

When I first sat down to write this reflection, I had no idea what I was going to do. My first internship, at the Retro Bag Canada, was a distant memory, only further obfuscated by that hazy quality that suffuses the memories of the extremely depressed. My second internship, at the Original Kids Theatre Company, was, contrastingly, too fresh in my mind. I'd written no fewer than three thousand words on the internship since it had ended, and I was, in all honesty, running out of things to say about it. So I did what I usually do when faced with writer's block. I thought idly about the assignment throughout my day, usually with the aid of certain psychoactive substances - not trying to reach any conclusion or argue any point, but simply inconsequentially pondering from whatever angle interested me at the moment. The angle that inspired this paper was this one: What if my two internships switched places - that is to say, what if the second occurred when the first one would have, and vice versa?

First, some background. I was not doing well mentally when I began working at the Retro Bag Canada. I had always had a depressive streak, but the shock of moving away to college combined with the isolation of the COVID-19 pandemic caused my psyche to buckle in a way it never had before. Only in second year, once I was out of the dorms and in a house full of kind and positive guys, was I able to begin opening my eyes to the joys of life again. But that journey was only beginning, and to make matters worse, I had just been through a particularly nasty breakup mere days before the internship started. When I got off the bus for my first shift, my foot sank into a bank of half-melted snow that had been churned into a gray paste by hundreds of cars, and which now instantly soaked through my shoe and sock. This incident neatly summarized the way I felt about myself at that time.

The owner of the Retro Bag Canada was a Nigerian woman named Adesola Ogunsakin, a failed doctor who opened a handbag store after she got tired of her residency applications being

rejected. Apparently she had conceived of the Retro Bag as an online store, and only recently had she opened up the physical location at Masonville Mall. She was friendly, vital, and extraordinarily bereft of business sense. I'm not saying this to be mean, and in fact I like Adesola quite a bit as a person, but the sad truth is that she was not prepared to build a business, and she was really not prepared to manage a bunch of young college kids. I had already suspected this from the first time I spoke with her, for my interview. I was desperate for the job and prepared to stretch my credentials right to the border of unethicity, but it turned out I didn't even need to do that. I had barely mentioned that I was learning to code in HTML/CSS, and Adesola was already explaining in glowing words how I would be given the power to overhaul her online storefront any way I wanted as her webmaster. A few years later, I would have loved that level of responsibility and creative freedom, but at the time I was woefully ill-equipped to deal with it. My time at the Retro Bag was largely spent doing whatever I wanted, which, miserable wretch that I was, was not a whole lot. I aimlessly played around with the UI-building features on Shopify (the website-hosting service Adesola used), wrote a product blurb or two which were roundly rejected for their cynical and sarcastic tone, and designed a few logos which never saw the light of day. The worst project, though, was the ad campaign.

It was the one thing Adesola actually told me to do, and it was a hilarious disaster. She explained to me that she wanted me to get her bags out there using Amazon's built-in pay-per-click advertising service. I told her I had no idea how to do that, and she replied that she didn't either. She recommended YouTube. So, after watching a few tutorials, I got to work. I wasn't given a budget limit, nor any metric for success, and so I blindly thrashed around for a few weeks trying to figure out why the ads weren't making us rich. I tried and eliminated every possible method of optimization, until it was clear the problem could only be one thing: we

didn't have the funds. Pay-per-click ads are highly competitive, and the most effective way to bring yours to the forefront is to pay more, which means that you need to throw a lot of money at a pay-per-click campaign before you can expect any kind of profit. Our money was coming directly out of Adesola's grocery budget. So, after about a month of this, Adesola made the wise decision to pull the plug. I looked at the stats for the Amazon storefront. We had made one sale.

Two years later, I returned to the Retro Bag a very different man. I had spent a year studying in beautiful Freiburg, Germany, and I had seen many terrifying and wonderful things. During my time abroad I had been uplifted and humbled in equal part, and I was awash in the confidence that I knew the world a little better than I had before. I was excited to meet Adesola again, to laugh in reminiscence at the way we had both blundered through the infant months of her business. Sadly, I discovered that the Retro Bag Canada was no longer there. The website which I had tinkered with endlessly was also gone. Dr. Ogunsakin had gone out of business.

Not too long after, I started working at the Original Kids Theatre Company. At this point, I was everything that my younger self was not. I was energetic, open-minded, bursting with ideas and eager to make my mark on the world. My new bosses, Laura and Rhys, in turn, were nothing that Adesola was. They were taciturn and orderly, and they ran their business with a ruthless efficiency that came from years of experience. Adesola was desperate - she had so many things that needed attending to that when the opportunity came for free labor, she gave her employees far too much freedom in the hopes that anything they did would be helpful. She was also a romantic, and held the idea that her interns would be instrumental architects of what would become a thriving fashion brand. Laura and Rhys, by contrast, were strict pragmatists. They were secure enough to know exactly what it was that needed doing, and I was to do it regardless of what my opinion on the matter was. Usually, it was painting backgrounds or assembling

furniture for the set - work which would hardly be noticed, and quickly forgotten. Adesola treated me like a friend. Laura and Rhys treated me like an employee. This was undoubtedly better for business, but it grated on my newfound sense of ambition. To make matters worse, it was the summer, and everyone I knew had left London, leaving me wanting for new friends. I planned to amend this at my new job, but I quickly discovered that my new coworkers had all the humor of a wooden plank. They were not poor communicators, and in fact they treated me with all the respect and decency anyone could ever ask for, but it was clear that a professional coolness would remain between us as long as I worked there. So, we worked in well-oiled silence, and all of my newfound energy and confidence remained bottled up inside me.

So, what if someone somehow warped time around so I worked at Original Kids first, and at the Retro Bag two years later? Well, my younger, more unsure self would probably have responded a lot better to the strict structure of Original Kids. I was unmoored and confused, and I needed someone to tell me what to do, to establish some baseline of normalcy in my life. Laura and Rhys worked with kids for a living, and so they were well-acquainted with this kind of youthful terror, and in fact even in this reality they ended up teaching me many things. I imagine that if I had met them two years earlier, they could have been a really great help to me. On the other hand, my older self would have loved the creative freedom that Adesola gave me. Helming such a significant project would have been a welcome challenge, and it would have looked great on my resume, which I was (and still am) trying to build. Also, Adesola was a fun person to hang out with, and she certainly would have made my summer less boring. It's almost sad to think about what could have been, with a simple reversal of fate.

Still, I think I did take something away from the internships I ended up having. Neither of them were exactly what I wanted, but that taught me to think differently than I'm used to, and to

weather disappointment. By the end of my time at Original Kids, I was actually having a lot of fun, because I learned to be humble and accept the job that I had to do. Furthermore, I think I did need some of the specific things that I got from each job. My younger self needed some positivity in his life, and Adesola gave me that through her indefatigable optimism. My time at Original Kids, on the other hand, was extremely educational. Not only did I learn a lot about stagecraft, an area of the theater arts that I was deficient in, but I learned how to be professional and work as a team.

At the end of the day, it's fun to speculate on what might have been, but I don't think it's particularly useful to go on moping about it after the fact. The things that happened are the things that happened, and if they happened another way it wouldn't even be me who's sitting here writing about it. He would look like me, and probably act a lot like me, but he would be a different guy with different experiences. So, I ask myself once again: Am I happy with my EL experience? And to that I reply with another question: How couldn't I be?