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BuzzFeed Reads My Vitals

This past summer I spent a lot of time alone. Watching TV, cooking, reading, mulling over a blank Google document, skating circles around the same basketball court over and over again, hopping the fence, and lying under the big green slide at my old elementary school.

It's the circles I remember the most. The pushing and pushing, turning the board with the weight of my body. I don't skateboard, let me just make that clear. I can't ollie or kickflip—the most I can do is a stationary shuvit. I'd practice them holding tight to the chain-link fence that surrounds the tennis courts, gripping it so hard that I'd walk away with angry red marks in the creases of my hands.

It took me a while to let go of the fence, even when I had them down I just couldn't commit. I still have trouble committing. Learning to shuvit wasn't my favorite part of skateboarding, sometimes I just went to the park and skated for hours without trying any tricks. Just circle after circle on the smooth green/blue court.

I've been creating characters since I was little, writing down names in notebooks, listing zodiac signs, favorite colors, movies, books. My sophomore year of high school I took a course on fiction. I wrote stories and created characters that felt less like lists and more like people. A year later and I'm taking a nonfiction class for the first time. There are no more characters, just myself and other actual people.

In fiction, it's all about creating a believable character. In nonfiction the realness is supposed to be a given, but how can I make myself a believable character if I don't even know who I am?

In class, my fiction teacher gave us a list of questions to ask about our character.

(I) Where does your character go when they want to be alone?

(II) Where is the last place your character spent the night?

(III) Does your character want a family in the future?

(IV) What is your character's fondest memory?

(V) What would your character's Spotify look like?

(VI) How do they want to spend their 18th birthday?

personalityhacker.com says I am curious and good at communication, but I'm also highly emotional and independent to a fault. I'm not sure if I agree but the computer says it's true and obviously the computer knows me better than I know myself.

A character isn't just a face that says things. It takes up space in the writer's head, you have to give them memories, you have to give them friends and family, a story. We're shaped by our surroundings, so with a character usually comes a setting, a list of experiences.

He's not just kind, she's not just mean. Widen scope. Tell me why, tell me what made them that way. This is called a backstory, a point of origin. He's kind because he grew up in a neighborhood where everyone shared everything because he remembers getting trash bags full of clothes from the family next door and he remembers passing those same clothes onto another kid a few doors down. Because he remembers how his mother made him fold each shirt and empty out all the pockets, making sure each sock was rightside out with a pair to match.

She's mean because of the boys in her fourth grade class that cut off her ponytail when she wasn't looking, because the teacher punished her instead of them, because she went through the rest of the year with a lopsided haircut, because she'll never forget the names they called her. Because her parents were too busy working to tell her everything would be okay, what happens in fourth grade doesn't really matter.

With a character comes a story, maybe not the story you're going to write, maybe it's a story that'll never be heard

because it's boring, or maybe it's tragic and you don't know how to put it to words. But there's a story there, that character comes from some place. Where do I come from?

I

Where does your character go when they want to be alone?

I rarely ever *want* to be alone. I think it's because I already feel so alone in my own head. I don't have secrets, but I think things that no one will ever hear, that I never want anyone to hear. My thoughts pull me back at unexpected moments, during the middle of class, while hanging out with friends, or watching a movie. My only anchor to the outside world is people.

I even prefer to study with other people around. I like being distracted, being pulled out of whatever I'm reading or writing with a "Hey look at this" or an "I'm bored." A phone slid across the table, a highlighter thrown towards my head, are all welcome interruptions. The closest I get to being alone is listening to music. It's like the music is building walls around my ears, not necessarily keeping other thoughts out, but keeping mine in.

allthetests.com says it can tell me which NCIS character I am most like. It asks me how I like my coffee, I do not like coffee. It asks me how I drive, I don't drive. I would like to be any character but McGee, even though I know I am most like McGee, because I'm a geek and I don't always know what to say. AllTheTests.com says I am most like Agent Ziva David, the badass foreign operative working with the NCIS team. This is wrong. The only thing Agent David and I have in common are Daddy issues.

II

Where is the last place your character spent the night?

Until I was twelve I never slept over someplace without family around. Usually it was just at a cousin's house—anywhere else and my mom would wake up to a midnight phone call asking her to come pick me up. The only successful sleepover I had before the age of twelve was at my friend Erin's house. Her older sister was in my brother's grade, so he came along and I slept through the night just fine. I remember their wiener dog, small and round. Who trotted like a show dog. Erin moved away a few months later, to Florida, her mom got a job with upper management at Disney World. That's what I think at least. I heard Disney World and Mom and job in the same sentence and constructed the most appropriate answer in my head. It's not like they were moving so their mom could dress up as Minnie Mouse everyday, or wait tables in the blue lagoon.

She came back to visit once the next year when I was in second grade. We met on the playground by the yellow monkey bars. I called out her name and at first a boy answered back. He was dangling helplessly from the pull up bar. We proceeded to argue for the next minute about whether Erin was a girl's name or a boy's name. I remember my conversation with him better than my time with her, running around on the playground.

The next time I successfully spent the night away from home was when I was on the school track team in 7th grade. We were having a pizza party at Jackie's house when she asked us if we wanted to sleep over. It wasn't planned, I slept in my jeans, and I woke up with the imprint of the carpet across my face.

Now I spend every night away from home, in a dorm, living within a few feet of some of my closest friends. Despite all this I still often forget that I go to boarding school. This isn't something I ever thought would happen, so as far as my brain is concerned, it didn't.

I'm not a student, I'm not a writer, I'm not a friend. I'm just a person looking in, just watching everything happen. Like I'm sitting on the front steps of my house listening to gossip about someone else's life. Like I'm staring into my phone watching a show play out in front of me. It's a plot that refuses to piece itself together.

[When fleshing out a character it's important to ask the deep questions, the ones hidden beneath the surface, the ones you scoff at during games of truth or dare. There are two questions in particular that are often asked in tandem, believed to be the main driving force behind a character's actions. (A) What do they fear?(B) What do they desire?]

III

Does your character want a family in the future?

I want a family. I want a wife or a husband, kids, a dog, two dogs, three dogs, a lot of dogs. I'm thinking of a corgi and a golden retriever, and I'm picturing snow. Hot chocolate waiting on countertops, layers peeled off at the front door, fuzzy socks and a fireplace. A snow day, a shoveled walk. I'd like to be close enough to the middle of nowhere that I don't have to deal with traffic right outside my front door or snow that tastes like soot in your mouth, snow that gathers next to gutters and piles up on your front lawn every time a plow comes by.

I'd buy dog-friendly salt for sidewalks, and I'd walk miles to get us donuts or good breakfast sandwiches.

[(A) This is a question I often have difficulty answering, but lately as I dissect myself and my own thought process I've come to the conclusion that I fear looking stupid. Maybe it's not my worst fear, maybe there are deeper ones that will reveal themselves in dire situations when all that I have left is my body and my primal instincts from way back when, but for now I do everything in my power to keep myself from looking like a poser.]

Buzzfeed says everyone in the world has a breakfast food that matches their personality. *Everyone*. I tell them I wake up at 8 and dislike the word “milky,” BuzzFeed tells me I have the personality of cereal. Dry and crunchy.

IV

What is your character's fondest memory?

The Hommocks Public Pool and their SpongeBob ice pops with black gumball eyes. I remember sitting on a white and green chair, a plastic one, the kind of one that you sink into that is made of a bunch of elastic straps draped over a plastic frame in varying directions. As a kid I often got stuck, a foot up to my ankle, an arm up to my elbow. My fondest memory is sitting wrapped up in a large beach towel, the chlorine drying in my hair as I ate a SpongeBob ice pop, insisting on chewing the disgusting black gumballs that at the time I thought tasted like tar. Spiderman is melted all over my younger cousin's hand and funnel cake is on the way. Mom says we'll get pizza on the way home and cinnamon rolls tomorrow morning. She says this is our fun weekend, this is a weekend to not feel guilty. I didn't understand because at that age I never felt guilty.

It's not as simple as your Hogwarts house or a coat of arms. A character isn't a motto. You can't point to the way they've styled their hair and say that swoop, that blonde curl that falls just between their eyes makes them brave. A character is made of choices. So tell me their favorite place to eat. Then tell me if they'd prefer to have the sex talk with their mom or their dad. Do they want to be buried or cremated? What do they wear to the airport, do they dress to the nines, or are they in sweatpants? Scantily clad to avoid trouble with airport security?? Only stop asking questions when you run out of questions to ask.

V

What does your character's Spotify playlist look like?

On Spotify my liked songs playlist has 602 songs on it. These songs date back to May of 2018, starting with Jon Bellion, ending with Bryce Vine. I hit shuffle and “Beverly Blues” by Opia comes on. I first heard this song my freshman year in the passenger seat of my brother's old Toyota Camry, driving home from a track meet. He dropped off his friends as I looked up the lyrics on my phone trying to find a name for the tune.

[(B) I'd just like to know that everything will be okay]

VI

Where does your character want to spend their 18th birthday?

Someplace with breadsticks. Breadsticks and family, maybe Target. On my 18th birthday I want to get a tattoo of a rook on my ribcage. I remember sitting in my Uncle Cliff's house, watching him roll up his sleeve to show off the family Coat of Arms, three small castles surrounded by a very large empty shield. Mostly I remember the white space between everything. How it looked so sad and pitiful. I am choosing a rook because it is still a castle but it is not sad or pitiful, it has agency where the castles on my uncle's arm do not.

Buzzfeed makes me pick from a lineup of subway sandwiches and wraps. Italian subs, caesar salads. I do not trust their meatballs. I answer and they tell me when I'll meet my soulmate. June 9th, 2022. This is a story that has yet to be written.