

"Tis better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all." All I can say to that, Mr. Tennyson, is that you obviously have not had the privilege (or misfortune) of viewing my life through the telescope of time. Perhaps you have never been to San Francisco. Perhaps you have never entered through the deceptively innocent doors of that famous (or infamous) pizza parlor they call Giovanni's. But let me tell you, Mr. Tennyson, that a tale lurks there unlike anything you have ever encountered, and it is that unfortunate tale that I unleash on you now.

To use that well-worn cliché, the day started out like any other, with the sun peeping in through the blinds and some strange species of primates running about yelling strange utterances, such as "Why aren't you out of bed yet?" and "I can't believe how lazy you are!" Needless to say, I rolled out of bed, shoved my limbs through the thick clothes my parents had advised me to wear, and dragged myself into the family SUV, along with four of my siblings and my two parents. There we sat, rigid as boards, seven human and multicolored marshmallows, unable to move for fear of cutting off the already slowed circulation throughout our bodies. We were headed to San Francisco to spend the day with friends from our church. Little did we know what that fateful day had in store for us. Ignorance is bliss and bliss is, well, a brand of chocolate, but let's stay focused here, people.

Exciting as it was, taking the train known as Bart into San Francisco put my family, friends, and I into a rather slack, slothful, and sleepy stupor. When the suggestion was made to "walk" to our lunch destination, a previously unheard of pizza restaurant called Giovanni's, all concerned parties readily acquiesced. Our fellow travelers' minds were laid out like books before us (some pretty easy reads), and it so happened that we were all of one and the same mind: a good brisk walk was just the antidote needed to drive away that poisonous disease of...dare I say it...boredom. We walkers strode up the street with gusto, a fire in our hearts and a song on our lips, rejoicing in the beautiful day with heads held high. Cue Chariots of Fire music playing in the background. At this point, I think it only fair to mention that regarding the matter of clothes, the kids had been right. No thick clothes were needed. The weather was gorgeously warm. In case the reader has not yet

duly noted this fact, the kids had scored one point, leaving the parents with a pathetic but much-anticipated zero. Why do parents think every part of the world outside of their own home-town has a climate similar to that of Antarctica? I do not understand. No kids do. I'm not even sure the adults themselves comprehend it. It's just become a tradition for them and so they blindly follow it without questioning, simply products of their society.

About 10 or 15 minutes later, there could be seen about us travelers a distinctive droop and listless demeanor. We were panting heavily (perhaps the first sign of our human-to-dog transformation), complaining of thirst and aching feet, and wondering aloud what this pizza place was to be like upon arrival. Needless to say, some words may have slipped out that would have been better left in the profanity jar at home, but those guilty persons will no doubt plead temporary insanity. The foodies of the group assured us one and all that it was a restaurant worth our while. So the weary wanderers pressed on, against all odds, with set faces and a certain grim determination about their mouths, wills of iron strongly resolved to show no weakness. Personally, I believed this to be nonsense, as did my friend Kim. Both of us were faithful converts to the doctrine of complaining. Each of us readily agonized about the Sahara Desert spewing forth scorching sand into our throats, the sharpened metal spikes we were walking on puncturing holes in our shoes, and the voracious Saint Bernard savagely gnawing holes in our stomachs. This seemed to help pass the time. At least, for us. Our companions didn't seem to look too pleased, but then again, their lives weren't going so splendidly at the moment anyway, so it was no small wonder that Kim and I escaped strangulation with shoelaces that day. Presently the sidewalk began to slope upward. This was certainly a new development. I shaded my burning eyes with a sweaty hand, peering into the distance for any sign of an oasis. None appeared.

At this point, I began hallucinating. I looked to my right and found Kim looking a bit run-down. All was well with the world. Then I laboriously swung my hot and heavy head over to my left and found a mirror image of myself, drinking a tall, cool glass of ice water and chowing down on a steaming hot piece of that lovely Italian-turned-American food called pizza. I sighed, and it was not a mere fanciful sigh. It was a longing from deep within the cores of my soul that rattled my very being. I had reached a melting point (almost literally) and, as I gathered from the profound and vibrating rumbles emanating

from my mid-section, so had my stomach. Up until this point, the weather had been pleasantly warm and all creation had seemed to be smiling down upon me, but no longer. The sun had put out a contract on my very life and each and every greedy pigeon cocked a sinister eye at my personage. I flinched when a scruffy looking individual rudely bumped into my shoulder, jostling my already-trembling physique and throwing me off balance. Noxious fumes from city smoke curled into my nostrils, producing a burning sensation that threatened to destroy any mucus I had managed to salvage from my last cold. As I was determining what a human being would look like if they melted on the sidewalk (probably something at least remotely resembling a popsicle), I bumped into the back of my father. Glancing up at the diminutive neon sign above his head, I read the word "Giovanni's." Oh no! I was hallucinating again! I furiously rubbed my eyes and attempted to press onward and upward to the top but was caught by what appeared to be my father's hand. "Emily! Stop walking! We're here." I sighed with relief, another heartfelt sentiment. Gladys, the GPS in my head, intoned: "You have reached your destination."

As about 20 hot, exhausted, and thirsty customers poured in through the doors, the restaurant staff quickly regained their momentarily and unprofessionally lost composure, picked up the bottom half of their jaws off the floor, retracted their eyes back into their heads, and somehow managed to make their body parts function well enough to take our order. I barely croaked out the word water before my vocal chords succumbed to utter paralysis. One of the most beautiful sights of the day was that gorgeous slice of pepperoni pizza on my very own plate. The fragrant and delectable piece de resistance wafted a shudder-inducing scent of heavenly goodness upwards into my waiting nostrils. I inhaled deeply. I sunk my teeth into the depth of the wedge, just as a beaver sinks its teeth into a tree trunk, and for several moments, no one spoke. I looked up and observed that the members of our party had magically transformed into wild dogs. I knew that previous heavy panting was a sign. It must be a full moon tonight. I shrugged. If you can't beat 'em, join 'em. My brain was fried by all that UV radiation, so it wasn't much of a downgrade to shift into werewolf gear anyway. I just wished my mouth had gotten the memo so I could've slammed home more of that needed sustenance I had cunningly tracked and hunted for so long. I now experienced the gratification of a first kill after so much time

spent studying it and learning its habits, and it felt wonderful. It was pure ecstasy.

Now at this point in the story, I could include some cliché inspirational phrases, such as "Never give up!" or "If at first you don't succeed, try try again." However, I have never found these idiomatic expressions to be all that stimulating or invigorating. That's not to say that this story doesn't have a moral or a point: almost every story does. This is a true story, although obviously greatly exaggerated for the purpose of entertaining readers and keeping their attention. I do, however, think this story speaks volumes about the journey of life, in and of itself. On the path of life, we often find ourselves beginning with passion and ambition, much as the travelers began their uphill journey. We commence our adventure this way because we cannot see what lies ahead: we cannot foresee the trials we will have to endure, or the hardships we will have to suffer. As we begin to get somewhat disheartened by the length of our walk, others around us seek to encourage us and give us a reason to continue walking, and it works for a short while. We put ourselves to the task for a time, but as soon as things take a turn away from our liking, the path gets thorny again. Someone hurts us or jostles us in our path, and we cry "Foul!" Our five senses don't deliver exactly what we'd like them to, and we protest against such unfairness. However, the path of life was not meant to be even, level, uninterrupted, and easy. God uses it as a test of faith for His children who are not at home in this world, but simply pilgrims passing through. If the journey was easy, we would not appreciate Christ and His work to earn us a spot in the glories and wonders of heaven. The journey has to be difficult. This difficult day only made me realize that important fact all the more. I thanked God for reminding me of the smallness of my suffering and the enormity of the suffering of Christ, which earned me and my fellow believers a room in a mansion where there will be no more suffering, hardship, persecution, crying, mourning, tears, or death. That's how I manage to endure my uphill battles in life: in His strength and with the assurance of a better life awaiting me at the end of my journey, a place much more eternally satisfying than Giovanni's in the story.

When later asked if the pizza was worth it, I consulted my pastor's iPhone GPS and discovered that we had just hiked uphill for 2.4 miles to reach a street-side cafe which, normally, I would never have set foot in in my entire life. I'm convinced, even to this day, that whoever built the roads in San Francisco was an ex-rodeo-man trying to relive the

glory days of his bull-riding youth. I'm also 95% sure he imbibed some Jameson Irish Whiskey in order to bolster his confidence enough to straddle the bucking brute. Being 17, I had no such choice. I didn't want to ride Bodacious anymore: I simply wanted to get off and nurse my aching limbs. Tugging my roving mind back to the question at hand, I reminisced about the stringy cheese, greasy pepperoni, and soggy crust. I weighed the pros and cons. Yes, it tasted good, but I had been hungry. I had just invited future heartburn into my vital organ for what could be a very lengthy visit. Whatever calories I managed to shed on that laborious uphill journey had been replaced twice over by the copious amounts of grease, fat, and dairy I had just consumed. And I decided in that moment, Mr. Alfred Lord Tennyson, that it was not better for me to have loved that pizza but lost valuable time, energy, and years of my life to love it. I would rather have never loved it at all. But to your credit, it does make a good story. A very good story indeed.