exams, at least temporarily.

For some of us, the next step meant Honours and Master's degrees. For others, it meant work.

That morning I woke up with headaches, because I would have to choose on how I was going to spend the next year after graduation. I had the forms ready, all I had to do was to drop them.

I took a long shower, had breakfast with my family, and said I would be going. I have made my decision to drop the forms.

Suddenly, my Dad, a man in his 50s that has done everything to make sure my two sisters and I get the best education possible, said, "Whatever you decide, we will always support you."

I reached for the door and walked a couple of meters to the tram station. I saw the trees dancing, and as the tram approached, I knew exactly what I would do to the forms I had in my hands.

I would throw them away.

\*

That was one of the moments on which my Mom would talk about again and again throughout the next year. "My daughter has gotten an offer for Honours year in Psychology and she rejected it," she would say loudly, making sure that I heard every word.

My logic behind rejecting that offer was that I didn't want to become a psychologist. Sure, I fancied the thought in my early years in university, yet I realised that I didn't have the heart for research, new studies, or finding out new breakthroughs through the means of scientific approaches.

I want to become a writer. And another year of studying Honours would not get me to becoming what I dream to be.

I packed my bags and said goodbye to my home for three years. Visa regulations didn't allow me to apply for Temporary Residency, so there went my opportunity to find a job in Australia.

So I went home. Back to Jakarta, Indonesia, battling my way through endless traffic and pollution. I thought of the cultural shock, the lifestyle change, and friendless zone that awaited me, but quickly brushed those feelings aside.

I would become a writer and begin my job-hunting phase at newspaper agencies, magazines, or online writing sites.

In a matter of weeks, I landed a three-month unpaid internship at a well-known Jakarta newspaper. It was as if I was given a green light to live the choice.

On my first day, my Dad offered to send me there, and being a nervous 20-year-old at the very first ladder of her career life, I took the offer gladly. That morning, I spent an hour and fifteen minutes to find the perfect first-day-of-work clothing set. Noted, I

wanted to get a pass for casual working officer, but I didn't want to be ultra casual and wear jeans and t-shirt on my first day.

I settled with a black and white striped knee-length dress, complete with my faithful black cardigan that I wore almost everywhere. An hour and a half before the appointed time, I got into the car and hustled to the place, afraid that Jakarta traffic was not on my side.

My Dad had to make a detour en route to work, but he didn't mind. He told me repeatedly to just, "Relax, it's going to be okay. You'll do splendid."

Yeah. Tell that to everyone who was on her first day on her first ever job ever.

I chatted with my boyfriend and joked about giving up. My hands were sweating, and I couldn't sit still. The sight of the road gave me more headaches as there were an unbelievable number of cars, an even more unbelievable number of motorcycles, and red lights. I looked at my watch. I prayed that I wouldn't be late, and if the traffic would be a good boy who listened to her mother, I would... I don't know. Do something that could make the world a better place, I guess.

At the back of my brain, I repeated this sentence again and again. "Hi, my name's Marcella. I am a Bachelor of Arts graduate from the University of Melbourne, majoring in Psychology and Media and Communication. I have been a journalist for two years

at a Melbourne's international students news website. I, uh... It's nice to meet you."

Too much repetition, and I started to laugh at myself.

"Gee, calm down," I said to myself. "You sound inexperienced."

We arrived at the place fifteen minutes before, and I took my time before getting out of the car.

As soon as I entered, I had this déjà-vu feeling. I knew this building. I've been here before. It took me some time to remember that I was here nearly two years ago. At that time, I was on summer holiday during my first year in university, and I had come to apply for an internship. Weeks later someone got back to me via email, saying that my writing was not adequate for the publication. In other words, he said that I didn't have the talent to even intern there.

That was two years ago. Today, I came for my first day. At least that meant I have improved.

I said goodbye to my Dad, who held his left thumb up and gave me a wink. I walked to the receptionist and said I'm the new intern, and looking for a guy who handled the youth section.

"He has not arrived yet," the receptionist in her 30s said. I looked at my watch. It was 10 am in the morning. Didn't employees start work one hour ago?

"I will just wait here, can you let me know when he's arrived?" I asked.

"Certainly," the lady said, pointing to the seats on the right.

This even made me more nervous, but hey, at least I was not late.

I reached for the newspapers lying on the small table beside my chair, and began to read. My mind was so blank it took me three times of reading before the words registered into my brain. After ten minutes, I gave up. I played Angry Birds on my iPhone to kill some time, and finally, my name was called.

"Please go to the second floor, he will be waiting for you there," she said.

I said my thanks and proceeded to the elevator. This was it. No turning back.

I got to the second floor and waited for another three minutes when finally the guy who was going to be my mentor for the next three months, the editor-in-chief of the youth section, showed up. He was a small-built man in his late 20s, I reckoned, with a metro sense of fashion. His hair was a bit long, it was up to his shoulder and able to be ponytailed. He was a soft-spoken person.

"You're Marcella? Welcome. Let's go inside and we'll talk more," he said, offering his hand.

He was really soft spoken that I really needed to make my ears work 110 per cent.

Inside, we talked through the jobs that I would be doing. Basically I would come in from 10am to 2pm, every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. I would help writing some of the publication, from reviews to small-sectioned articles.

"I will need you to work hard," he said. "If I ask you to cover an event that is located in the central business district of Jakarta and there's traffic jam, get a taxi, charter an *ojek*, I don't care. Just get there and cover the event."

By that time, this princess who has spent her entire life cocooned in her safe little haven, who has never stepped a foot on Jakarta's public transport due to it being unsafe, who only has used the taxi twice in Jakarta, and both times with other people, began to go on an overdrive state of mind.

At that time, I was thinking, I was not even paid for my work.

But I kept my thoughts, smiled, and said I would do my best.

The rest of that first day was a blur. I remember writing a cheesy quiz section, asking two girls if they know the answers to, "The writer of *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*" or "The actress who got married with blah named her daughter what?" Or something like that.

On the second day of the internship, I was asked to write, "What's in your bag" section. This showcased a young adult who was a 'somebody' or at least, doing something worth mentioning. I was to ask the must-have things in their bags when they go out.

I rolled my eyes.

Clearly, those were the sections that I never read, and had no appetite to write on.

At lunchtime, he offered to show me the places to eat nearby the office. I went with him, and we ended up at a *warteg* - which is

not a restaurant but just a kiosk selling home-cooked food at low price. We finished our food while talking about our backgrounds, and suddenly, he took out a cigarette.

I was a princess, and I hated cigarette smoke. My Dad was a smoker for so long and my Mom always glared and got angry at him whenever he smoked. He quitted years ago, but that gene of not being able to stand cigarette smoke was well stored inside me.

It was my second day at the internship and by the time I got home, I started to search for full-time jobs.

I was going through my portfolio when I stumbled on a nonprofit organisation that focused on youth development. Back in Melbourne, I have covered a charity concert that gave the proceeds to this organisation.

I clicked on the website and sent an email to the HR department, asking to join their Media and Communication team.

What I didn't know was by that time two days later, I would have had secured my first ever full-time job.

\*

The call came unexpectedly. It was Thursday afternoon and I was on bed, reading John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars*. If you've read the book, you would know that it was a hell of a book. I was sobbing quite hard when suddenly my iPhone rang.

"Hello, I am... From... can you go...interview...?" was all I could get from the first attempt trying to listen to the call.

"Sorry, can you repeat that again? Who is this from?" I said, still on bed, still crying, and still thinking on why the hell Augustus needed to die.

"I am... From... We received your email," she said.

I started to get up from my bed and process the call. Did I send any application yesterday... Yes, I did.

"Sorry, did you say you are from the organisation?"

"Yes," she said, a bit relieved, "I would like to ask if you are available for an interview at 9am tomorrow morning."

I was silent for a few seconds until the words sunk in, and said, "Absolutely! Where is the office again?" Dumb question, I should just say, "I would Google your office address and be there by 9."

"It was nearby ...blah blah... So you turn left from... Blah blah," she said. Clearly, I have the memory of a fish when it comes to street direction.

"I'll be there by 9. Thank you," and I hung up the phone.

That left me exactly one day to polish my rusty interview skills, but I didn't care. This was my first ever full-time job interview, and I realised that I still had tears on my cheek and resumed to the part where Hazel Grace found Augustus' last letter.

I went to the interview wearing my sister's dark blue satin blouse and my Mom's knee-length black skirt. It was Friday, and everyone else was wearing *Batik*. I felt a little bit out of place, but



oh well. I would just enjoy my interview, it didn't really matter if I landed the gig or not, right?

I was welcomed by the girl who called me – a skinny woman in her late 20s who was kind and soft-spoken. She asked me to wait for a bit as the Chief Administrator Officer who was supposed to handle the interview had not arrived yet.

I didn't mind. The waiting room was way much better than the one I interned at, and it was definitely more homey. She asked if I brought samples of my writing and I said I did, on my iPad, due to my printer being broken just the night before. It was a half lie, as actually, my printer simply ran out of ink, and I realised this at 9pm when I was about to print my writings.

She had this slightly concerned look at her face, and offered me to print them herself, if I could send her a selection of the links of my published writing.

I emailed the links then, and ten minutes after she came with papers of my printed writings and asked me to come upstairs.

The office was a four-storey building in the middle of a housing neighbourhood. It was a ten-minute ride from my house and didn't look anything like my dreamed first office.

When you first walked inside the office, you would find the waiting room on the left. It was a doorless small glass room, on which had two sofas that could seat about six people and a stack of newspapers on the corner of the room. On the walls, there were clippings with white frames of the organisation's

achievements, mostly news about the founder and the awards she had gotten.

To the right, there was a long table with a series of trophies for the organisation's involvements in various events. There was one about cooking the most tempura in a company's CSR campaign. For the life of me I couldn't remember anything else, but there were five or six more trophies of various size and templates on that table.

A reception desk was in front, and there was always one person behind the desk, either the receptionist or a security officer who filled in for the receptionist. There were ten or more magazines on that desk, and to this day I always wondered why they were there. When guests came in, they would sit in the waiting room and not stand there in front of the reception to read the magazines.

You would then find this hall with a meeting room on the right, capable of housing 30 people or more. At the end of the hall there were the stairs, which entry access was protected by a glass door which would only open with a swipe card.

I was asked to enter the room on the right on the second floor. Again, it was covered by glass and I awkwardly sat on the small green chair in front of the desk. The CAO came in not long after that, a woman in her 30s with short hair and motherly instinct. We went straight to the usual, "Who are you and why do you want to work here," stuffs.

Ten minutes to the interview, another lady came in. She smiled, laughed, and jumped readily into the conversation, talking to me in English. I was pleasantly surprised, because after three years in Melbourne, my tongue found it easier to converse formally in English.

My whole attention shifted to this lady, on whom at that time I didn't know yet that she was my CEO. She dominated the whole conversation, talking about her passion for the organisation and the dreams she wanted to achieve. She then asked, "What are your dream and passion?"

I paused for a while for dramatic effect, and answered, "My passion is writing. I would love to write a book one day. And as to why I want to join this organisation, I want to make a difference in my writing. If I can help others through my writings instead of writing beauty reviews, I would."

She smiled, thanked me, and found her way out, bringing my printed published writings with her. The CAO told me that she was indeed the CEO, and that we should discuss the salary as she had given the green light.

I had a full-time job.

\*

By that time, I didn't realise that getting a job was easy, getting out from one was the real problem.

I had just come in for three days on my supposedly three-month internship and was ready to call it quit. The next Wednesday, I waited for the editor-in-chief to arrive at the office for me to verbally talk to him before filing in the formal resignation letter.

I waited. And waited. But he didn't come.

It was getting late and after asking for advice from my Dad and several other friends, I decided to call him. Why? I was eager to go. Clearly, I didn't enjoy the experience, and now with a full-time job in my pocket, I wanted to cut the ties.

I reached for my phone and called him. He was in the car, nearing the office. I changed my mind then, saying I would just wait until he got to the office.

Five minutes after, he suddenly called me, demanding to know why I called him for.

I sensed that he was annoyed, and for some reasons, a little bit angry.

"It's okay, I'd just wait until you come to the office," I said.

But he insisted so hard that after five minutes I ended up telling him that I was offered a full-time job and I would not be able to continue the internship.

What came next was literally off my mind.

He exploded.

He exploded so bad that between the lines, he said, "That was not how you do stuffs." My mind literally screamed for me to be

calm, "You're nearly there. You just need to tell him you are going to send the access card back and you'll be on your way."

But... no.

"No, I'm the one who brings you in, I'm going to be the one who brings you out. I don't have time for you right now, do you think you are the only one that I should tend to? Go home and come back tomorrow to return the access card," he said. Then he hung up.

You see, this was a problem. It was Wednesday, February the 13th. Tomorrow would be Valentine's Day and my boyfriend had flown all the way from Singapore to spend the day with me. And suddenly I needed to make my way to the office which was one hour and a half away from my house just to return the access card which I could actually do right now.

I was confused, so I ended up talking to his boss.

He was a Caucasian man in his 40s, and with my utmost respect I told him the same thing I had told my editor-in-chief.

He listened, nodded, smiled, and congratulated me. "Things happen, that is really okay. I wish you all the best for your work."

I was speechless for a couple of seconds.

A few minutes after, as I was readying myself to go home, the editor-in-chief walked into the office. He took one look at me and said, "Go home and come back tomorrow to return the access card."

I was literally holding my tears then, and walked to the door as calmly and professionally as I could.

As you can see, my first time quitting didn't go too well. Perhaps mostly, it was my fault.

I came back the next day with my best poker face and acted like nothing was wrong. And he told me to return to access key by myself.

So I returned the card, went back to the office, exchanged a few casual polite words, thanking him for the opportunity, no matter how brief it was, and dashed off.

# **Chapter 2:**

# **There's This Thing Called**

# **Respect**

It was my first week on my first ever full-time job.

Half of the office was at this restaurant nearby. There was a farewell party held to send off a Marketing Communications employee whose resignation was one of the reasons I was hired.

We were enjoying these glorious *satay* and *tongseng* soup in front of us, free of charge, while suddenly the Deputy to CEO walked to my table, eyeing me. I had a very bad feeling for that one.

"I want you to change this bit and it has to be done ASAP," she said, showing me a brochure we did about the success story of

one of the students that the organisation supported. I had delivered the writing earlier that day.

"I will do that the first thing on Monday, as I'll be out of town for the weekend," I said in the politest way possible.

"Oh, you need to do this soon as on Monday, everything needs to be printed and ready," she said in her high-pitched voice.

"I'm really sorry but I can't do it over the weekend as I will be away," I replied.

"That's not my problem," she said, handing me the brochure.

"How about I just do it now?" I snapped, equally annoyed.

"As you wish," she said, and walked away.

I took out a pen and started to edit the story. Suddenly I realised that it was just very minor mistakes, like rearranging some words and polishing the grammar. It was something that she could do herself in two minutes' time.

I gave the revision to the graphic designer, and continued eating my dinner.

One of my colleagues in the same department commented straightaway, "You are so brave to say that to her."

Little did I know that my battle with this boss was going to last forever.

\*



The Boss was a skinny woman in her mid 30s who was about to be married later that year. She had a reputation to be giving tasks to whoever she wanted whenever she wanted them.

For instance, that brochure which story she demanded me to do right away? It was not processed until the next Thursday, which actually made it fine if she handed me the work on Monday morning.

She was not my direct supervisor, not even my direct supervisor's direct supervisor. But for the longest time, all my workload came from her, which left a very big question mark between my direct supervisor, my job descriptions, and I.

The Boss was not the CEO, but she did seem like one. She knew our CEO's heart by heart, and she knew how things should be done for them to be perfect. And everyone agreed that it was not the job she asked us to do that was killing us, it was how she asked us to do it.

I was the freshest graduate on my first job ever, and frankly, I was hoping for guidance on how to actually do things. One week into my job as a Content Writer, being in the Marketing Communications department, she ordered me to write the organisation's 2012 Annual Report.

"It's simple. Just use the 2011 annual report, update the numbers, and change the wordings so you will not be plagiarising the previous writer," she said.

"Ask our receptionist on the copies of the annual report."

I was still shy, one week to the job, and whoa, an Annual Report? This boss must be joking.

Apparently, she was not.

I got the copy of our 2011 Annual Report and typed all the sections, from hard copy to soft copy, word by word, into the blank word document. The report's word version that the graphic designer sent to me was beyond repair, in other words the documents have undergone major facelifts and it was just hard to know which one was the latest version that went on print.

That week, I listed all numbers that needed updating. I emailed the program directors asking for their data. It was one of the hardest things actually, asking your own colleagues of different departments for data and information. Even getting data from your clients were easier.

I tried as best as I could to leave the sections that she specifically ordered not to touch as they were, and to update the numbers and information as needed. I printed the changes I had made on the sections and put them on her desk.

The next morning, I discovered a stack of papers on my desk which were full of red inks. "This felt like college," I said to myself. "Who still marked stuffs with red inks on paper?"

Not long after seeing the revisions, I got a call. It was from her.

"Cel, have you gotten my revisions?" She said with a playful note in her voice.

"Yeap," I said, knowing what she would say next.

"Go down and we'll talk about that," she said, and hung up at the exact moment I said, "Okay."

I rolled my eyes and found my colleague looking at me with sympathy.

"The Boss?" she asked.

I sighed. "Yeap," I replied, gathering the papers and taking a pen. "I'm going down."

My desk was at the third floor, while her desk was at the second. It was placed so strategically that every time you had to go to upstairs, you would go pass her desk. And every time you went down to have lunch or to go home, you would need to pass her desk too. Every single time I prayed that she was not there.

I headed downstairs, pulled a chair next to hers, and thus began the famous long lecture about how the things should be done.

"This is wrong, you need to double check with the education department. You should have known that this was supposed to be done this way, use your common sense, there is no way that this section is like this, right? Try asking about this, I am not sure if this program is still running," and so on, so forth.

I was about to tell her that those orders came from her anyway, and if she gave the wrong information and we did the wrong thing, it wasn't really our fault that we didn't deliver up to her standards. Yet she played the words as such that we were left

to believe we should have known better. That we should have known exactly what to do.

So I sat there, being silent. Occasionally I patted myself in the back and asked a few questions on how to do it right. But other than that, I kept my mouth shut, trying to focus on her instructions and how to execute them.

By the time I returned to my desk, my colleagues were ready to pat me on the back too.

\*

Every time I thought that was it, I was dead wrong. For the next two months, I got this syndrome of dreading the sound of phone calls. Clearly, 90 per cent of the phone calls I had gotten were from her, giving yet another task that was completely unrelated to why I was hired or handing yet another revision for me to fix.

That annual report had at least five different versions, and contradictory to her initial order, I ended up rewriting the whole thing, as her perfectionism continually grew horns and wings.

On a good day, the revisions would just be some grammar mistakes and rearrangement of sentences.

On a bad day...

"Marcella, do you get what I'm saying? This doesn't make sense right? This *Teens for Jeans* program has now been stopped and it was not supposed to make an appearance in the education

section. And this vocational sewing program, it is supposed to be in the entrepreneurship section. And for the program concerning the mothers of the children, we need to be using keywords such as women entrepreneurs and giving hope. I have told you before."

Actually, no, you haven't.

She had this gift of making people feel like they should have known everything but didn't. Psychologically, it made me feel guilty and did my job. But then one of the colleagues told me this, "She didn't like to get the blame."

Maybe that was why every time something went wrong, she resorted to the tactics of, "You should have known better," and "I have told you before."

It took me another month to recover from the trauma of picking up the phone. It was up to the point where my colleagues offered to pick up the phone for me, and if it was from her, some half-truths would be given, such as Marcella was busy or she was in the toilet or she was talking to the other supervisors.

I even cried in the toilet once. It was when I was getting the fourth revision of the annual report.

Over time, though, I grew in endurance.

I guess my confidence was built, and I finally knew that I could deliver, and I could deliver well. I began to say no after getting the green light from my manager to some of the tasks she asked me to do, from writing her department's reports, brochures, emails, follow ups, stories, and so on, so forth. I often joked that she really

needed clearance from my direct supervisor if she wanted to assign me anything.

Then, I began to get better at listing my priorities and the workload I had at the moment. And if I could do the tasks she asked, I would tell her when she could expect me to deliver them and thus negotiating the deadline.

She still called me to go downstairs and ordered me stuffs to do, but it was way much better than before. I was more prepared, mentally, emotionally, and physically, and I began to get accustomed to her way of asking and giving revisions.

In the final month of my work there, I even began to appreciate her eye on details and her perfectionist nature. Every organisation needs a woman like her, and even though I still hated the way she asked, the way she wanted us to drop everything at once and do her assignments first, the way she falsified the deadline for us to deliver even when she knew we had truckloads of things to do, I began to respect her.

One of the first lessons I learned in working life is that you don't need to like every one of your coworkers, and they don't need to like you either. You just have to respect them, and getting their respect in return. And believe it or not, I came to thank the Boss for building my endurance at work.

# **Chapter 3:**

## **The One Makes It Worth**

Let's talk about nonprofit.

It is not my dream job to say the least. I don't think working in nonprofit is anyone's dream job when they first graduated from university.

For some people who breathe and live social works, they might dream of becoming social entrepreneurs and helping others and making a difference of some sorts. I wasn't one of them. In university, I daydreamed about being a director or a CEO of a well-known profitable company. Not really at a nonprofit organisation.

And clearly, it isn't any parents' dream to see their children work at nonprofit organisations too.

When I first told my parents that I got the job, my Dad nodded approvingly while saying I did a good job. My Mom, being my

Mom, congratulated me as well but with a hint of doubt in her voice.

"To gain experience," she nodded, her eyes looking far away as if the dream of her daughter having some kind of fancy job disappeared into thin air.

My parents, being parents, were always proud of my two sisters' and my achievements. We were the apples of their eyes, being all academically above average with glistening trophies and tons of other certificates behind our belts.

So when their youngest daughter said that she would be working at a nonprofit for her first job, I am pretty sure they were at least a little bit disappointed.

Why? It was nonprofit. The stigma was still much greater in Indonesia, as it was the place where no money was found and no status was gained. Overseas, the luck of nonprofit workers was different, as nonprofit and for-profit work were treated as equal and as prestigious.

Work, whether the company makes profit or not, was still work.

But not here. Not in my home country.

I have lost count of the times I tried to explain to my friends about the perks of working in a nonprofit. I have encountered all kinds of comments.

"Do you get paid?" a friend once asked.

"What are you doing there?" another added.



They meant no disrespect (or maybe did), however I could sense a little bit of mocking in their voice, creeping slowly to my soul as if saying, "You are getting a first class education and all you can secure is a lousy job at a nonprofit organisation back home?"

Of course, there were others who supported my decision. "It's good work, helping others, being social. I bet you learn tons of things at your workplace." But for most others, yeah, we'd just leave it to that.

Over time, I became better at ignoring those voices and just answering what they asked. I didn't bother to explain about my work to those who just asked to compare your success level to theirs (you became better at separating squares from triangles), and talked with passion to those others who were genuinely interested.

After all, I was getting well paid, I loved my job, and I didn't owe them any explanation of what I did for a living. None at all.

\*

That was the image that others had of me working in a nonprofit, but the real deal happened inside.

I was interviewing this 20-year-old who was once a student at one of our schools. He graduated from our high school equivalent program and showed some talents at sewing. We decided to support him – giving him seed capital in the form of two sewing

machines to kickstart his convection career. He began producing bags and iPad covers using denim. He was one of the successful students.

My manager assigned me to cover the story and made a profile of him. Another senior and I went to his rental place in the middle of the better-looking slums in Jakarta. The road could only fit one car, and we had some trouble getting in and out of that place.

He rented this small house that had one kitchen, one bedroom, and a living room that was transformed into his working space. He was not tall, about my height and he was rather skinny. His skin was dark brown and he smiled a lot.

At first, we talked about his background. He came from a family of five with one older sister and three younger siblings. He spent his early years in Majalengka, a small countryside in West Java and moved to Jakarta to go after his parents who worked here first. After six months of not pursuing education, he heard about our low-cost school from his older sister and enrolled there.

He was shy, and I could see that he was choosing his words carefully. We sat on the floor as there were no chairs and he clasped his hands and played with his fingers. His eyes were always downcast, looking up to meet mine just occasionally.

He was polite, but there was something nagging me. Something that wasn't quite right.

We talked some more about his dreams and he mentioned that he wanted to go for further studies in fashion design. This was

one of the times when his eyes lit up. He also said he wanted to help his younger siblings to get education until college, and I could see his earnestness in doing that.

After a couple of more brief chats the senior beside me began to ask me about his business.

"Business is slow," he said while gulping his saliva. "My partner and I make enough to live but we hardly have any savings. One month we have a lot and another we have nothing."

My senior talked to him about a few sales strategies, and shared a few ways he could market his products.

He said, "If we could get more help..."

And there it was. The nagging feeling.

He was too cautious to tell about his stories as he was hoping for us to help him more.

He framed himself in such way that help was what he needed. And that he couldn't do more because he lacked this important help.

And I had to write a success story for this one.

\*

Of course, success is something that has loose definition. Perhaps by one standard, the kid was successful because he was way much better than he was before. He had more access to education and

more knowledge and more skills to find better ways of making money instead of basking on the streets.

That was my first brush towards understanding the mentality of people in poverty, and clearly, was not the worst.

One day, I paid a visit to one of our schools, giving a tour to prospective partners in opening up vocational skill programs for the students.

After the tour was finished, I remembered my manager wanted me to do a story with one of the teachers who had been there for some time. I asked around for him and luckily, he had just finished his teaching period and had some time to spare for an interview.

We sat down at the teacher's room, my iPhone on the table that acted as a recording device while I searched for my notebook and pen. Old journalism habit died hard.

He turned 65 that year, although he sure looked 50, wearing white polo t-shirt and training pants as he had just finished teaching sports to the students. His grey hair spoke volumes about his experience in teaching. He greeted me, an uninvited guest, smiling warmly while he adjusted his sitting position while asking, "What can I do for you?"

A few minutes to the conversation, I noticed how he loved teaching the children, but I could also sense a hint of disappointment in his face. Despite the well intentions of the teachers and constant support from the program directors, most of the problems lied on the students themselves.

"One of our biggest problems is giving discipline, especially in treating students' absence," he said.

"Some students may only come 80 per cent of the time, some 50 per cent, while another 100 per cent.

"Some students have the mentality of quitting when things get hard."

He shared the story of one of the students, who graduated from hospitality class and gotten a job as a waiter. However, when he experienced that the job was hard, he quitted.

"I asked, 'Why do you quit?' He said because it's boring, it's hard."

As I was hearing more stories about students who somehow did not want to be helped, my heart broke.

He then mentioned that the key to help these children was to give a hook instead of fish. Give them skills, knowledge, education. Guide them to know how to fish.

Yes. But how should we start?

\*

Over time I realised that nonprofit organisations focus heavily on quantity over quality, and I couldn't say I was surprised, but at the same time I didn't know it was that heavy.

The logic behind going for numbers is to get the balls rolling. Organisations live and breathe on donors, and for these donors to

be willing to give their donations, they want to see impact and results, which are easiest to be translated through numbers. A nonprofit will be seen by its capability to help one million or one billion people, and the bigger the number, the more credible and trusted the organisation is.

But what about quality?

Aren't we going to be held responsible for these children's lives because we just give them an acceptable education and not a good one?

After my first month working in nonprofit I was on my knees (figuratively) and went to seek the council of a friend who had been in nonprofit for as long as I remember. He was a classmate back in Melbourne, and he had been an intern at World Vision and supported countless charity events.

I asked, "I was asked to write a story I wasn't comfortable writing in. It felt as if I needed to dramatise the story to move more hearts into lending a hand. Is this the case with nonprofits everywhere?"

He acknowledged that nonprofits do put their weight on the numbers. "It's just how the donors' mind works," he said.

"Not necessarily that I agree with it, but it is true. Not all the stories are shown. While in my experience the organisation I'm supporting do not really alter the story, they do choose the best stories to showcase."

So not telling the whole truth. It does sound like journalism.

"But for me, it isn't an excuse to not give. At the end of the day, lending a hand is still better than just standing on the sideline."

True.

Over my next month of working, I began to know even more truth of the nonprofit world. I always thought that the children from the poor were eager and thirsty for education – they just didn't have the opportunity to actually get them.

Newsflash: They weren't.

Out of a hundred students on whom we gave almost no cost for access to education, one may have that mentality. A hundred? Perhaps a thousand, I was not sure. I saw students skipping classes to make money because the hours they lost to studying at school was equal to the lost money that could be gained on the streets.

I heard stories of students getting job placements at industries and restaurants and quitted once they felt it was hard. "Basking was easier," one student said.

I learned that even when we pushed education and knowledge down their throat with silver spoons and all, they still resisted, not wanting to be helped.

The parents? They preferred their children to help them with work, earning extra income for the family. Few believed education was truly important.

"So the problem was not the access to attain education," I finally realised, "The problem was adjusting the mentality of the

people (read: parents) to understand the importance of education."

Over time, I grew frustrated.

What we were dealing with was just the surface. The roots were still there, like cancer cells that were hard to kill even with radiation. The poverty mentality was cancerous.

If you never get down from your chairs and visit to those slums, you wouldn't realise the gravity of what's at stake. Trying to help children who don't want to be helped is as helpless as not being able to help those who want to be helped.

And I wondered if what we were doing was for the better or worse of those children.

You know, we were just trying to treat a flesh wound of a deeply rooted toxic disease, not knowing if whether what we were doing will make an impact on those people's lives. We were showering them with gifts only to let them sell the donated shoes or books to the store next door for money. We were raising an army with the mentality of 'asking for more', failing to equip them with independence they crucially need for better future.

We talked about this a lot, my colleagues and I. At the end of the day, would we be held accountable for just shoveling more so-so knowledge into their brain which would probably just vaporise into thin air?

We had no answer.



I was so close, so close to throw in the towel and leave after two months of working. I didn't know what I was doing, and worse, if what I was doing actually yielded an impact. I had an obsessive-compulsive disorder when it came to doing something and achieving no results. And I was afraid I was living one.

One of the program directors had a chat with me one day. He was a man in his mid-30s with two children, who could easily make much more money someplace else. Instead, he had been staying for eight years. He wouldn't do it if it were for the money.

"Have you ever asked yourself if whether what you are doing is meaningless?" I asked. Noted, I was so close to giving up.

He leaned back on the chair as if thinking, then broke into the biggest smile ever.

"Yes. But every time I hear one child whose life was changed because we help, I think it's worth it for that one child," he said.

Somehow at that same week, my colleague visited one of the furthest schools that we had which took her about three hours to get there. But she recounted her story as joyful. "When you see the children so eager to welcome you, you suddenly feel like the trip is worth it," she said.

"We are making a difference after all, no matter how small that difference is."

So I stayed. For the hope of changing that one student's life was greater than the possibility of 99 others who were not.

# **Chapter 4: Swimming with The Sharks**

My first six months after graduation was like being splashed with Antarctic water while still wearing pajamas on bed at a deserted post somewhere in South Pole. Noted, working in a nonprofit wasn't that extreme, and to be honest, it was so much easier and better compared my peers who worked eight-to-eight everyday without a good compensation.

But as a fresh graduate who hasn't gotten enough time to play? Yeap, it was a wake up call.

Second but, nothing actually prepared you for what came next, except perhaps a smarter brain in your head.

These were how the preparations should look like: learning how participate in meetings, how to make proposals, how to

adhere to the company's rules, how to induce in politically correct behaviours, how to be disciplined and wake up at the same time every morning and sleep at roughly the same hour every night, and how to impress your manager.

The things they never tell you that come with the payslip are how you should be mentally prepared to have such limited time in doing what you like outside of work, how you should suck it up on your own values and do what is required, and how you may end up doing things you're not comfortable doing.

Worse, if somewhere along the journey you realise that you actually don't love, or even like your job, well, you're a bit screwed.

Because work will become just another chore for you.

So after sailing the nonprofit journey I decided to get on another ship to sightsee the other extreme part of the ocean. I was intrigued to see the secrets they held. Of course, I was expecting to see the dolphins.

I met the sharks instead.

Yeap, the ship was a corporate job, and the sharks, well, we shall see what the sharks were together, shall we?

\*

It was another fine day when I checked my LinkedIn profile and received an invitation to meet up. My going-to-be manager had

stalked me via this social media platform and asked if I was interested in a writing position with the company.

A week later, I sat down at the office which was located in Jakarta's CBD to talk with my soon-to-be CEO and manager.

I was wearing a blazer and a black skirt, and I had put on a little bit of make up to give them a professional look. The CEO, a big man in his 40s who really looked intellectual, asked me to come in, opened his laptop, and interviewed me while looking at my resume.

He went through the document and asked of the things I did in my previous job. He asked about my experiences, and some samples of my writing.

The interview went as per usual. As we were nearing the end, he asked, "Is there anything you would like to ask?" I had been studying the company's website, and I spotted a typo on one of the least opened pages. So instead of a question, I told him this.

"It's not really a question, but I just want to tell you that there's a typo on one of the pages of your website."

He was taken aback. He definitely didn't see it coming, and asked me to tell what the mistake was.

When I pointed it up, he stared at that page for some seconds. "Good job, Marcella," he said. "I bet no one actually ever visits this section."

He said he would follow up with the position later on, and the manager escorted me outside the room.

On the way, he said, "I really want you. Consider yourself in."  
What a feeling.

\*

I was excited at first. It would be my first brush at having a real job, according to my Mom and most of my friends. Though after a while the truth finally sunk in.

Like, all the stuffs they say about having corporate work? They are true.

When I first worked at a nonprofit, every one of my colleagues there, except my CEO, of course, said to me that it was actually a mistake to work in a nonprofit straight after graduation. Even my manager said so. At that time, I didn't really know why. Wasn't it the same thing? Weren't the practices, the silver linings, and the frameworks similar?

They told me I should have tasted the corporate world first before going social. That the standard and the benchmark of working should first be created by the rule, and not the exception.

Why? Well, here are some reasons:

1. Nonprofit work means being social, and almost all of the employees actually care about making a difference. They are not going to settle with lesser pay if they don't. This makes the colleagues feel more like friends.

2. Some practices of politics will always be there, but hey, it's not that bad. No one's really trying to put big rocks on everybody else's pathways to get those bonuses because there are no bonuses to be earned.

3. Work feels good. Why? Because you actually do something that helps people. Going social means your work has an impact towards someone out there on whom you haven't met and may never meet for the rest of your life. And it demands you to be creative and wanting to do your best as more freedom to handle projects are permissible in nonprofit section.

4. It is more laidback. Not all will agree with me, but it is more laidback for me in terms of the pressure. Sure, you have targets to meet and clients to reach but those were not the most important things. Noted, I am a creature who works best when freedom and creativity are allowed rather than pressure.

So when the offer finally came for me to work at a corporate, everybody else was happier than me and supported me to take the job, including my manager.

"Take it," he said with a sad but sincere note. "You have my full blessings."

To my delight, he showed a melancholic side that reassured me that he really wanted me to stay, but said this otherwise. "You're still young and you need more experiences in working. We can only offer you as much but a corporate working experience will really boost your career. It is a really good position. Take it."

I knew a corporate job would alter my working life forever. What I didn't expect was losing myself there.

\*

I was swimming with the sharks. They consist of cubicle, nine-to-five rule, a series of KPIs, weekly meetings and reports, bosses, and more rules.

Reader, meet corporate work.

I never realised having a real corporate work put a limit to your freedom. The ideal situation would look like this: You were given a project and you wanted to be creative and put your 110 per cent of effort to achieve real results.

But let me tell you the more 'real things' about corporate work.

Forty percent of your work would consist of administrative stuffs. This would include all the meetings you have no business to be in, the reports you need to file in, the proposals you need to make, the timesheets you need to key in, the emails you need to send (most of them would be, "Noted"), the files and folders you need to arrange, and so on, so forth.

These are the basic of management and everyone in the office needs to do this correctly to ensure the best productivity and effectiveness of the company.

Needless to say, I acknowledge the need of these admin stuffs but I really, really don't like doing them.

The other thirty per cent would be spent talking to your colleagues and your bosses about an idea and whose opinions should be followed and about defending your own stake and listening to your senior defending his and much, much more. And it is exhausting. A simple decision is spent back and forth as too many mouths jumped in and solutions are not met.

So with my deepest sympathy I tell you that only thirty percent of working time is dedicated to real work. That is if you don't steal this time to occasionally check on your Facebook and Twitter and so on, so forth.

Actually, I have a question. How much work is to be finished during a nine-to-five job? If you think of it critically, eight hours a day is a lot of time. Not that lot, but you can always finish a lot of things inside those eight hours. But at times I wonder at the real practice of working. How much work do you actually finish during those eight hours?

Instead of working in terms of projects, we are working in terms of hours. Being physically there in the office is worth much more compared to the amount of work we are doing. And most times, it backfires.

During my first two jobs I see my colleagues watching Korean drama and browsing on 9gag for quite some time. Me? I am reading a book. Some others gossip and play Facebook games and



in the end I come to the conclusion that when it comes to real productivity, find workers with the same values and goals and passions or hire them on project-based. More things will get done with less time and it's benefitting both the employer and the employee.

Yes, work is tiring. Moreover the work that you don't actually love.

\*

Ask anyone who works and most people will agree that commuting time is a big deal. I just didn't know how much it's worth until I work one and a half hour away from home.

The other shark I encountered at my corporate job wasn't wearing any ties nor suits nor Italian leather shoes. Nope. This shark had a very bad time management and fancied drivers to lose their minds and get stressed.

Reader, meet traffic.

I spent my first year of university living in the suburb and travelling about one hour plus to the university. I needed to take the train and tram to reach there, often waking up as early as 6.30am for a 9am class. Turned out it was much, much better than what I was having at work.

My first full-time job was located ten minutes from my home. I remember how I hated commuting and having an office nearby my

place was heaven. Then I moved jobs and found myself getting stuck in traffic for three hours everyday on a good day. On a bad day, it could be five.

Traffic really drained the life out of me.

During the first few weeks, my excitement of working at a new company helped to reduce the stress of commuting. Soon, however, I felt more agitated. I arrived home every night with a bad mood, and I was experiencing back pains and neck pains and stress pains and depression pains. I tried to kill the hours with reading books but soon I got dizzy and my head spun and I ended up arriving at the office in a worse state.

And I really did try everything.

Playing Candy Crush, listening to various podcast, sleeping, writing, daydreaming, and none of them worked. Once I tried desperately to hold my bladder from bursting during a two-hour car ride and really, I almost cried. The stress I got from traffic made me cranky all the time, and for some reasons, I was always having a bad mood.

So here is an advice to many fresh graduates out there: Shorten your commuting time to work. It will increase your life happiness. Literally.

\*

During our university years, we want to be free – free to make our own choices, free to do whatever we want to do when we want it, and free to live the life we want to. One of them is to have financial freedom.

Besides those money earned at a few part-time jobs which only cover half of what we need, our bank accounts are replenished by money from our parents. They are the ones who make sure that we have the next bucks to buy food and caffeine.

So our first stop after graduation? Trying to make money. Lots of it.

You have 21 years of owing your parents to pay for everything. Now that you have education on your brain, the least you can do is to be able to support yourself.

Yes?

Truth to be told, I am not sure how many fresh graduates are able to finance themselves 100 per cent. Some are still living in their parents' house. Others are still in the phase of job hunting and yes, being dependent on their parents for money.

We dream to graduate and get a job with a decent wage that is able to put ourselves as the master of our own spending.

And yet how many graduates can achieve this dream stage right after graduation?

We want to make money. We have dreams of buying our first car, of signing our first mortgage, and of managing our own bank accounts.

We want to make the world a better place but first of all, we ourselves need to be financially secure before we try giving to others. We want to become social entrepreneurs but really, where does the money come from?

Money was, is, and will always be the big issue. But at that moment, I wasn't working for money.

Coming from a nonprofit background, it was actually quite hard to shift myself from working to make a difference into working to make a profit.

In essence, everything you do comes down to this, "Does it make money?" If the answer is no or maybe, perhaps you should consider doing things differently.

So here's the third shark: Money.

The love of money is the root of all evil, and yet we can't really live without it. It would be great if everything in life follows the formula, "Pursue excellence, success will follow." But most times, it doesn't. Money doesn't grow on trees, and it doesn't magically appear on your doorstep.

So there I was, sitting in a meeting, listening to my seniors asking about profit every time we talked about our plan on the marketing communications side. Not that it was wrong, it was just not my preferred approach, as the talk of money made me uncomfortable. It made me drop my passion, and it made me feel pressured.

And I didn't work well with pressure.

How could I? I grew up with the birth of *Pencils of Promise* and *Humans of New York*. I fancy people who support *TOMS*. I love the *Make-A-Wish* foundation. I am a fan of *Jubilee Project*.

So when the first thing asked was always about profit, I automatically tuned out.

Not that there was something wrong with it, it was just not me.

Soon enough, I started to not feel fulfilled at work.

I had always known that the work I was doing meant something to someone. Back in the world of nonprofit, I believe that everything I did was helping someone having a better life, even if just for a little bit. Here, I had lost my purpose. I didn't know if what I was doing benefitted anyone (although realistically speaking, of course they did), and I didn't feel accomplished in work.

I began to drag myself to work. Traffic. Rules. Politics. Profit.

I felt like a little kid, lost in the insanely big supermarket with adults with unwelcoming faces. I felt irresponsible. I felt I was such a weakling for not wanting to endure. I felt being such a crybaby – giving up when things got a little bit tough and calling it quit, quit, and quit.

I felt like I failed at growing up.

I failed at being an adult. Who was I kidding? I was clearly not one.

So after five months of contemplating, I had finally decided.

I was to start the life I wanted to live, not the life that was expected of me.

# Chapter 5:

## I Quit

I wasn't good at quitting and not burning bridges. I resigned from my internship after three days and I burned the bridge with that editor, perhaps forever.

The second time I quit my job, I burned the bridge with my CEO as I resigned with her still being mad at my decision to quit.

Two bridges in six months.

This time, I wasn't keen to burn any more bridges, but how to actually walk away without dropping the bomb?

I didn't want to be labeled as a quitter, but perhaps I really was one. When I had a better offer, I quit. When I felt like quitting, you abandoned ship.

Your early 20s is such a weird moment in life where you make a lot of mistakes. I am not saying you should be a quitter and a job

hopper and irresponsibly live the way you want to, but if that is you, I want to tell you that you're not alone.

I want to tell you it's not okay, but it's also okay because those mistakes make you grow up. Yes, they are costly, but perhaps you wouldn't know what you really want in a job or what kind of life you really after if you didn't make those mistakes.

Yes, I didn't like my job. But before that, I didn't know. In the end, your employment isn't going to take care of your back pains and neck pains and all those stress and depression associated with it. You are.

So I wanted to abandon ship. But I wasn't really keen on getting on another ship only to find myself plotting an escape three months after. This time, I would put much more effort into planning my next steps.

\*

It was forty-five minutes past three in the evening and my mind was in an overdrive state. I glanced back and forth between my iPhone and my bag containing that medium-sized white envelope. I checked my Whatsapp for the thirtieth time that minute, hoping for some more encouragement from my good friends.

In fifteen minutes, the Friday get-together thingy would start. It was really now or never.



I took a deep breath for the third time, grabbed the white envelope, knocked on my manager's office, and walked inside.

"Can I talk to you for a second?" I asked.

He was startled at first, but quickly said, "Sure, come in. Take a seat." My manager was a man in his 40s who loved to laugh and joke about stuffs. When he saw the white envelope, he knew exactly what came next.

"Don't tell me that it's a letter of resignation you're bringing," he said.

I hadn't even sat down.

I laughed, trying my best to camouflage my nervousness. "I haven't even said anything and you have guessed what I am going to say," I said, trying to make myself comfortable on such an uncomfortable moment.

"Is it because of me?" he asked, making a sad, concerned face that I couldn't really tell if he was joking or being really serious.

After reassuring for the tenth time that it was not because of him, he finally asked the one-million-dollar question, "But why?"

So I told him the story of my life. It was personal, and not business. It wasn't because of the colleagues nor the company. It was me and my heart and my brain. I wasn't feeling fulfilled. I hated the traffic. I got stressed frequently. I needed to pick myself up once again.

I thought that this was it. I had just given a resignation letter without a plan of what I would be doing next. Perhaps I would freelance. Travel. Write and earn nothing.

I thought that he would resent me, reject me, and send me packing without even a second glance as I was so easy to be replaced.

He did not.

“How about this,” he said. “What if starting next year, you work for us on a freelance basis, writing a couple of articles weekly and come in once a while for a meeting with the rest of the team? That way you can work from home, and still do everything else you want to do during your spare time.”

I smiled. “Yes, that would be great.”

\*

When I said, “I quit,” for the third time that same year, I didn’t burn a bridge. Or at least, I think I didn’t. Perhaps I have gotten better at calling it quit. Perhaps I have finally called it quit for the right reason. Or perhaps for all it’s worth, I have done something right during my short time working at the place.

However, I learned it through the hard way.

A true professional will say, “Don’t ever burn any bridge, you would never know if your path will cross with them again one day in the future.” But I did, and not just once, but twice.

Were they costly mistakes? Maybe. Will it destroy my career life? No.

I always have this sense of perfectionism that everything needs to be in place. If there are some things that are just not right in the beginning or in the middle, in the end everything will not fall into place.

That's why I hate making mistakes. I feel like mistakes will destroy me. I feel like mistakes will eat me alive later down the path when I finally do something right.

It is, of course, another lie.

So I still call it quit.

I do not recommend this to every fresh graduate out there who just starts his career. In fact, I don't recommend this to anyone at all. Sticking at a job, whether you like it or not, will develop your character as a person. I am just choosing a different path of forging mine. I choose not to go that way. Not everybody has to go the same journey.

I choose not to have a desk job. At least not for the moment. I choose not to be bounded by time and space and regulations. It certainly works great for me, perhaps it will not work on you.

Looking back, I am happy I made that choice. I could imagine lamenting all those wasted hours on the traffic, and gaining a few more extra kgs due to stress and lack of physical activity. By quitting, I get to spend time with my newborn baby nephew, and I

get to read more and write more. I even get to write this book, which is a lifelong dream for me.

But perhaps it is not the same case for you.

I work from home, with half the paycheck that I used to get. But I get to control my own schedule and get up in the morning doing what I want to do. I have the support of my parents and the luxury of doing so.

And I abandon ship. It isn't the smartest thing to do, and I don't even know if it is the right one, but I made a choice.

So will you.

One thing that I learn from a series of my quitting is that I made these decisions myself. I am responsible for them. I might not like those choices, or love them, and I might even live to regret them. But the most important thing is that I choose to do something. They may be the wrong choices, but they won't ruin your life. You may learn things the hard way, but they do not dictate your future. You just need to walk, and keep on walking.

So go. Dream, discover, make your choice. Stay. Quit.

And above all, never lose hope, and never lose the sight of where your dreams can take you.



## **Part 2: The Things You Don't Know... Yet**

In retrospect, there are always things you wish you knew beforehand. You wish you knew how to swim before you actually go under the water, but most often it's not always the case. After all, learning from others – from books, theories, and other people's experiences is not as vivid as learning the lessons yourselves.

Nonetheless, knowing *these* beforehand may save several of your nerves from the point of breaking apart.

The most obvious lessons learned in work are the day-to-day job descriptions. We learn how to write emails. We learn how to schedule a meeting, attend a meeting, or even host a meeting. We learn how to give presentations of the products we have towards our clients, and we learn how to present our findings to our seniors.

We learn how to make reports. We know how to pick up the phone and just call whoever it is we need to get answers from. We know how to ask people to stick with their deadlines and we know how to fill in our timesheet.

Those are the working skills we pick up during our first job. Yet there are also other not-so-apparent lessons we learn along the way. And here they are.

# **Chapter 6: It's Not a Matter of Starting Right**

Most fresh graduates I know are determined to start their careers right. In fact, almost all fresh graduates I know have grandeur dreams on how awesome their first job will be as an adult.

Thing is, only one in a million graduates will find *that* awesome first job. The others will have to settle with ordinary.

As children, all we want to do is to grow up. Growing up holds the key to the freedom of living the life we have always dreamed of, yet never being able to reach. Being an adult is our ticket to a life free from the boundaries of our parents' rules – we are finally able to discover the world on our own terms. And that first job, that first full-time job with awesome salary after graduation will start the pace for the rest of our lives.



Of course, this is such a wrong state of mind, but how many graduates secretly believe that their first job dictates the rest of their career path? Quite a number.

We believe by holding a great first job, our career life can only climb up the ladder, and not down. We believe by holding a job that people see as second class, our career life can only deteriorate, and thus it will be hard to keep our heads held high and accomplish our first big break.

The starting point, we believe, is the most important thing in the race.

It is not.

Many people try to give an analogy for life. Most agree that life is like running a marathon. It's not really about winning fast, or winning first, it's a matter of endurance and crossing the finish line. We might not be able to start right, but it's never been about starting right or starting wrong.

What matters most is to start.

\*

From the public point of view, I didn't start right. I graduated from the number one university in Australia. However, as I was unable to apply for a visa to stay in Melbourne, I went back home to Jakarta. My first full-time job was being a Content Writer at a

nonprofit organisation. I made more money working as a waitress in Melbourne compared to this full-time job (literally).

My Mom secretly felt like it was only an experience kind of thing, not really a real work. My friends wondered at my decision to take this job. After all, shouldn't I be shooting for higher stars?

Six months later, I threw in the towel. I exchanged my nine-to-five job with another nine-to-five job, only this time it had better pay and prestige. Working in an international consulting company made you more confident in answering the "Where do you work?" question in every social event that followed.

Fast-forward another six months, and I threw in the towel once more.

My first year working after graduation, it seemed, looked like a mess.

I held short-lived jobs and half the time, I didn't like what I was doing. I struggled with stress due to insane traffic and began to ask the 'what if' questions. What if I made the wrong choice? What if this wasn't the right path for me? I wanted to quit and yet I felt like a failure, not being able to have the quality called perseverance. Yet at the same time, I didn't feel like I fit in.

I had imagined my first job to be something that I would love to kick my blanket first thing in the morning. My first job would be a real eye-opener – full of possibilities and blue sky and rainbows and fireworks. My first job would make me fall in love with the working world, because as people used to say, once you realise

you can make money, you would not want to trade it with anything.

But I'm not alone. I have friends who work on their very first job and hate it. Their jobs fall below expectation, both in terms of quality and pay. And the thing with working full time? It takes a lot hard work.

We are the first batch of generation where the majority holds college degrees and yet we are jobless for a year and scraping a living by being a barista at Starbucks. We have gotten quality education that our parents can only dream of getting but not a decent workplace wants to give us a chance. Is this the irony of working? We have spent so much money into our education and by the time we graduate, we must rely on our parents' bank accounts once again while we crawl our ways towards adulthood.

No one tells us that working is going to be easy, but no one tells us that it's going to be that hard either.

Months after graduation, we go out with friends and family members and all they want to hear is our success tale of getting that awesome first job. Yet the only story we can tell is that we hate our job, or we aren't doing that extraordinary – we are just living an ordinary life. All those flower bouquets and hats thrown during graduation day feel like anti-climaxes, as we downgrade our living from having assignments and deadlines to keep trying to bring home decent bacon.

Back when I was still a student, I saw older friends being unable to get a job for one or even two years after graduation. I naively thought, “Perhaps they are not trying hard enough,” or, “They might have played around a lot during their university years.” After I walked down the path myself, I finally realise how hard it is to secure a good job.

Rejection letters. Interview offers and yet not getting through afterwards.

Over time, we grow in endurance to shield those rejection letters. Once a letter starts with the word “unfortunately”, it doesn’t matter if they have a number of high quality graduates or how we have talents and big future in front of us and they wish us all the best. It doesn’t matter. What matters is we are rejected. They don’t want us.

Get those rejection letters enough and you will feel another kind of feeling: unwanted. Perhaps we don’t have what it takes to really make it to the real world. Perhaps we are not qualified, not adequate enough in our skills to compete with the geniuses out there.

That is a lie, of course.

The truth is: Everyone will start somewhere.

\*

I was doing an assignment for my Journalism class and I chose to interview a friend who secured a job at a small company about a year after he graduated. He told me many things he's learned along the way, but one thing stuck with me always.

"Everyone is going to start somewhere," he said.

"Your starting place might not be the same with other's, but in the end we all will start somewhere."

Noted.

Just because you start your job as a data entry clerk, it doesn't mean that you can't become the next CEO. Just because your friend gets to start at one of the Big Four companies and you don't, it doesn't mean that he'll become successful and you'll not.

In fact, starting somewhere is the most important thing. You might need to wait a couple more months compared to your peers. You might need to wait a year or two until you finally get a decent full-time job. But it doesn't matter. The most important thing is to start. Something. Anything.

Why we feel like we need to start rightly – that we need to undergo the same walk, the same path, the same journey as everyone else is because that's what we have been taught our whole lives. Since birth, we always have the natural progression of what life looks like. After first grade we have second grade. After high school we have university.

We always know what's in store for the next chapter in our lives. And those next chapters are the same to people our age as

well. Our peers who graduate with us in high school go on to get university degrees. We are all on the same page.

So when the paths start to diverge, we feel lost.

I know this one thing to be true: When we start to go to different paths, we love to compare our lives to our peers'. If our friend is successful six months after graduation, we feel like we are lagging behind. We are burned with jealousy. If our friend gets the dream job one year after graduation, we feel that we have lost.

Yet their successes aren't your failures.

This season in life, especially if you are going down the road less traveled, will challenge you to become the better or the worse version of yourself.

You have a friend who is hired as a consultant at McKinsey. So what? You are your own master in your own field. Comparing your life with his is like comparing apples with oranges.

It's not your job to compare. Your job is to start.

And to start is actually simpler than one may expect.

You just have to put one foot in front of the other, and do something.

# **Chapter 7:**

## **You are Not Your Work**

While living the working life, I often wonder how everyone else transitions their lives effortlessly from university to work. They change their routines from sleeping at 3am and waking at 1pm to sleeping at 11pm and waking up at 7am in a blink. They put on their semiformal clothes, go to work, go home, and forget about the world and watch TV while eating dinner. They have new responsibilities and totally different lives but they embrace them as matter-of-factly.

At university, when we did something wrong on our essays, we could just gulp it down, try again for the next one, and get over that subject forever. We just had to endure 12 weeks of studying and then we could kiss it goodbye. At work, you'll still face that 'something wrong' every single day. In university, you could just shrug it off your shoulder and try to get a pass. At work, it's a continual thing that you need to improve on every single day.

As a writer, I take tremendous pride and effort on my work. I feel connected to them, as they contain a little piece of me. So what happens when your boss doesn't like your work and demands a change?

You take the blow, personally.

At university, when you mess up, you only mess your grades and your college lives. At work, you mess up a whole system and if you're unlucky, someone's paycheck.

So the pressure's there. You feel like you're making mistakes, again and again. You're the new kid on the block and making friends feels unnatural. There are work politics to be learned and pride to be swallowed.

One of the first things you need to learn is to detach yourself from your work. And it's not as easy as it sounds.

\*

While working at my first job, I got a lot of feedback/criticism/change-this-bit-asap/you-re-not-doing-this-right kind of thing. I knew that work is not really a bed of roses, but it is still hard getting all those critics.

Your bosses may feel like their critics are purely based on business level and not personal. But if you just start working, everything feels like personal.



So when you're feeling down, remember this. The work you've done? They are not you. The mistakes you've done at your job? They are not you either.

Your work is an extension of you, but they are not you. They don't define you. You are much, much more than just a series of mistakes and work. Does your boss just scold you for messing things up? Shrug it off, and move on. Does your manager think that you're doing poorly in that project? Swallow every pride and justification and do as you are told, and move on. Thing is, during university we have always been our own boss, so when we get to workplace and need to do everything as the company's guidelines, we feel deprived of creativity and independence.

It's okay to make mistakes. How else will you learn?

Make mistakes. It's not the end of the world. You need to respect your bosses and seniors, of course, but don't let them discourage you from trying again. When you're having one of those bad days, remember, you are not your mistakes.

And you are not your work.

# **Chapter 8: Passion? It's (Not) Overrated**

Gen Y-ers and their obsession with pursuing their dreams and finding their passion. Isn't it too much already?

It will be, if only everyone actually lives their lives pursuing their dreams instead of talking about it.

In the days of old, our parents live trying to scrape a living by whatever was legal (hopefully) and profitable. They did their work that was needed for them to put the bacon on the table and unleaking roofs above their heads.

They worked hard and at times, without passion. They learned that the more you do it, the better you are at it, and the more money you could be making. As long as you are earnest in your work, you would make a living.

Those days were gone, and we now have arrived at this generation where one expertise is no longer enough to sustain a good life. We need to become a master in a series of expertises, and hone our networking, management, IT, and digital skills.

Yet we are also the narcissistic generation who believe if the job is not to our liking, then we must do something to make it to our liking. We demand not only a fat paycheck, but also good work-life balance, flexibility, and happiness. Life is too short to be lived doing something we are not happy to be doing.

We grow up at the time when the world puts all the emphasis of work to one thing: Find the thing you love. Find your passion. Answer your calling. Then, and only then, you can be fruitful and not miserable and to borrow Aristotle, "Not work a single day in your life."

Of course, I don't mean to be unrealistic. Sometimes doing what we love isn't just good enough. We have responsibilities, bills to pay, futures to tend to, and aging parents to take care of. And yet perhaps your early 20s is exactly the phase when you are able to spare the time to take a bet in this costly way to pursue your passion.

Perhaps it's your shot in life to try to give it all, and still has the ability to afford the results.

\*

For the longest time, I have lived my life on the expectation of others. I grew up with two older sisters who are not just genius, but *genius* genius. They are hardworking people who are at the top of their classes and being blessed with the brains they have, they all choose the science stream, which is reserved mainly for the clever kids.

Being the youngest, I have always wanted to prove that I was on their level. I wanted to prove that I could do it.

So I followed their paths.

In Senior High, I chose to do the triple science subjects, as well as doing Mathematics Extension 1 and 2. I never did like science, although I had a soft spot for problem solving in Maths.

I was never good in understanding concepts in Physics (like, until now, I still don't understand what inertia is), and I just couldn't understand why some chemical reactions happened that way (Potassium turns lilac when it is burned. Oh, wait, isn't it red? No, red is reserved for Sodium. I think).

I enrolled in those subjects because of one simple reason: I excelled. And I performed. By the end of my high school career, I was the best student in Maths Extension 1 and 2, as well as Chemistry and Indonesian Language.

I dropped Biology in 12<sup>th</sup> grade because of the study load of Maths Extension 2, despite being the top Biology student in year 11. Until now, whenever I pay a visit to my old school, my Biology teacher would give me a look and say loudly for everyone to hear

that I had dropped Biology for the sake of Extension 2 but ending up to somewhere totally unrelated to those credits I pursued in high school. I am pretty sure she thinks that if that's going to be the case, I might as well do Bio.

By the time I needed to decide on a university degree, I was confused. I was no different than Erica Goldson, the American student who gave the valedictorian speech of being "the best slave", doing extra credits of study without actually needing them.

I secretly envied people whose paths were clearer. I knew friends who would be cooks, painters, programmers, and designers. They were extremely gifted at those, and I just wasn't one of them. I was good at several things, but never was great at one.

My seventh grade Physics teacher once had a premonition that I would become an architect. My twelfth grade Physics teacher wanted me to become a biomedical engineer. My Biology teacher thought that I would once again walk on the same footsteps of my older sister, pursuing a career in medicine. My Maths teacher said I could be anything I wanted.

Thing was, I didn't know what I wanted.

I applied to the University of Melbourne, the only university I applied to. I had three choices, so I put Bachelor of Biomedicine as my first, Bachelor of Commerce as my second, and Bachelor of Arts as my third. I was accepted to Biomed, and although I had no idea what the degree could teach me, I thought that it would be

prestigious enough for my parents to boast about her daughter's chosen study to their friends.

I had almost become one, if not for the nagging feeling of my hatred to study science. I saw my sister as a medical student, studying day and night and would continue to do so for the rest of her life. I wasn't her. I was a rebellious young girl who loved freedom and fun more than anything else. I wasn't born for science. There had to be something else.

On a sudden thought, I remembered that I love doing presentation, and had always been fascinated with communication and human personalities. Bachelor of Arts offered the permission to double major in Psychology and Media and Communication.

Impulsively, on the last day before the due deadline, I finally changed the bearings of my life. To my pleasant surprise, I found support from my family in doing so.

\*

That said, I didn't grow up loving to read, nor to write.

Famous writers always have a series of hints that they are going to be a writer one day. They look back on their childhood and see themselves thinking of dragons and locked princesses and castles when they were five. Some won the spelling bees contests. Others have read Charles Dickens and Hemingway and Fitzgerald by the age of twelve.

Some wrote short stories since they were seven, with their teachers binding those torn papers into a book which is then referred as the turning point moment of their lives. Another has been fascinated with words ever since they could read, which was at the age of three.

I wasn't one of those writers.

I picked up reading in high school because I wanted to impersonate my sister's love for reading. She looked smart and cool to be one of those people who read hard books, and I wanted to be like her. I scanned through every book she has read and tried to fake it until I make it.

It wasn't until I read the Harry Potter series that I finally read for myself.

And to that, I owe J.K. Rowling almost everything.

The stories of Harry Potter were so exciting for a teenager who was stuck at the real world. I have always loved magic anyway, and the books were just too awesome to be missed.

After Harry Potter, a childhood friend introduced me to the Eragon series, which later better known as the Inheritance Cycle. The series was a total controversy, with some people deemed them as merely copying other stories, but I didn't really join the debate. I enjoyed the books, and that was good enough for me.

Soon I began to read Mitch Albom's books, in which he remains my favourite author until now. Then I began to read widely.

Malcolm Gladwell. John Green. David Levithan. Jonas Jonasson. Scott F. Fitzgerald. J.R.R. Tolkien. Jeff Goins. Stephen Chbosky. Susan Cain. Jon Acuff. Melina Marchetta. Michael Hyatt. Seth Godin. Nicholas Sparks. Suzanne Collins. Patrick Rothfuss. And more.

Stories fascinate me.

But it wasn't until later in life that I fell in love with writing.

I'm sorry to disappoint you, but there was no some random lighting in the sky nor a light bulb moment when I realised I have fallen in love with writing. There were many.

It all began when I chose to study Arts. I reckoned that I needed to practice my English and there was this hype going on about having a blog.

I became a blogger by chance, writing about the random stuffs which I was quite ashamed to show anyone at the moment. There were an unhealthy dosage of emoticons, caps, and exclamation marks stuffed in those writing. I was writing to my heart's content without any filter, and it felt more like a diary rather than real writing.

Nearing the end of my first year in university, a classmate asked me if whether I wanted to join Meld Magazine, a Melbourne's international news website, with him as journalists. I said, "Sure," first because of courtesy, and second because I had said no so many times to his prior invitations. To keep the friendship rolling, one can only say no so many times.



We both ended up staying in Meld until we graduated. Needless to say, it was one life-changing choice – one of which I could clearly say I wouldn't be a writer if it weren't for my mentors, and moreover, readers.

My first published writing was a 200-word piece about a fire that happened at Collins Street. I needed to call the media spokesperson of the fire department and get some quotes to go with the writing.

It was hard.

If you were an international student who wasn't still quite fluent in English, it really, really was. I called them and put the phone on speaker, with a recorder beside it. If hearing the conversation in loudspeaker wasn't hard enough, imagine how worse it could be if the person on the other end talked with this heavy countryside Australian accent.

I listened to the recording approximately thirty times before I could make my best guess of what he actually said.

The piece was butchered mercilessly – my editor-in-chief sat next to me while editing the piece and told me of how the sequence of a news article should be like and how to choose an angle to write the news. I reckoned only 20 per cent of the original piece was still there.

The weird thing was: When she published the article under my byline, I felt like I have written a masterpiece.

\*

The discipline in writing for a publication forced me to really edit my words and think of an angle to write from. I couldn't really write whatever I wanted because whatever I wanted wasn't good enough. And the editors were not merciful enough to tolerate those things.

You could always know when the sequence of the paragraphs was changed, or when your grammar sucked and your piece underwent heavy editing. But from every one of those editing, you grew as a writer.

Or actually, at that stage, I considered myself as a journalist and a blogger, but not yet a writer.

Being a journalist forced me heavily out of my comfort zone. I needed to approach some strangers who looked like international students at bookshops and asked them of what they think of a particular matter. I needed to sit down at a cafe with two people I never knew before and interviewed them about the charity concert they were going to hold.

Another time I held a media pass and went backstage on David Choi's Asia Pacific concert and I almost died right then and there. Well, I was a fan.

I met more people on whom I would never meet if it weren't for Meld, who forced me to punch through the walls and actually go out there.

I almost gave up, you know. I doubted my skills and I thought I had no talent. I often wondered if the times I spent there could be spent somewhere else – playing and having fun instead. But if there was such thing as a light-bulb moment, this was definitely one of them.

My editor-in-chief asked me if whether I had an idea for the next story. I told her, "What if we write about the importance of grades?"

I was a top achieving student and in hindsight, I am proud of it. I just wish I had dedicated more time to read more books and to play around once in a while. And I believe I am not alone. I know a friend who had eight extra classes after school and during weekends. It was so hard to ask her out. I never knew if she really loved the classes, nor if she regretted them now, but the message is clear: We are to believe that grades are everything.

They aren't. Yes, they are important, but they aren't everything.

I wrote my first opinion piece and it got published on Meld. And the article went viral, as viral as a newbie writer could dream of. Some teachers mentioned that they would show this to their students. Some other students felt the same way, and thought to slow down as well. When I republished the article on my blog, it went to Wordpress featured post.

Thus started my love for writing opinion articles. I have found my niche.

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In the beginning there was Meld, and then there were other publications. Fast-forward a couple more years and I had the chance to be published on other sites, including Relevant Magazine, Thought Catalog, The Jakarta Globe, Indonesia Mengglobal, Upstart Magazine, and Prodigal Magazine. I was thrilled, knowing that I could send an email to the editor and gotten a positive response in return.

Perhaps, you know, I could do this for real.

I decided to take another leap of faith and invested on my blog. I moved from wordpress.com to wordpress.org, and bought my own domain. From now on, the writings published must be up to a standard, and I was going to take this seriously.

There were other moments, small ones, like a comment from a reader saying she loves my writing and how it has changed her, or an email from the unknown saying to just keep writing. Those moments were my favourite.

Other times an old friend suddenly commented out of nowhere that I clearly have a gift in writing, and to keep on pursuing my passion.

Those moments are the ones that strengthen you when you want to give up on your dreams. And the journey to achieve them gives you a sense of fulfillment. It's not overrated. Not at all.

# Chapter 9: Being 'You'

How do you find your passion? And when you finally discover it, how do you know for sure that it is your calling in life? If someone randomly walks to you and says, "You were born to do this," would you believe them?

We know Roger Federer was born to play tennis. We also know Leonardo DiCaprio was born to act. We have not a single doubt that J.K. Rowling was born to be a writer.

What were you born to do?

Passion is the endless resource of fuel to keep the fire burning within you. It is the one that keeps you to move forward when things look bleak. Passion is the key, people say, to live a fulfilled life.

To this day, I am still unsure if I was born to write. It is not easy to have complete faith in what you are supposed to be doing. Add

different arrays of choices in life to the equation and you will have a very confused Gen Yer. But I knew if I didn't try to believe I was born to write, I would regret it.

I was reading a book by Jeff Goins about writing. He said many people believe that passion is supposed to be found. He said this is wrong. Passion is supposed to be rediscovered, as there would be many breadcrumbs along the way about who we are supposed to be in this life.

These are the writers who have breadcrumbs. They have the hints. Stephen King wrote short stories when he was seven, or perhaps five. Jon Acuff had his writings turned into a book by his teacher in Primary School. The established writers were those who dreamed about castles under the sea and treasures in the Mayan ruins.

Not me.

I wasn't writing short stories. The only writing I did was a handful of cheesy love poems, just like all teenagers who had fallen into puppy loves. I didn't pick up the pen until I was in university. By the famous writers' standard, I am lagging fifteen years behind.

Sure, I love writing, but is this a feeling that I build on my own or is it more of a natural thing? Sure, people tell me that I definitely have a gift, but is it enough?

Self-doubt. You wonder if this is just a fling or the real deal. Is it love, is it passion, or is it just merely infatuation?

The funny thing about success stories is we have always tried to find a piece of ourselves in them. Like, when I read Jeff Goins' definition of being a writer, I try to see myself in it and figure out if I can fit in. I try to tick the boxes. And then when we figure out that we have different beginnings than theirs, we doubt. I did. I do. I wonder how, when, and where could I call myself a writer. I want validation. I need it.

But here's another secret: Your beginnings and your life stories will always be different. Stop comparing yours to theirs.

Remember the story of my interview with a senior who landed a job a year after he graduated?

"Your beginning will always be different than theirs," he said. And it's true.

No matter how much you try to compare your beginnings to other people who have made a name for themselves, it will always be different. Yes, there may be some similarities, but truth is your story is yours alone.

And just because it's different to theirs, it doesn't mean it's wrong.

Over time I try to reconcile with myself that I didn't have those fifteen years to kickstart my career in writing. I stop convincing myself that I am a writer and just write instead.

I simply believe.

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I guess I am among the lucky ones. I have so many friends who are still not sure of what their passions are. Not that it's wrong, but I know how fulfilled and energetic you can be when you do the things you love.

Remember the movie *Megamind*? Metroman, the powerful man who can fly, shoot laser with his eyes, and move so fast he could almost stop the time, said that he isn't happy doing all those hero stuffs. He has everything, and yet he fakes his death and tries to find his muse.

There's a lesson here to be learned by all of us. Ready? Here we go: Just because you are good at something that doesn't mean you will live a fulfilled life doing that. What you're good at might be your passion, but it might not be as well.

I was a good science student but imagine myself as a biomedical engineer ten years down the road. I don't think I'll be happy.

Truth is, anyone can be good at anything, as long as we key in the hours. Malcolm Gladwell, the author of *Outliers*, said that there's this 10,000 hours rule – it is the span of time we need to pay to be an expert at anything. And some people will find it more natural to learn some things than others, but I believe at the core of our hearts there is a certain calling that will nag you again and again over the course of your life. You just have to listen, especially when it comes to passion.



I also believe everyone can have more than one. A writer can be passionate in exercising as well. An engineer can be passionate in politics. A businessman can be passionate in coffee.

And these passions, more often than not, benefit each other.

I am a freak when it comes to movies and almost every week, I go to the cinema to watch the latest blockbuster. Every night after work, I turn on my TV and choose to watch a movie that I have already watched before. Some movies I have watched more than ten times. Some movies I have watched more than five. I am a movie collector and a movie rewatcher, and I am determined to get every single hint there is.

Due to this obsession, writing a story becomes more natural to me. I have watched so many different stories it benefits me to explain a certain concept with the example of a specific movie. Other times I borrow the quotes to get my point across. And if I have nothing else to write, I can just write a review on the movies I have watched.

I am a self-confessed coffee lover too. My latte should be the perfect combination of the viscosity of the shot and the frothed milk, as more froth would mean I would be having cappuccino. I hate it when my cup's too runny or too hot, and tasteless at the same time.

Yes, I am such an obnoxious person when it comes to my coffee. And it does make a good writing. I've written about barista

techniques or how to differentiate good cafes and bad ones.

Other times I write cafe reviews. The articles are read widely.

You can love many things and you can have many different passions. But there will always be one that outweighs the others, the one that can even be termed, your calling.

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Another topic about passion that usually gets brushed aside is this: it takes a hell lot of hard work.

Every time I see someone writing or talking about passion, it is as if the emphasis is always about finding the thing you love doing and everything else in the world will magically turn to aid your calling.

Sorry pumpkin, it ain't how the world works either.

Knowing your passion is one thing, living it is another. It takes courage and faith and hard work and countless amount of hours of doubting yourself. It takes hundreds of rejections and wrong turns. It takes tears, sweat, and blood.

You see others who are effortlessly living their dreams and you tell yourself, "Isn't that the true image of pursuing your dream, to be walking down the path paved with gold and glory? Why was I stuck in here doing what I love and yet I see no results, not like her?"

How can she get a writing gone viral with thousands of likes while my best article that gone viral was only worth hundreds of likes? Am I not good enough? Is she better than me? What have I been doing all these times? Have I been doing it wrong?

This is the part where you have to persevere. This is the part where you just need to suck it up and move on. Because if you don't even believe that you are a writer, who will?

My parents always thought of my passion with writing as a hobby. Coming from an Asian background, I couldn't really blame them. Their definition of a real job is being an accountant, an employee at a corporate, a researcher, or a doctor. Being a writer is not.

My Dad used to say that after having a business of some sort to make the ball rolling for financial security, I will then be able to write on the side. True. But that was not what I have in mind when I said I want to become a writer.

My Mom didn't really believe in writing as a career. She saw it as me, lazying around on bed or at the cafe with a cup of coffee while being transfixed on my computer or iPad, doing stuff that she knew only consisted of one thing: Facebook.

How much money does an author earn anyway? After reading books on writing, I think not much. Of course, the most successful ones are billionaires. But for the majority of others who will be so lucky to get even one of her books published, the life forecast is not that good.

But still, I fancy myself as a writer who writes to live a fulfilled life. Perhaps one day, the financial side will take a bow to my dreams and decide to become a partner instead of an enemy.



# **Part 3: To My Fellow Fresh Graduates**

I'd love to give you a series of formula on how things ought to be done. I wish I could give a specific, detailed step-to-step guide on how to grow into a responsible, hardworking adult we have always known we would be.

I have none.

In a sense, I don't know if I should even share my life stories with you. I know the feeling of reading others' stories and feel empowered, thinking, "I am not alone in going through this." But I

also know the feeling of comparing my life stories to others, and checking on the things-I-have-done-right and the things-I-have-done-wrong.

Yet your life will go on different path. As will mine, hers, his, and theirs.

There are no one, two, or three right ways on how your dreams will be realised. Yes, there are some similarities between successful people who are able to make it big in the world, but it's never about finding a hint of your life stories in theirs. Don't do what I did. I looked for myself in successful people's lives. I've been told that great people have gone through a series of adversities. I've read that they have been dreaming and doing and creating since they were at the age of five.

So if you're not starting your career or living your life like the big people you know, you are screwed.

Well, not quite.

There are just three more things I'd like to share with you. Three short things. And may the odds be ever in your favour.

# **Chapter 10:**

## **You Are Not Alone**

You're scared. You've been beaten emotionally and it's not going well. You know that it's going to be okay someday. But today isn't someday. Today is today. You have to go through those rejections, those critics from your boss saying you can't get anything right. You have tons of deadlines and little sleep.

You feel like you are nowhere nearer to realising your dream. In fact, you are drifting far apart. You hold a job you don't love, or don't even like. You hold a series of part-time jobs as a barista, waitress, or data entry clerk, wondering when you could stop living from paycheck to paycheck.

You make a lot of mistakes and nothing seems to go as planned. Yes, you make plans, but plans change all the time and most often without notification.



You have tried so hard to get one decent interview, and you feel like you're just not nailing it. You don't know if what you're doing will yield results, and you feel lost.

Lost in trying to be an adult. Lost in trying to grow up. Lost in a sea of responsibilities, torn between living the life you have always known you should and living the life others want you to live.

If this is you, I want to say: You are not alone.

You are not the only who's making mistakes and burning bridges. You are not the only one who doesn't have everything under control. You are not the only one who is lost.

You are not alone.

After talking about my working experiences with some friends, I have come to realise that this is more common than you think. A couple of days after I wrote on my blog about calling it quit, I received an email from an acquaintance thanking me for writing that story as he was undergoing similar pressure himself. He has worked three different jobs in the past year, and his pre-thought plans were thrown out of the window.

You really are not alone.

Do you decide to quit your job? Do you make a lot of mistakes? Do you take a leap of faith and open that online magazine? Are you swimming against the current, walking down the road less travelled and against what everyone thought of what your life should look like?

I salute you, and you are not alone.

Your early 20s is the time to really discover yourself and realistically, no one actually lands his dream job right after graduation. You may think that you are behind the schedule, that after ten months your job stays the same while your friend has gotten yet another promotion and able to afford a brand new car.

Worse, you may think that you are a failure – that you have chosen wrongly and the cards that are dealt to you are in such bad combination which prevents you to actually thrive and win in life.

I want to tell you, you are not alone in feeling that way.

You are not singled out in any way, and just because your friend's Facebook depicts such grandeur life, it doesn't mean yours sucks.

The first real mistake you have done here is isolating yourself and thinking that everyone has gotten it easier than you, that everyone has gotten it better than you. But really, everyone is thinking the same way that you do.

It has been said countless times but let me say this one more time: It's okay to make mistakes.

A couple of months ago, I would shake my head and think that no, it's not really okay. But now, I want it to be okay. I need it to be okay. Because contrary to the people who use "It's okay to make mistakes," as an excuse to make right their wrongs, there are much more of them who can't really forgive themselves for being less than perfect.

I was one of them. I want to graduate with good grades and get a job of my dreams. I want prestige. I want my parents to be proud of what I'm doing. I want my friends to see that this girl who is voted as one of "The most likely to succeed" back in High School can live to the expectation.

And so I live the life that everyone expects me to live. When I can't, I grow frustrated, and make even more mistakes. And the vicious cycle continues until one day I can't take it anymore, and call it quit. And again. And again.

I feel lost, and I am not alone.

You are not to figure everything one year after you graduate. You are not to figure everything ten years after you graduate. There will always be lessons to be learned, books to be read, paths to be walked, and choices to be made.

And you're not walking alone.

# **Chapter 11: Not All Those Who Wander are Lost**

I have tasted nonprofit and corporate lives. I have worked nine-to-five jobs. I have volunteered in organisations. Each time I need to make a choice, I am rejecting another kind of life.

Soon enough, the 'what ifs' start to come. What if I choose to study Honours right after graduation? What if I choose not to quit my job? What if I choose to quit sooner? What if?

What if you weren't supposed to go this path?

What if you chose wrongly?

The short answer to this question is, "It's okay." Life will go on, and you will become an adult. The long answer to this question is, "It really is okay."

Or as J.R.R. Tolkien famously put it, “Not all those who wander are lost.” Not even you.

We may decide to wander into the unknown, fighting dragons we never know exist and being thrown completely out of our comfort zone. We may feel we have wasted a year, or two, or even three, and that we should have known better.

Yet we would not know what could have been. But what will be is another story entirely.

While we couldn't go back and undo everything, it's true that everything has its lessons. If you are meant to become a musician and yet finding yourself in a data entry position, it's not a lost year. You will learn other invaluable life lessons – resilience, confidence, attention to detail which will benefit you in your later years in making music.

There are no accidents.

Would I choose differently if I were given the chance to undo everything? Perhaps. But then I would learn another different set of lessons to the ones I am learning now.

Just wait. Push through. All these experiences in life will still one day make sense.

# Chapter 12: A Silver Lining

One of my friends, singer/songwriter Charles J. Tan once wrote, “There is a silver lining to everything. Even if I cannot see it, I choose to believe it.”

What beautiful words.

Here’s the thing: We love to see instant results. We are born where technology is at its best, and we feel if we are not getting results straightaway, we are doing something wrong. We are shaped into having what I love to call as the microwave mentality. You wait for one minute and the food goes from cold to hot. You want to live life that way too.

But the world doesn’t operate this way. You couldn’t plant a seed today and expect it to bear fruits tomorrow. There’s process, and it takes time.

And yet, how could we wait? Every advertisement, every lesson on the internet teaches us one simple lie: If you are not getting it fast enough, you are doing something wrong.

You feel like a failure. Yes, I know that feeling. That gnawing feeling that eats up your soul from the inside. That nagging voice in your head telling you that you have been wasting time, that you are still wasting time, again and again. Time is the most precious commodity, and yet you spend them on the wrong things.

You feel like the job you are having at the moment is wrong. You feel like you are not supposed to choose a certain degree in the first place. You feel like whatever you're doing right now is in vain.

I want to tell you now that it isn't.

I don't know what's the silver lining between your accounting job and your passion in cooking, but I tell you, there will be one. I don't know what's the silver lining between your volunteering job at the zoo with your degree in law, but there will be one. You are not wasting your time; you are experiencing life. You may be a barista and yet all you ever want to do is to perform ballet in front of thousands of people. There's still a silver lining. I promise. It's there. Even if you can't see it. Even if you don't believe it.

I have heard stories of people who believe that their early years of waitressing have formed them into the persons they are at the moment. Those low-prestigious jobs teach them humility, they said. Those jobs teach them resilience. Others abandon their

high-profiled lives with 401(k) benefits to do what they believe will make a difference. Were those previous years wasted? No, those years build who they are.

I may feel like I have wasted an entire year of my life after graduation. But I know that's not true.

There is a silver lining in everything. Even if I can't see it, I choose to believe it.





# Epilogue

There's actually only one shark in this book and it is myself. The sharks represent what you fear the most in this life, and the one thing I fear? Failure. I fear I will go down, and keep on going down. I fear to screw things up. I fear I am wasting my time. And who is the one telling my all these lies? Myself.

The year after graduation is the year where I grew up the most. I held full-time jobs, celebrated some success, and had some failures. I made friends, betrayed some, loved another, and hurt others. And I lived.

Perhaps it was really my own fault to shoot for the stars and not ready to land on the moon. Every day a Gen Y'er is bombarded with the message of, "Are you happy with your life? If you're not, you're doing it all wrong." We have become so scared of mistakes and failures, feeling like we have to do no wrong. We hate to disappoint people. We want to change the world and

make the world the better place, and yet we are hardly whole persons ourselves.

Social media connects people, but it also propels competition. Suddenly, everyone's life is an open book, whose chapters can be directly compared to ours. We envy the neighbour's grass and resenting our managers for not giving us the next big break. We are not faithful in little things, and we want to do something great straight away. We have been nurtured into developing this microwave mentality, and we want everything to happen instantly.

We want to see results. We always think we are the greatest – the ones who need to undo the past generation's mistakes. We are going to have the cake and eat it too.

And we are afraid – afraid to make the wrong choices, which in the end makes us live day by day as it is and never really go down the road less travelled.

During those years in university, we are cocooned to perfection, isolated from the real world or from knowing of what being an adult really means. Then we graduate, and we need to relearn everything once again.

So we feel lost, big time.

But coming back to one's feet starts with accepting that we are indeed, lost.

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# About The Author



Originally from Jakarta, Indonesia, Marcella went to Australia in 2010 to study Bachelor of Arts in the University of Melbourne, majoring in Psychology and Media and Communication.

She then joined a nonprofit called Meld Magazine as a journalist and a columnist, which unlocked her passion to share stories through writing.

After graduating in 2012, Marcella moved back to Jakarta to begin her journey as a writer. She has worked both at nonprofit and corporate settings as a content writer, and currently is working from home while travelling and babysitting her baby nephew.

Her work has been published in local and international publications. Marcella has a weak spot for coffee, books, and movies, and is passionate in being involved with social work.

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