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EH 101

Dr. Lowe

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### Conquering Great Expectations

I spent the summer of my junior year at John Smith High School on the softball field alongside my head coach as we ran that years intramural softball camp. Of the 16 girls on the roster, I think I had kissed about 4 of their boobos each, dried the hysterical tears of about 7 of them per day, and pulled an innumerable amount of invisible thorns from all of their fingers with a smile plastered on my face. An exceptional amount of talent was never expected, but where one specific nine-year-old, Bailey, was concerned I could easily admit that I hated her guts as much as I hated her inability to realize she was putting athleticism to death on the softball field. I often found myself wondering what kind of pep talk she was giving herself in the mirror every morning to step onto that field over and over again in the afternoons. Day after day I watched her strike out, drop balls, wipe out on the bases, and overthrow her cut off points by yards and yet she still showed back up every day with a smiling face and open ears.

I caught a flash of her smile just a few yards away as she sat laughing with her friends. As if she could feel my attention on her, Bailey strayed from her friends' sides and joined me on diving block 3 where I was supposed to be lifeguarding the end of the season pool party but was busy struggling through the pages of Great Expectations. Don't ask me why I thought Dickens would be a fun summer read; at the moment I thought it would be a good idea to challenge myself but it quickly turned into a nightmare project that I was contemplating quitting more and

more with each day. I barely had time to ponder how exactly I got stuck being the only assistant coach working this sweat fest of a party before Bailey was violating my personal space with her inconvenient presence. “I hope you have a good Summer Coach T,” she said, squinting down at me and pushing her glasses back up her nose. “If you come back and work camp again next summer then we can be throwing partners again that would be really cool,” she says and picks up my book from where I had tossed it in frustration to the ground next to my feet seconds before she walked up. Maybe it was the memory of catching a ball or two of Bailey’s with the side of my head or my apprehension at the possibility of her taking a look at the contents of my marked up pages taking precedence over my self-control because before I could slam my lips shut on the thought, the words, “so you’re really coming back next year?” slipped out of my fat mouth laced with just enough bitterness that I knew they had to sting. I braced myself for her alligator tears and had already begun forming two apologies, one sugar-coated and overly assuring one I would give to Bailey and another less enthusiastic one I would give to my coach before he fired me. But no, she just plopped down next to me and said “I know I suck. I really do.”

Her words instantly transported me back to a scene from my own childhood. The fact that I was a horrible reader was not a new one by me. By the time I was noticeably falling behind in school, my mom had heard the excuse, “the words keep swimming,” from me at least twice a day. It was clear that my difficulties with reading weren’t that of a typical struggling student and what came easily to the other kids was exceptionally difficult for me to pick up. I remember the word “dyslexia” being tossed around a few times in the meeting my mom and I had with my teacher. Little did I know then that that word I could barely pronounce would go on to define the greatest challenge I faced growing up. My mom jumped at every opportunity to help me, even going so far as to hire a private tutor. She had to work the first day Ms. Kathy came over to help

me I remember feeling relieved because when she was around I always felt like my mom expected me to pity myself. Only I didn't want to pity myself, I wanted to be thrown every curveball and trick question there was. I wanted to be good. But the fact remained that I was horrible and I knew it.

I sat at the bar working through "Biscuit Visits the Doctor" after she had left contemplating the cons of being illiterate when my dad walked in from cutting grass.

"Are you reading college level yet?" he asked, grabbing a Coke out of the fridge in the kitchen and folding his overly tall body into the bar chair next to me.

I just groaned dramatically and tucked my head into my crossed arms, mumbling, "What's the point in wasting all my time trying to read about a stupid dog when I'll suck at it forever?"

My dad laid a huge hand over the top of my head and turned it so I was looking at him. He cleared his throat and tried his best to imbue me with a dollop of inspirational gold. "You may suck right now, but practice and you'll suck less. Suck less and you're winning. You quit because you suck and you lose." I thought it was a load of bull; after all, this was the man that gave me permission to quit trying to learn how to water ski years earlier by telling me that, "sometimes we just suck at shit." Wondering where in the world that man had gone, I rolled my eyes and turned my attention back to the stupid dog book. My dad hopped down from the bar, realizing his moment in the spotlight of inspirational dadhood was over.

So here I was, memories of my own failures spinning around my head. Bailey's self-awareness had shocked me into silence. Dickens's words on the pages of *Great Expectations* called me a hypocritical pig for glorifying my own efforts and judging someone else for theirs. I

don't know why but I opened my mouth again. Then I left it there waiting for an explanation or an apology to come tumbling out but nothing did. It was Bailey that looked down at Dickens and began to speak. "It's weird that people hate this book. I read some of it once when my sister had Mrs. White and I thought it was kind of good." I just stared at her as she continued thumbing through the pages, growing irritated that the child who couldn't even run bases in the right order was breezing through Dickens at age nine like it was casual Sunday afternoon reading. She adjusted her glasses again before uttering her next sentences in a volley of rushed words. "I know I'm smart, actually maybe it makes me even more smart that I'm smart enough to know I'm smart. But then I see everyone playing these fun sports. Don't get me wrong, learning things is fun and knowing more than your friends is cool but I see my friends do things like dance and play tennis and it's different. It doesn't make any sense but it just is."

She looked up at me with an expression that could have been aggravation to everyone else. But I recognized it as the look of a person that knows exactly what they mean but are so afraid of explaining it wrong that they are misunderstood. "It's just different," she muttered again, smiling sheepishly.

With those words, I began to understand her a little bit more. I turned towards her and propped my elbows on my knees. "Being bad doesn't bother you does it?" I prompted, "it makes you feel like you're constantly learning, not like you're failing?" I was asking it like a question but she shot me a smile that let me know I was onto something. "And it's not about proving anything to anyone," I continued, not knowing why I rushed the words like a prayer. Maybe I just wanted her to know that there was someone that understood where she was coming from and that her unique perspective on adversity was one to cherish not mock. "It's about finding the things that matter to you, and doing everything you can to embrace every inch of that shit," I

finished. She giggled uncontrollably at my choice of language, clutching my book tighter to her chest before she reached her hands behind her and leaned on them. I watched the pages of Dickens fall open temporarily in my peripheral vision as she gripped at the spine, trying not to drop it. I was no longer ashamed that there was written evidence of my mistaking the word “bog” for “cog” and trying to map out how the events of the first chapter were happening in a factory.

My attention was pulled to the pool deck gate where the multiple renditions of “Margaret, how lovely to see you” meant that her mother had joined the others checking watches and tapping feet impatiently, their soaking wet children clad in towels and doing their best to postpone being dragged home. “Even if you suck at it?” She asked, leaning forward again and dropping her attention down to my book, fiddling with the rolled up corner pages. “Especially if you suck at it,” I said. I offered her a hand, pulled her up, and began walking to the gate alongside her. It wasn’t until we were just out of earshot of her mother that she pulled down on my hand and whispered into my ear, “because sucking at shit doesn’t give you permission to quit.” I was caught a little off guard at her word choice but still found it ironic that her revelation was a cruder version of my father’s advice concerning quitting. I just laughed to myself at the coincidence before grabbing her by the waist and throwing her over my shoulder.

I was walking to my car at the end of the day when I finally realized that she had walked away with my copy of Great Expectations.