

Learning to March to My Own Beat

My lips sting and swell deep red as I fill my lungs with the crisp, clear air of an early September night. The intense heat of the towering spotlights flares up the itchy uncomfortableness of my size-too-small, blue and white uniform -- something I had never seemed to get used to, even after four years. My trombone, my trusty, beat-up, golden instrument, gleams with the reflection of hundreds of eyes on the football field as I continue on, marching to the second movement *left, right, left, right, left, right*. My heart seems to beat to the rhythm of the drums behind me, internalizing the tempo, recalling the number of steps it takes to get to the next rest. It is the first football game of senior year, and I notice the pain of my swollen lips, the aching of my upper arms, the sweat brimming at the top of my oversized hat and beading down my forehead onto crimson cheeks. There is no place else I'd rather be.

The one constant force over my seven years at Oxford Middle School and High School was band: I was a devoted, stereotypical band geek. My idea of a fun night was hanging out in the stark white-walled band room, practicing a piece for next month's band festival until my lips turned purple, or just simply combing through what was probably thousands of videos -- some amazing and others cringe-worthy -- of other marching band performances. Through the proud moments of school spirit as our high school won the wrestling state championships to the dismal days of failed quizzes and family struggles, music had always been there, playing softly in the background of chaos and clutter. I could count on the notes in *Bunker Hill March* to have the same black quarter rests each time I played it through, and this reminder never ceased to comfort me; it's stability was dependable, like the marked, inevitable calluses you develop from clutching your trombone between your thumb and index finger for hours each day.

My body tensed as the band snapped to attention for the third and final song of the show we had finally come to play on our patchy green field. We stood for a moment against the bright lights of the stadium, watching the American flag flap steadily in the nighttime breeze, and hearing uninterested parents chat with their neighbors while their children chased each other up and down the bleachers, clanking their tennis shoes against the metal with every nimble step. “Band, Horns Up!” shouted the drum major, barely audible over the rowdy conversations in the stands. And then, we were off.

Just like every run through, my lips throbbed rapidly like the beat of the song. My feet glided across the ground to each spot, each assigned patch of grass that became your own when you finally reached your destination and held your instrument high. My body moved without consciousness, arms controlling the trombone’s slide while my legs carried me across the field towards the final push, the company front -- the pinnacle of the show, where the entire band forms a horizontal line and marches forward, in unison. It’s a beautiful technique, so bold yet classic that it always wows an audience. But this time, for some reason (it might have been my jumbled mind, or fate if you want to look at it that way), I didn’t make it to my spot on the forty yard line. Panicked, I attempted to make up for the room with huge steps backwards, into the front.

*Crunch.*

Instantly my left knee buckled as I stepped into a small, indented crater in the dirt. The pain radiated from my ankle to the top of my knee, feeling as though my leg was burning on the inside, up my muscles and tendons and back down again. My trombone clinked to the ground beside me as I dropped down on my right knee hard and tried to catch my breath; from the crowd, I heard the collective gasp of the normally unobservant and distracted football fans as I

hit the grass. The freshman trombone player next to me glanced behind his shoulder, looking as terrified as I did at me kneeling on the ground. *Shit. Shit. Shit.* I thought over and over, trying to register both where the band was and how to get up. My cheeks burned with mortification as I felt the crowd's sympathetic eyes all turn and watch me struggle up, using my trombone as a cane. *Great, how embarrassing.* I limped to the line twelve paces in front of me, desperately hoping to blend back into the band.

In throbbing, stinging darts of pain, I stood with my trombone pretending to play the final, steady notes of the piece while instead wheezing into my mouthpiece, trying to lessen the shock and burn from my fall. The song couldn't end soon enough. I had to get off of the field and ice my knee and leg. *Oh my god Alyssa, what did you do?* I kept thinking to myself. *Why did you do that? How could you have been so stupid?*

"Ummm, are you alright?" the freshman asked as soon as our horns came down. I grimaced and attempted to smile, but my mouth only made a pained "O" as I plopped down on the sideline bench. My friends swarmed around me, overwhelmingly asking what happened and if I needed anything. "It's nothing, I think I just sprained my ankle," I assured them. But in the back of my mind I was freaking out, thinking *When will it stop burning? How long will I have to miss practice for?* Even the melodramatic *This is the worst day of my life!* crossed my mind. My anxiety kept rising at the thought of missing our next practice before the first competition. What would I do if I couldn't march?

I tried to remain positive on the outside to cover the berating voice going on in my head. My self-absorbed sixteen year old mind told me that I had made a fool of myself, and even more harshly that it was completely because of my own actions. It was the greatest burden of self-guilt that I had ever placed on myself before. Afraid that others might realize this too, I hobbled

back to the cold set of bleachers reserved for the band only but decided to sit off near the top corner, brewing with emotion. In my embarrassment and pain I felt different, hurt, alone.

Ten packs of icy-hots, bags of ice, and doses of ibuprofen later, my leg barely felt better than it had that Friday night. When I bent my leg back and forth I felt a grinding sensation on my knee, a dull ache coming from it while I lay icing my ankle in bed. Knowing that wasn't a good sign, I stopped in after school to the local clinic, hoping for some stronger pain pills and quick advice. Dr. Larsen examined my leg she felt up and down my shin and calf with her cold, slender fingers. As she moved my knee back and forth she began to nod, making me nervous as her lips pressed together into a tight line and as she wrote down a few sentences on her flimsy clipboard.

"Well, you definitely twisted your ankle up pretty bad," she started, still looking at her notes. "I think what happened with the knee is that it strained the muscles in your leg up to your knee, where you can hear that grinding noise as you bend your leg." She stretched my left leg out and back to demonstrate what she was saying. "An x-ray will tell us for sure, but the grinding is most likely caused by an absence of cartilage under your kneecap. Most likely this has been happening for a while now, and the ankle was just the thing to wake it up. It's what doctors' call "Chondromalacia patella," or "Runner's Knee."

Assuring me that we could talk about options after the x-ray, I hesitantly followed her to the frumpy beige room to look at my knee. It was cold and I sat breathing the stagnant air, hoping that Dr. Larsen was wrong about her diagnosis. Unfortunately she wasn't, and she explained that even if my ankle healed within the next week, the complications with my knee would prove more painful in the long run, since my case was in a highly advanced state of cartilage deterioration.

“So, what can I do to get more cartilage back?” I asked after comprehending that this was more important than I thought. *When will this go away?* I felt so frustrated that this was happening, and could feel the knot forming in my throat, warning me of my impending tears. There really was no answer that would satisfy what I wanted to hear; Tylenol, rest, and physical therapy would help regain strength in my knee over time. It would take time. My last marching band season was over.

I wish that I had reacted differently to this news and made the best of the situation, but at the time I couldn't stop asking myself *why*. Why didn't I make it to my mark? Why didn't I see the patch of dirt behind me? Why did this have to happen to me? Instead of focusing on getting better quickly, I moped. I cried and complained about the unfairness of not being able to march with my friends, and with the band that I had put so much work into for the last four years. I beat myself up about the last football game, playing it back over and over again in my head, blushing at the embarrassment of falling in front of all of those people and the stupidity of my mistake marching backwards with such big steps. *It was my fault*. I began to eat less, avoid talking with friends, and sleep more. Even playing my trombone just for fun seemed like an impossible task – What if I messed up a song in front of everyone? What did it matter anyways, since I was sidelined for the season and no help to the band? For the first time in my life I wasn't excited to get out my instrument and make music.

The question of *why* always sat in the back of my mind, like an annoying, unwanted relative who had stayed much past their welcome. *Why do things like this happen? Because the world is out to get me*, I'd answer to myself immediately. Even a month after my fall did I ask myself this, crying alone in the band room once again. Holding my trombone with little

motivation or desire to play, the heavy outside door opened behind me and I jumped in shock at the familiar and comforting outline of my band instructor, Gibby.

“What the heck are you doing here?” his voice boomed as his giant body hovered over my music stand. “Are you crying?”

Feeling there was no way to avoid the conversation, my words began to pour out. “Oh Gibby, I just don’t want to play anymore. I can’t get over how stupid and embarrassed I was when I hurt my ankle,” I choked out through tears still flowing down my face. “What am I supposed to do... I don’t feel like playing anymore, but there’s nothing else for me to do. It’s so annoying.”

Gibby sighed as he grabbed a chair with his enormous hand and dragged it across the floor in front of me. “Who are you? Describe yourself to me,” he asked me out of the blue.

Taken aback I stammered to a response. “Uhhh, my name is Alyssa? I’m sixteen, a senior, my favorite color is blue, and I’m an only child. I’ve played trombone for seven years... I want to be a teacher... I love scary movies... annnnd, I’m obsessed with the British Royal family.” *What the heck is this about?* I wondered.

Looking me in the eye, Gibby began, “Think about it, you’ve got so much more going for you than just marching band. There’s more happening in your life, and obviously more things that interest you that you haven’t been thinking about while you’ve been focusing on band.” He shifted to pat me on the shoulder. “And while I love your enthusiasm and commitment to this program, I really have to say: Get out there and explore those other things. Come back when you’re ready – But make sure you come back... I need some trombones for jazz band this winter,” he chuckled, getting up from his chair and continuing to unlock his office door.

I thought about what he had said and it made sense. Hadn't I always wanted to sign up for an art class? Didn't I always seem to avoid going to movies with friends because I wanted to practice instead? I could try to do some of those things now. While the separation I felt from my trombone was intimidating, I also realized the opportunities it might open to experience something new. This was scary yet exhilarating, and I recognized that I was willing to give it a shot. Maybe the reason why bad things happen is not simply a punishment, but to help you see a situation or perspective in a brand new light.

Hearing the office door clap shut, I turned to see Gibby walking back across the room, smiling to himself. "You know Alyssa, 'Shit happens.' Take advantage of that. I'll see you tomorrow," he laughed as the door opened and the last few shadows of the day stretched into the room. *Yeah, it really does*, I agreed as I placed my trombone back in its hard, bulky case and turned off the lights.

I never thought I'd enjoy doing anything else but being in band, but I was wrong. My tumble on the football field, while succeeding in embarrassing me in front of much of my high school, also led me to start to write for the school paper, and eventually to declare an English concentration at the University of Michigan where I can write this story down now. It was not an easy path – the road to rehabilitation of my knee was draining and it still took me a long time to deal with my self-blame and strained relationships with friends. I still continue to ask myself *why* certain things happen to this day; however, instead of focusing on the negative, I try hard to look at the possible positive outcomes – which I've found there almost always are.

Though after three years I no longer play my trombone, band is still a part of me and it always will be. Whenever I click on my Pandora site and hear Holtz's *Jupiter* or a Sousa march, the emotions begin to flood back. *Why?* Because it is a part of who I am. Not the thing that

defines me, but one of those little pieces I can hold as a comfort, like the dependable quarter notes of *Bunker Hill March*. It can be confusing to deal with, but I have come to understand: We are defined by so much more than what we might think. All of that shit that happens, it creates opportunities, it stems from reason. And so, I can say that I am me: self-deprecating, complex, ever-changing, a horror film fanatic, and a life-long band geek. It's time to just go with it.