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As It Comes

Ashley N. Riddle

Cedarville University, ashleynriddle@cedarville.edu

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Description

As It Comes is an odd cross between a memoir, an autobiography, and creative non-fiction that was born out of grief, frustration, and my self-perceived inability to be holy.

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About the Contributor

I am a Western Maryland native studying English and Women's Ministry. I'm an avid tea drinker, inconsistent blog writer, and an aspiring giver of grace.

AS IT COMES

ASHLEY RIDDLE

"We'll just take it as it comes." My mom said on the other end of the phone line that twisted its way from Cumberland, Maryland to Cedarville, Ohio. It spanned a distance of 320 miles and I felt every one of them.

If there's anything that could sum up my mom's philosophy of life, it's those seven words. She's been taking as it comes her whole life. In fact, if life was a boxing match, there is no doubt in my mind that she'd be the heavyweight champion. In reality, at 5 foot 4 my mom is a tiny woman. Her collar bone sticks out from below her freckled skin like some sort of sprout jutting up out of the dirt. The freckles, she says, are from working on the farm as a child; no one cared much about sunscreen in the 1970s.

I guess the farm is really where she first started taking things as they came. When I was young, she would always tell me stories about her grandmother's bull. He was 2,500 pounds of hard, lean muscle with a fiery attitude. They never bothered to give him a name, at least not that she could remember, but mom told me that he snorted like a train. When my mom and uncle would get home from school, they would hurl themselves over the barbed wire fence, run across the pasture, and pray that the bull wouldn't notice them. The heifers didn't much mind Mom and uncle Randy cutting across that field, but the bull sure did. There were times, she said, that she could almost feel the warm breath of the bull on the back of her neck as she flung her backpack across the fence to safety and tumbled over after it, desperately trying not to get stuck on the barbed wire. She told me the bull always scared them out of their pants, but cutting across the pasture was the quickest way back to the house.

Still, scarier than the bull was PopPop, my mom's grandfather. Ordinarily, he was nice enough,

but he had an awful habit of drinking too much: and drink, my mom said, made him mean as a snake. When I got older, she told me stories about how she and her grandmother would hide from PopPop when he was in one of his fits - in closets or under the musty cellar stairs among the jars of string beans, beets, and tomatoes that Sweet Grandma had canned. Sometimes, though, they didn't hide fast enough, and the farmhouse walls would be peppered with human-sized dents that Sweet Grandma would rearrange the furniture to hide until she could patch up the old drywall. Mom was learning then to take things as they came.

As the years passed, she continued to perfect the art form of taking things as they come. In her early twenties, she found herself a single mother of two daughters. To make ends meet, she worked as a settlement officer for an attorney. Her desk was across from that of an older Jewish lady who made the best bagels - Mom said she'd always known when Mrs. Blum had brought bagels to the office because you could smell the yeastiness of the freshly baked dough as soon as you walked in the door: it was a stark contrast from the smell of old papers and ink. Mrs. Blum's children worked in the attorney's office too, filing paperwork. They were nineteen and twenty years old - old enough to file paperwork, but still young enough to exasperate their mother when the skinny metal file cabinets, shoved precariously in the back corner of the office, weren't quite as organized as she'd like them to be. One of Mrs. Blum's favorite expressions was *oy vey*, and the phrase quickly became a staple in my mom's vocabulary. I couldn't tell you how many times I've heard her say it. *Oy vey*, I learned later, was simply Yiddish for taking things as they come.

In her early thirties, Mom was married and I showed up on the scene to the surprise of my parents, but to the delight of my older sister, who was

ten at the time. Mom told me that one Sunday after church, the fourth grade Sunday school teacher, Mrs. Buhl, told her that my sister's prayer request, every single Sunday for an entire year, had been for a baby sister. Mom told Mrs. Buhl very assuredly that that would not be happening. Nonetheless, Mom went into labor with me six months later, but it was three months too early, so the doctors put her on bed rest for those last three months, telling her that she could only stand for five minutes a day. Mom took it as it came and spent those ninety days reading her Bible, singing hymns, and watching *The Price is Right* while drinking strawberry milk made from fluorescent pink Nesquik powder. I was born healthy as could be, despite the overly complicated pregnancy, and things in my mom's life started to fall into place again— until they stopped.

When I was eight, things in our house started getting very tense. My sister was never at home when she didn't have to be. When she wasn't working in the hospital's cafeteria she was at our community college taking nursing classes. My parents never looked at each other anymore. The "snowball" fights we had using plastic Easter eggs after Saturday breakfast stopped. The blanket tents and sleepovers in the living room stopped. One day, while my dad was at work, Mom took the door knobs out of our doors and replaced them. The new ones were gold colored, not silver. They had locks on the inside and no slot for a key on the outside; instead, it was just a little hole where, presumably, you could pick the lock if you had the patience for it. The gold didn't look quite right to me. Other people had gold door knobs, we didn't. After the locks came, the questions started. First from my mom, then from a police officer, then from a therapist. Summer came and went, and I was tired being asked questions that my brain didn't have an answer to.

One morning, my dad went to work and he didn't come back. I knew that it was coming, Mom had told my sister and I during one of our trips back from the Sheriff's office. When we asked Mom what we were going to do, she told us that we would take things as they came. So we did. Somehow, Mom made normalcy out of court cases, new jobs, new schools, and our newfound absence of a father. Mom kept us marching forward every day. We didn't look back, we looked forward, we kept walking, and whatever life threw at us, we'd figure out a way through it.

Mom, from decades of practice, was a professional at taking things as it came and as I got older, I watched aspects of my mom's stories come to life. No longer were they tales and legends; I was watching the champion retain her title firsthand. She never knew what kind of hit was coming, but somehow, she always responded with more grace and poise than I knew to be possible. She was careful, methodical, and prayed more than I'd ever seen anyone pray.

The older I got, the more I realized that I'm nothing like my mom, at least not in this aspect. I can take things as they come, but not full of grace, or poise, or prayer - though I try. Maybe it's because I never ran from a bull, or scrunched myself up to fit on a shelf of canned goods, or because I can't stand the taste of strawberry Nesquick. Maybe it's because I didn't have three months of bed rest to sanctify me or because I'd much rather have silver door knobs. I don't know.

Instead of filling me with poise and grace, learning to take things as they come lit a fire under my skin, and if I'm not careful, it prickles its way up my chest and onto my neck and face. Anger isn't the right word to describe it, but neither is cynicism or fear. Rather, a mess of unidentifiables provide the kindling for this fire that I don't quite understand.

A lot of well-meaning people tell me that I should extinguish this fire when I try to explain it to them, but I don't think I can. It does get in the way sometimes, this sort of fiery headstrong-ness: like when I bristle at the thought of trying to pray in a moment of crisis - because praying would force me to admit that I don't have everything under control, or when I snap at people instead of giving them grace, because, in reality, I'm not nearly as sanctified as I try to be.

Sometimes, though, the fire is helpful. It lets me look things in the eye and take them on, no matter how tired I am of doing it. I know that I can rely on it for strength and then capitulate myself into it at the end of the day so that I emerge the next morning reborn. I've slowly come to the realization that no matter how desperately I want to be exactly like my mom, I can't fight on her terms, and she likely couldn't fight on mine. Maybe I'll never be a heavyweight champion fighting this way, but fire keeps me alive. It lets me take things as they come - on my own terms.

So now, 320 miles away on the other end of the phone line, when my mom tells me that the tumors on her thyroid are growing, even though the doctor promised us that they'd shrink if it wasn't cancer, I assent quietly that we will take this as it comes. One day, one hour, one second at a time. My mom with the strength and poise of a fighter, and me with fire under my skin. And maybe that's okay.