

Water Bottle

by Stephen Fowler

Water Bottles. They're everywhere, a staple in most people's bags, cupholders, and kitchen. Maybe they're a new phenomenon, a sign of shifting environmental tides, a token effort towards saving the planet or the turtles, whichever you like more. All I know is that I've used a water bottle all my life, going through different phases, losing one and moving onto the next, always carting one with me, wherever I go. I'd never been attached to one, though. For all the daily use, the constant sip, refill, sip, refill, I had never cared for my water bottle, always seeing it as a staple of daily life, akin to a plate or a pillow: Useful yet interchangeable, created and constructed to remain indistinguishable from its siblings. I'd pick up water bottles from sporting events, track meets, soccer tournaments, anything my parents would sign me up for. They adorn dusty shelves now, living a life of forced retirement and seeing the sun only on particularly ambitious spring cleaning days. With such diverse options, I would often switch between them interchangeably, putting no care into remembering the location of each one, as I knew they'd all appear out of hiding one day, pulled by the invisible force that returns lost objects inexplicably.

My family regularly travels for the summers, usually traveling out west to the baked deserts and snowpack-filled rivers of Idaho to paddle gorgeous swaths of untouched river. Each trip is different, but one thing remains constant: It's *hot*. Not humid, not muggy, not wear a T-Shirt and shorts and call it fine weather, but *hot*. The green and blue oasis of the river shimmers with incandescent reflections and mirages, held between mountainous hills on either side, walling you in and guiding you forward. There are no Starbucks, no Bubble Tea shops, no drinks besides what you bring. Knowing that, I would always bring the biggest water bottle I could find to ward off the headaches and dehydration, ironic maladies given the aquatic location, yet dangerous nonetheless. One notable trip I found a new water bottle, a black, 64 ounce, Takeya bottle, perfect for the trip but insignificant at the time. It was a wonderful trip, full of nights below the stars, memories being made playing beach volleyball, kayaking through waves, froth, and days, arriving at the eventual end, the monotonous cleanup, drive, and flight back to the summer's regular programming. Cleaning up my bag, I found an innocuous sticker, meant for my boat but forgotten in the chaos of departure, a vivid orange "Idaho Invasive Species Fund", expiration date Dec. 31, 2022. Wanting to remember the trip and being too much of a cheapskate to find an actual sticker, I slapped it onto my bottle, figuring it'd remind me of that pleasant trip. The sticker has long since expired, but its legacy hasn't.

The sticker on the water bottle was a turning point, although I didn't know it at the time. It took a water bottle, interchangeable from the rest, and made it *my* water bottle. I had put the sticker on, it meant I was stuck with it, for better or worse, because who else would want the bottle with an ugly protruding sticker, a sticker that broke the metallic sheen meant to exhibit quality or present a stoic face to the world, a nameless accessory meant for convenience and nothing more. Bringing my water bottle around, I would always notice the lone sticker, garishly protruding from the monotonous cylinder that occupied my desk space. It began to look lonely, and my personification of it began to pull at my heartstrings. That, coupled with the imagined social awkwardness of having a weird water bottle, a different bottle, got me searching. Searching for more stickers, more memories I could plaster onto my source of hydration, more idiosyncratic elements of my personality, became a hobby. Initially, I didn't quality control. I had vast quantities of stickers from track races, the bland black-and-white numbers from one to fourteen used to identify different competitors filling up every available inch of my newly cherished bottle. I found it ironic that these numbers, intended to differentiate runners, ended

up making my bottle void of personality, uniform, clear to many that the owner ran track, yet giving nothing else, no idea of any other interests, hobbies, or pastimes. With that oxymoronic happenstance, I began looking for more stickers, ways of making the bottle more *me*, giving it color, personality, and life, emblematic of my personality, my trips, and my memories.

Looking at my water bottle now, it's hard to remember the chronology of the stickers, remember the how and why in the overlapping blanket of patterned stickers. Many of the oldest that were deemed insignificant have been long replaced by brighter or prettier stickers, remaining only in the sliver of color between overlapping successors, a last ray of light before the sun sets on them for the last time, covered for eternity by a new sticker, yet always remaining as a support, always the base of whatever comes after and is placed on top. Others have special spots, such importance that they reserve front-row seats permanently, always part of my history, memory, or personality. The sticker from Mount Bachelor reminds me of my love of mountains, skiing, and visiting my grandmother. The Galena Lodge sticker reminds me of long nights with friends, away from wifi, internet, and worries. The sticker from a prestigious cross country race reminds me of what I'm working for every day, why I love to run. The list goes on, with the bottle reaching max capacity, so full that most new stickers I get go into a drawer intended for the worst case scenario, the scenario where I lose my water bottle.

Losing the water bottle wasn't a very dramatic affair. I'm not the most organized person, I was stressed, a weekend went by where my mind was elsewhere, and I couldn't find it. End of story. I figured it wasn't lost, hiding underneath a stack of clothes or books or left in the car. But the longer I looked, the more sure I was that it wasn't any of the usual culprits. I knew it wasn't a momentous loss, not on the scale of a wallet or a Stradivarius, but it still stung. The sentimental value outweighed any actual value, and I began to feel the loss in the next week, forced to take inferior bottles to school and deal with leaks and the unfamiliarity. It felt like betrayal to pick up a bland, stickerless water bottle; knowing that mine was somewhere and I had lost it, that it was my fault and now I was moving on already. The unfamiliarity led to me leaving the alternatives behind, preferring dehydration to dealing with the issue. I relied on my bottle more than I realized, as a reminder of the good times I'd had and the trips I was looking forward to, days traveling the west, days with friends, and hikes, events, and inside jokes. I also had picked up a peculiar habit, a symptom of attachment and a sport that requires a great deal of hydration. Stress drinking water had been an outlet of emotion, a way to take a deep breath, reset, and continue, a mechanism I hadn't realized I needed until it was gone.

I began to think about replacements, searching Amazon for its twin and beginning the process over again. The moment I gave up would feel like betrayal, the "confirmation of shipping" button the signal I had given up, started anew. Dehydration seemed like a better option, I was too stubborn to give up, the impetuous to act too faint to justify falling back on my bank account. The impact began to feel more than a loss of a possession, it became a loss of memories, my unorthodox library vanishing into the wind. The entire experience felt very juvenile and embarrassing, something warranting a demotivated half hour of searching and forgetting by the next day, but I couldn't figure out the moving on part. Materialism and self expression had never been my jam, my whole life I had tried to have as few tchotchkes and objects as possible, the few I allowed myself to have were never an expression or representation of me, used only for practicality. The water bottle was the anomaly to this trend, a sole form of expression from a closed-off person.

I found it eventually, without much fanfare. I'd like to say it was a dramatic or plot-filled detective scene, filled with hidden meaning and clever symbolism, but life doesn't always work like that. It was under a seat in a car, wedged in an unpredictable and infuriating position, the type you'd never expect to be possible until it happens. Ironically, it was

found in a search for something else, where sheer luck and probability brought my fingers to its layered, glossy exterior. I marveled at its resurfacing, kicking myself for not finding it *there*, with the cliché of hindsight being 20/20 resonating heavily in my mind, as all the pieces and gaps in my memory flooded back.

The return of a prized water bottle didn't change the course of my month, week, or day. It provided fodder for the daily dinner conversation and the dreaded question of "what interesting thing happened today" but was a blip in the graph of happiness, minor excitement followed by a return to the normal. But with later reflection, I realized that the episode hadn't advanced the plot, but developed the backstory. While the course of my life didn't change, I learned more about myself than a first glance would have guessed. I *could* find art interesting, self expression wasn't as bad as I thought it was, and not everything has to be about efficiency and performance. It was a moment of reflection on the culture of today, the culture prizing normativity, efficiency, and output. The more I mulled over why the bottle had meant so much to me, the more I saw myself in a new lens: one where I had slipped into that destructive and damaging culture, with the water bottle as an anomaly from that inclination. I felt like I had discovered something about myself, that maybe I didn't need to behave or act certain ways to fit in or feel okay about me and my dispositions. I was more than I thought I was, introspection had led me to uncovering facets of myself previously left covered in cobwebs in a dark corner of my brain, unused and atrophied. I began to think about branching out, trying new things, figuring more out about myself, free from the typical fear of being disappointed by self reflection because the possibility of discovery was far more enticing, all because of one amalgam of a water bottle. One man's trash is another man's treasure, and I know I'll treasure my chaotic, colorful, and vibrant water bottle for the water and memories it holds.