

I USED TO FAKE IT

I used to fake it. When we were told to sit on the floor we would all hurry, our status defined by dusky flower patterned cushions. We'd scramble to claim our own private islands, or else be regulated to sharing the carpet. After settling my island furthest from the door I would sit tense, my legs crossed tailor fashion, and a box of tissues my silent companion. Thirty minutes was a lifetime of anxiety, trying to quietly blow my nose and still my pounding heart. My eyes would dart everywhere but at what was gripped tightly in my small hands. I'd fight to keep my head down and my breathing under control, rarely turning a page and never seeing the words that were on it. They called it Silent Reading Time, and my third grade self had learned to fake it.

Every Friday our class would go as a group to the library. Marking the exits with a glance and keeping to my line, we were marched two by two down the hallway. Using the buddy system to ensure our safe arrival we climbed the stairs, the slap of rubber soles against the brick coloured tiles echoed with my breath in the corridors. I knew I wouldn't be able to find my way back to homeroom alone, but I knew all the ways out, and I could tell you where the closest bathroom was.

At the last rise of the stairs we were herded along the final hallway. There, the tiled floors turned into carpet at the threshold, the desk guarded against the unsupervised. We were urged to be obedient as we crossed over, our footsteps muffled as we were cautioned to keep our voices low. The first to enter would rush to the white shelf where the new arrivals were kept. Displayed prominently among the others, *The Stinky Cheeseman* lay open for our perusal. We were always solemn in our handling of such an irreverent and colourful Picture book.

I was as sincere in my enjoyment as the others, but something else drew me, and I would soon turn to my real goal; the standing book rack. Further from the door yet still in sight of the desk it stood tall and isolated, proudly cradling its paperbacks. Cheap white wire, novel in its ability to rotate and captivating in its contents. The only pictures in these books were on the covers and that's what appealed to me; since I would barely be glancing at the words within. I made my selection, I judged a book by its cover.

Every week for a year I'd lovingly gaze at the image of the glowing ember dragon curled protectively over its hoard of gold. Then I would proudly bring it back to class and not read it. The pages were yellowed and it had that weird smell unique to library paperbacks, but it had a dragon on it! It wasn't until high school that I picked up *The Hobbit* with the intention of actually reading it, but before that, there was the ice storm.

In my final year of elementary school, three years after silent reading time was first thrust upon me, they introduced The Pizza Party. Our Names were penned on the brightly colored board that was mounted on the wall of our classroom. Our teacher would add stars

next to our names for each book that we read, and at the end of the month she would take the two classmates with the most stars to Pizza Hut for lunch. Pizza hut had a sundae bar. I never got any pizza, I didn't get any ice cream. I still faked it.

When the storm hit we lost power. Our upstairs bathroom was undergoing one of my Dad's renovations, so the walls were tarped and a shower was impossible. I'd bathe in the night by candlelight, the silver tarp covering the tiles making the room a cave. Simple daily tasks became an adventure with the camping stove in the kitchen heating our dinner. I can't recall what kept the living room warm while my brother and I slept, but I also don't remember worrying about it.

Those days were an endeavour into creativity for my parents, so to keep us amused they took my brother and I to the Disneyland of winter; they took us to The Mall. After rolling around in the pure exhilaration and joy that only a ten-year-old girl in the 90's can experience after her dad buys her *Mall Madness*, my mom took me to Chapters. Usually I would shift from foot to foot with nervous energy, my chest and toes dancing with electric discomfort while I waited for her to finish her torturously long browse. This time however, my mom had a mission. I was led through rows upon rows of bookshelves, wheeled by tables and turned around corners, and finally spun to face the young adult section by my mother. "Choose" she said, and with that I was handed the responsibility of my own assignment and entertainment.

That day was my first step into understanding how someone could possibly take so long deciding what book to take home, especially considering they were expected to actually read it. I was told to choose three and my choices were eclectic but uniform in their ability to pique my interest, I didn't even base the decision solely on their covers!

That evening my mother cracked the spine of the first book. I couldn't tell you the name of the book, and all I remember of the cover was that it was blue; maybe. There was intrigue, there was a diary, and there may have been a vampire. Sitting crossed legged on the carpet of my own home watching my mother read to us by candlelight, I began to make the connection between independent words and the stories they could make when pressed together and printed on paper. Letters had more purpose when arranged into words, and the right words strung together formed beautiful sentences that lay flat against the page. They marched in straight little lines and yet could lead anywhere, and those pages were in the books, --and I had three.

The ritual of reading by candlelight would continue over the following days and even the lure of *Mall Madness's* credit cards couldn't divert my obsession with discovering what happened next. When my mom wasn't reading to us I wanted her to read, and when she was reading, she was reading too slow. And then, my parents went back to work.

I waited enduringly for my mom to come home and pick up where she left off; my patience lasted one day. Driven by a combination of curiosity and extreme boredom; Tired of waiting to hear the end of the first book, I took matters into my own hands. I started to read.

Book one was quickly devoured and book two introduced me to the world of Elvira, Mistress of the dark; she quickly won me over with *Transylvania 90210*, and that is where my addiction started.

My bi-weekly trips to Toys “R” Us with my father were substituted for an hour at Chapters, Saturdays were spent begging my mom for trips to the library. I traded in my little ponies for books. When I returned to school, stars started appearing by my name, leading to monthly visits with the candied sprinkles at the sundae bar. I ended the school year on a sugar high.

In grade seven, pizza wasn’t a motivation for literary discovery; A new book was the only incentive I needed. Head down, hair hanging to shield my face, my hands would twitch nervously beneath my desk. Trying to escape notice, my heart would pound, and my breath would stagger along with my heroine. Sometimes, I was caught; Paperbacks are harder to hide during math class.

High school had brought a new library and with it an entirely new bliss. Walking through that turnstile was the entrance into my own private literary kingdom. That’s where I found the jacketless book; Worn and simply bound in green, the gold embossed title glittered up at me. This time I took *The Hobbit* home eager to meet the dragon inside. This time, I didn’t fake it.