

A Voice in the Wind

The yogurt cup laid casually next to the trash can. At some point earlier in the day, Lynne Sinek's boss, Carrie Marsten, had tried to shoot the empty cup into the trash can across her office but had missed. The cup was empty except for some uneaten green remnants that got warmer and stickier the longer they lay in the room, which was exactly how Carrie's employees matured. Lynne gave a casual glance towards the forgotten debris and then looked back at her boss.

"ARE YOU SURE YOU WANT TO LEAVE US?" Carrie asked, her voice, once useful in her years as a Zumba instructor, now better fit her role as a human resources supervisor. Lynne, who had worked under Carrie for several years as a HR generalist, had moved her chair back as far away from the desk as possible when she came in to give her two weeks' notice.

"Yes," Lynne said.

"I'M SAD TO SEE YOU GO, YOU'RE A GREAT WORKER." Carrie began to look at the paperwork Lynne had laid on her desk so casually earlier. "IF YOU DON'T MIND ME ASKING, WHY ARE YOU LEAVING? YOU HAVEN'T MENTIONED IT IN YOUR LETTER. HAVE YOU FOUND ANOTHER JOB?" Carrie's eyes lit up with the type of drama hungry gleam only those working in an office seem to get.

"No," Lynne said, she had always been one of little word and though she tried to keep eye contact with her soon-to-be ex-boss, she found herself much more focused on her own wrinkled pinstriped blazer she had bought for her first interview years ago.

“I’m actually leaving so that I can find my original voice.”

Lynne could not pinpoint when she had lost her voice. She sometimes thought she remembered it being there in her childhood, like a friend she’d play Mr. Fox with--it’d turn it’s back to her, she’d ask a question, and it’d tell her exactly what to do. Or, she’d remember her voice being an anthem of a generation belting out discontented ballads at the oppressor that was time. Other times, on her bad days, she feared that such memories were placed into her head by nostalgia, the most dangerous of all addictions. But, there was one thing Lynne knew for certain, it had existed at some point, and she wanted it back.

“ARE YOU SURE YOU WANT TO TRY THAT? YOU KNOW YOU’RE NOT THE FIRST EMPLOYEE I’VE HAD COME TO MY OFFICE WITH THE SAME GOAL.”

Carrie touched her own throat as she spoke; Lynne wondered if she had ever had the same dream herself, to find the original voice that she, Carrie Marsten, had had in the past. Lynne was willing to bet that her voice had sounded like honey sliding down wind chimes in comparison to the voice she had now. *I’m quite sure, I know where I generally left it, I just need time to search the area a little more thoroughly.*

Lynne was lying, of course, she couldn’t remember where she had lost her original voice. The more she thought about it, the more she feared that she hadn’t lost it all at once, but that it had broken like an ink bottle hitting concrete, leaving it in small jigsaw-like pieces. It was not unheard of for people to lose their original voice in bits and pieces, they often fell inconspicuously to the ground and no one would notice until they nearly tripped over it and broke their necks.

Lynne could remember exactly where she was when she realized that her voice was gone. She had been walking around her in-law's marshy backyard with her new husband. The epiphany had left her quite frightened. "What's the matter?" her husband had asked as she began to stoop in flooded grass.

"Did you lose something?"

*My voice, my voice.* Lynne had wanted to wail but it seemed her new voice would not let her, *it's gone.*

"Well of course it's gone! It took it time fully leaving, that's for sure! Nobody keeps their original voice. I'm surprised you kept yours for as long as you did." He did not mourn the loss of his original voice as she did, for his new voice had landed him commercial gigs reading off warnings and fine print on advertisements.

Lynne's new voice had not been as career opening as his. While most people were able to convey emotion through their speech, Lynne's was very flat and monotone. It was a voice better suited to a robot, Lynne thought, not a human. It was her voice that led her into her human resources job, where people were quick to believe she was a recording and not a living person anytime she picked up the phone. After three long years of that, Lynne decided that she needed to find her original voice, and the best place to start would be the backyard where she had first noticed the change.

As soon as her two weeks were up, Lynne drove straight over to her in-law's house. Her father-in-law was a little confused at first upon seeing her, but after she proudly explained her intentions, he let her into the backyard. Her in-laws were not the type to practice lawn care. "It

won't be long before its back to a swampy mess anyway so why bother? It's better to just let it be?" Lynne's mother-in-law often said. It suited Lynne just fine in this case, because it meant there was more of a chance of her finding her voice hidden in a wild patch of grass.

She searched the backyard for the better part of a day but was no closer to finding any semblance of her original voice than she had been the first time. But she refused to give up, even as her sneakers filled with muddy water and her jeans were stained with cold earth, she continued to look until it grew too dark, and she had to go home.

She went back to the backyard the day after that and then the day after that, finally on the fourth day; she brought hedge clippers with her. Lynne began to meticulously clip the blades of grass a small set at a time. *I can't bring a weed whacker or an electric lawn mower through here, there's too much water*, she had to keep telling herself so that she wouldn't give in and try to bring electric machinery through the yard.

It took her nearly a week to finish. Her body became strained like an old rubber band, but her back rippled with power each time she snipped the clippers shut.

Eight days after she had started her search, she was rewarded. Near the edge of the backyard under the gaze of once tall grass, there lay the tiniest piece of her voice. It was dirty and jagged, but it was as persistent as its old master. Finding that sliver of originality put a spring back in Lynne's step and as she washed it off, she was already thinking hard about where the rest of it could be.

Her quest eventually brought her to a hoarder's home. A helpful suggestion from an online forum ran by self-titled reclaimers, people dedicated to getting their old voices back, said

that this hoarder's home held many broken voices. The owner was more than happy to allow individuals in to look for their piece of voice too if they so desired. Lynne took the suggestion to heart, emailed the voice hoarder, and within a few days, was on her way to the house.

When the homeowner greeted her, Lynne was surprised and embarrassed to find out that she was a voiceless. Born without the ability to speak, the existence of the voiceless made complaining about a new voice in public taboo. As a result, many reclaimers took to the internet to commune. Although she had been taught how to communicate with a voiceless in grade school, Lynne didn't know how to communicate her reasons for being on the door step. Lucky for her, the homeowner, who introduced herself as June, happily beckoned her inside.

The house was tiny and looked like someone had just moved in, there were so many boxes, but Lynne was quick to notice almost everything in the house was a voice. There were jagged high pitched voices scraping against the walls of a dining room, loud crumbled voices muffled in a wardrobe, and beautiful bubbling voices flooding the bathroom. She accidentally bumped into a large stack of boxes by the door and wispy voices blew across the ground like tumbleweeds nearly out the door. "A little loud in here isn't it?"

*It's not too bad,* June signed.

"Do you live here by yourself?"

*Yes*

"Mmmm," Lynne replied, unsure of why she had asked the question in the first place nor did she know where to start searching.

*Would you like some help looking?* June signed, her hands flowing effortlessly while her face beamed with a much too friendly smile.

“No, that’s ok I got it,” Lynne said quickly. She was slightly annoyed at her own lack of emotion.

*Well, I’m here if you need it,* and with that, June was gone.

As she got into opening more of the boxes by the door, Lynne couldn’t help but wish she had more help. The voices were all loud and some of them were extremely sharp and cut Lynne’s hands a few times when she tried to pick them up. When randomly opening boxes didn’t yield any results, she began to sort out voice pieces, first by shape, and then by pitches. She did find a small number of voice pieces that went together with each other, but not with her own.

She had just begun sorting out some potential voice pieces that fit with the fragment of voice she had brought with her when she was interrupted by a shoulder tap.

*Break?* June held out a cold glass of water, its cold droplets unraveling seductively down the glass. Lynne cautiously took it. It wasn’t that Lynne hated the voiceless--far from it--she just couldn’t feel comfortable around them. Her desires for her old voice were often seen as shallow, cosmetic, especially compared to what the voiceless had to go through. Whenever she brought it up with friends or family, that was always their response: “the voiceless have it worse than you” and, while that may have been true, Lynne wished others in her life would be a little more understanding of her predicament. Getting involved in reclaimer online chats last year had been what convinced her to leave her job and start the search for her voice.

Lynne's mind began to fill with the words of encouragement she had received from strangers over the internet; it felt good to be some mis-voiced person's hero. After she had told the group that she had found a small piece of her original voice, they had all been very happy, congratulating her on working so hard and for being a sign to others that it is possible to find your old voice again. But, after a while, the praise had begun to slow down, as did most of the dialogue. It wasn't until Lynne asked where she should look next that someone in the forum had given her June's address. Lynne found herself wondering what would happen if she came out of June's empty handed, would the group chat then abandon her?

She was so focused on this horror, that she missed over half of what June had been signing to her and asked her to repeat. *Why are you looking for your original voice?* June asked. Lynne felt her face flash with heat as she realized that she didn't have a good answer ready, even though in the past she had been able to express with ease on the reclaimer's forum all the important reasons she had for getting her original voice back.

"This one just doesn't feel like me," she finally answered. She felt like she was a woman at a department store returning a blouse that wasn't her style while the cashier wore an old rotted shirt she could not stop wearing even if she wanted to. *I see,* June signed.

"What is it like being voiceless?" Lynne couldn't resist asking.

She was surprised at her daring and was about to apologize when June, who was looking confused, signed *I'm not voiceless.*

"Then, you can talk?" Lynne felt confused and embarrassed, she wished the forum had been more clear about who this voice hoarder was. *I do not have the ability to talk like you do,*

*but I do have a voice, and I always will. You're seeing it right now.* June looked slightly annoyed but did not look angry.

“Is this your new voice then, you had an original voice before this one?”

At that point, June just shook her head and Lynne, now tomato red with embarrassment, wanted to run from the house.

But, after a second thought, she remembered that part of her original voice was still in the house, and she needed to get that before she could leave. To smooth over her ignorant offense, Lynne asked another question that had been bugging her.

“Why do you collect voice pieces?”

June smiled and signed, *I just like to help people.*

Lynne sat quietly for a moment, and then asked June if she could help her navigate the house to find a part of her voice. As they worked, Lynne talked. She talked more that day than she had in nearly ten years all about her life, her husband, the shock of being unemployed, and slightly sore shoulders she had from when she found the first piece of her original voice. June listened to Lynne as she sorted, her balance focused between the task at hand and Lynne's ramblings. It made Lynne feel like she had something more than just a forum that understood her.

Late that night, surrounded by springy, grumpy, and stoic original voices of other people, Lynne found another part of her voice. She went back to June's house a few more times to see if any more of her voice was there. This was the justification Lynne gave herself, but really, she just wanted to see June again. At first Lynne wanted to put all the voices she had pulled out back

into their boxes, but June reasoned that they'd all be pulled out again anyway. Instead, they spent most of their time together in June's garden, tending to her lilacs and drinking lemonade.

*Don't you have to find the rest of your voice?* June asked one day while they were out on the back porch listening carelessly to the voices trailing from inside the house. Lynne's heart sank, she had been all but ready to give up her shallow quest for her original voice now that she had someone to listen to her. *You and I both know that the rest of your voice isn't here Lynne, it's someplace else.*

"But, I don't even know why I want it," Lynne felt a familiar anger bubble through at her inability to voice despair. *You still have more to discover, once you find what you're looking for, don't hesitate to come over here and tell me all about it.* Lynne wanted to be mad; she wanted June to taste the bitter confusion she felt in her own journey. But, Lynne knew she was right. Already her mind was trying to figure out other areas where her original voice could be hiding.

"It has been a long time since I heard the real me speak," Lynne said finally. *I think you're closer to that person than you realize,* was the last thing June said before Lynne left the voice hoarder's house.

Fueled with a new unknown fear, Lynne wouldn't get any new clues to the whereabouts of the rest of her voice until well into winter. After her time with June, she spent less time on the reclamer's forum and more time arguing with her husband about the need of finding her original voice. "You really don't need it! Your voice is fine," he would often say whenever she brought it up.

"Then why do you always look so sad when I talk? Would you rather I just not speak at all?" she would retort, as flat and dead sounding as a dried worm. They kept their argument fresh

and alive for a long time. It was long enough for Lynne to find a new job at a new office and enough time for them both to go into marriage counseling.

It was after their sixth session, when they were driving through a surprise snowfall that Lynne's husband spoke about her voice search. "Are you still looking for your old voice?" Lynne didn't respond at first, but watched the snowflakes as they gently smacked the passenger window and quickly melted.

"I'm not so sure anymore. I have nearly all my original voice together, but I don't know where to look next." Lynne's husband didn't say anything else on the subject until they were parked in front of their home. "Have you ever heard of voice merchants?"

Lynne's husband explained that the voice merchants were vultures. They collected any voice pieces they could find and then sold them on the black market. They generally weren't the nicest of folks and many would often try to scam their customers. Some people would even lie about being voice merchants and then would mug their potential customers. Lynne's husband had the sinking feeling that the rest of Lynne's voice was probably with a voice merchant, and Lynne had the same feeling too. They didn't talk about her voice for the rest of the night, but two days later she was on her way to a parking lot in the middle of the night where a merchant waited for her.

The voice merchant went by the alias Vincent. A smaller man, he stayed hunched up against the trunk of his car and waited for Lynne to come to him.

"Are you Vincent?" Lynne asked, already knowing the answer.

“HMMM I can see why you are looking for a new voice HMMM” he said as he popped open his car’s trunk.

“Not a new voice, I’m looking for my original one,” Lynne walked towards the trunk but waited for Vincent to click on his trunk’s light before she peeked in.

“HMMM just as well, there really is no such thing as a new voice these days anyway, just a lot of recycling HMMM”.

“Look,” Lynne huffed as she crossed her cold hands under her arms, “Can you just get on with it?”

Vincent just smiled and clicked on the light, Lynne came in closer to take a look.

Inside, there was an assortment of voice pieces. Though not as big as June’s collection, the voices in the trunk were well categorized and were singing in harmony with each other from the moment Vincent turned on the light. “HMMM I don’t blame you for wanting to find your original voice, I would too if my new voice was as emotionless as that HMMM.”

Lynne ignored the bait and started to shift through the voices. “HMMM be careful with those HMMM!” Lynne pulled out her nearly completed original voice and began to compare it to those in the trunk.

“HMMM is that an almost whole original voice HMMM? HMMM I’ve never seen one of those before HMM.” Lynne plunged her hand down to the bottom of the trunk and began to remember all the things that her voice had once been: the soft drone of a bee during a picnic in

the park, the salty smack of the ocean against the coast on her honeymoon, the loud laugh at last call, Lynne Sinek was confident that she was about to find the original her.

And, just like that, as quickly as she had lost her original voice, her fingers found the rest of it. She ripped it out of the trunk victoriously; the last piece shimmered in the trunk's light.

“HMMM hold on! You have to pay for that HMMM!” Lynne looked wildly at the voice merchant, pulled out the agreed upon amount, and slapped it in his hands. Vincent was in shock as Lynne connected the final piece.

Where there had once been erratic excitement, there was now silence. Lynne was trying to decide what her first words would be. She finally decided on a phrase she had refused to say since losing her voice.

“I am Lynne Sinek.” Lynne said.

She frowned.

The voice was small. The voice was uncertain, it was not anything close to being what Lynne wanted, except that it was her original voice, of that she could be sure. She nearly crumpled into the side of Vincent's car as memories--real memories--pranced through her head. Memories of childhood ideas, and childhood fears, of silly wishes and ridiculous dreams; all of which belonged to a different Lynne.

“This voice is too small.” Lynne murmured. It was the voice of a child filled with all the imagination and none of the understanding that an adult needed. Lynne had had issues with

people mistaking her as a machine in the past, now she was afraid that she would be nothing but a child for the rest of her days.

Vincent had felt like he had been scammed out of money up until Lynne began to whine. Now, he felt like businessman again.

“HMMM would you like to get rid of it? I’m sure I can find a buyer willing to take it off your hands HMMM?” Lynne, her hand now over her mouth, just shook her head.

“HMMM well you don’t want to sell, and you don’t like your voice, why don’t you make a new one then HMMM?” Vincent chuckled to himself as he tucked the money into his pocket, closed the trunk, and drove out of Lynne’s life forever.

Lynne was unsure what to do. A grown up with a child’s voice, she could no longer claim that everything had been better in her past because she was living her past now. She had hated her changed voice but now wished that she hadn’t been as harsh with it. “Who is the real me?” she spoke to nobody but received a reply from her memory. *I think you’re closer to that person than you realize.* June, the voiceless woman with a voice, now spoke to Lynne from a place of possibility. “*Why don’t you make a new one then HMMM?*” Vincent, the heckler, had spoken to her from a place of reality. “Why can’t I make a new voice?” Lynne spoke to herself in the present from a place of innocent originality.

And so, from the dreams of child-like possibility and the harsh reality of adulthood, Lynne created a new voice for herself. She spoke, and it sounded like a jazz song traveling through the wind, it was beautifully unique, and it would be different each time she spoke. Lynne

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had found her old voice and had just as quickly lost it, but, as she walked back the way she came, she found it all to be her.