



The Art of Disobedience

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It all started with a pile of green peas. Four-year-old me sat at the kitchen table, my lips pressed tight, small fists clenched and head shaking, “no.” Even after everyone else had gone on to games or books or music, even as the clock cuckooed my bedtime, I sat at that scarred table just looking at those peas.

No matter what my mama said, or how late it got, I was not going to eat them. Even when my eyelids began to pucker and I longed to lay my head down on my pillow with its lavender eyelet case, I remained resolute.

I waited for Mama’s dash up the stairs to kiss my better-behaved brothers and sister good night and held my nose as I stuffed the peas into my cheeks like a little chipmunk. Then I rushed to the bathroom—careful to avoid the squeaky floorboards—and promptly spit and flushed.

When Mama came back down the steps I was once again her angelic daughter complete with halo of golden hair. Her gracious smile was worth the faint taste of peas still clinging to the inside of my mouth.

Each night after that, for many weeks, I repeated the process. My life of disobedience had begun.

As I got older, the issues got bigger than the dinner plate. Like when I was ten and our family of seven was on a tight budget, and my mama decided she would sew all of me and my sister’s clothes. She’s a wonderful seamstress, my mama, but the clothes didn’t come from the mall and “handmade with love” was not the right label.

How many nights did Mama stay up after midnight, her head bent over the sewing machine? I didn’t want to hurt her feelings, so I borrowed clothes from a friend and changed into them on the morning school bus with the skill of an actress between scenes. Then, on the ride home, I hunched in the floorboard between the seats and pushed my arms and legs right back into those homespun clothes.

For weeks the plan went beautifully. But then my older brother had to develop a croupy cough and start running a fever at school. I watched from the top of the monkey bars as Mama walked up the sidewalk, that smile I loved lighting her face as she recognized me. Before I could return the smile, I looked down at the Ralph Lauren t-shirt and acid-washed jeans. My legs locked up and my eyes dropped.

Please God, I prayed. Please don’t let her see. But God wasn’t listening that morning. As my mama’s smile turned to an angry scowl, I knew my secret was out.

The rest of that day is a blur. Did Mama say anything to me about the borrowed clothes when she greeted me on the playground? Did I bother to change back into my handmade ones before I walked in the front door after school?

I don’t remember those parts. What I do remember is the four page letter Mama wrote to me. The one in which she expressed her disappointment, the sense of betrayal, how she wished we could have just talked about it. How if I’d given her a chance, she might have understood. And how I had broken her trust, which was very nearly an irrevocable thing.

The thing I know now, that I must have on some level known even then, was that as wonderful as it sounds,

talking about it wouldn't have worked. I couldn't have risked a "no." The clothing was unacceptable. I wasn't going to wear those pieces ever again, no matter how much love went into their design. In order to become my own person, I had to do the deed. I had to risk everything.

Difficult as it was, I knew that the choice was less about clothes and more about identity: I could either be myself and disappoint my mother, or be who my mother wanted me to be and watch myself wither away and eventually disappear.

Disobedience was the only answer that made sense. But not the in-your-face brand that I saw my older brothers using. For years it seemed like every day at least one of them was shouting or cussing or smoking or getting suspended from school. That wasn't the kind of attention I was after. In fact, I have distinct memories of informing my teachers on the first day of each school year, "Yes, they're my brothers, but I'm not anything like them."

Oh, but I was. I had just discovered something my brothers hadn't. That there was an art to disobedience, there was a way to be rebellious and stake a claim on one's own life without serious injury to others. The key was to be quiet about it. To nurture that independence by keeping it close to the heart—far, far away from others who might inadvertently harm it.

Which might partially explain the haven I found in books. The summer I was sixteen I took \$25 of hard-earned babysitting money and bought from a neighbor's yard sale a cardboard box full of romance novels. Another disobedience, probably, had I ever asked for my parents' permission. The steamy covers were nothing compared to the treasures I found within, so I quickly burned through those books, and in the years afterward moved onto others. I discovered my favorite characters in books and real life are the ones who have the courage to go their own way. Scarlett O'Hara. Don Quixote. Elphaba. No matter the particulars, the thing they all have in common is a disregard for the rules that don't make sense to them. It is only by breaking the rules that they become who they were meant to be.

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Now that I'm a mother myself, I appreciate all the gray areas of parenthood, how decisions are made that seem to make sense, then abandoned when it turns out they don't. I understand the importance of rules, how children need them to feel safe.

But I also expect disobedience. I admire it, even.

Like when my youngest son refused to wear the requisite white shirt and blue slacks for a school program. They made him itch, he said. They were too tight.

But I understood what he was really saying: they aren't me. And as a parent who has learned the hard way to pick one's battles, I smiled and shook my head as I watched the bus door close behind his plaid shorts and favorite band T-shirt.

The teacher's disappointment seemed small compared to what I knew my son would learn that day, not just about himself, but about this world we live in. And while I'm sure conformity looks better to some, I supported the greater lesson that I knew he would learn that day. How he would find out for himself, if, indeed, the noncompliance was worth the consequences.

Which brings me back to that letter my mother wrote to me when I was ten years old. Among many other things, she wrote, "Err on the side of love." In other words, if you choose disobedience, choose it for the right reasons, after careful consideration. Create the life you want, but not at the expense of others. And Mama, I want you to know, I have tried my best to live up to those words every single day of my life.

As for the peas—it doesn't matter how pretty they look, or how good they are for human health. I still don't eat them.

