

*now that I am 20,
I can't fail*

Where I Am: Short Essay about my Life

Sofus Wenoe

CHAPTER ONE

Grey Winters

When I look back at my life, one of the strangest things is how long it took me to understand what I was actually looking for.

I grew up in Denmark. I do not remember much from my earliest childhood myself, but my parents describe me as a very expressive kid. I would follow my sister everywhere, imitate her, sing, smile, jump around and copy what she was doing.

There was something naturally playful in me.

At the same time, I was physically sensitive. I had bad pollen allergies, and Danish summers often meant staying indoors while everyone else was outside. The winters were dark, and I have always been unusually affected by the amount of sunlight around me.

So despite having a happy side to me, a lot of my childhood was spent inside.

I did not have a strong friend group growing up either. I had one very close friend, Jens, but outside of that I rarely felt deeply connected to the people around me.

Most days, I would sit in my room playing video games with friends online, watching YouTube, watching anime and disappearing into worlds that felt much more interesting than my own.

But I was not only consuming things.

Being alone with a computer also became one of the first places where I learned to create.

I taught myself how to edit videos. For a school project, I made a little movie using green screens and effects. Later, I learned how to code. I would watch people on YouTube building things, making videos and seemingly designing their own lives, and I became fascinated by the possibility that perhaps I could do the same.

CHAPTER TWO

Free Before Knowing Why

Around twelve or thirteen, I discovered FIRE: financial independence, retire early.

At the time, the idea seemed almost perfect to me.

If I could somehow become financially independent early enough, then I would never have to do anything I did not want to do. I could escape the normal path and finally have complete freedom over my life.

Looking back, I think there was something slightly strange hidden inside that dream.

I was trying to become free before I even knew what I wanted to be free for.

I did not yet know what kind of work I loved, where I wanted to live, who I wanted around me or what an ordinary Tuesday in a good life would actually look like.

I just knew that I did not want someone else deciding those things for me.

And perhaps financial independence also offered another kind of safety. I could imagine choosing my own life without having to disappoint my parents, reject the conventional path outright or give up the external validation that came from succeeding within it.

If I became successful enough first, perhaps I would finally have permission to do whatever I wanted.

That idea stayed with me for years.

Looking back, I think the worlds I found online gave me glimpses of several things I was missing.

Adventure.

Beauty.

Friendship.

Belonging.

People caring deeply about each other.

But they also showed me something else:

Possibility.

The possibility that life could be designed differently.

I experienced something similar whenever I visited Hong Kong or Japan. Even as a kid, those places felt fundamentally different to me. I do not know how much of that was reality and how much was projection, but emotionally, the contrast

was enormous.

Denmark often felt grey.

Hong Kong and Japan felt like glimpses of heaven.

CHAPTER THREE

Experiments in Belonging

As I became older, I started trying to solve that feeling.

Around sixth grade, I began realizing that what I really wanted was love and affection. At school, I often felt that people looked down on me, so instead of knowing how to create real belonging, I began trying to make people look up to me.

For a while, debating became the answer.

Online, debate was often portrayed as a hierarchy. One person knew more, argued better, said the right thing, and therefore appeared intellectually superior.

I became fascinated by that.

For maybe half a year to a year, I would debate people around school and try to become sharper and more knowledgeable. It worked to some extent. People noticed me more.

But the validation was incredibly shallow.

Eventually, I realized I did not actually care.

So I tried something else.

I became part of a friend group of girls, and for some time I was genuinely much happier. I experimented with different clothes, different styles and different ways of expressing myself. I spent more money. I was finally surrounded by people more often.

But the group was unstable. One person would constantly move in and out of it and manipulate the people around her. I hated watching it happen, and I hated being around that kind of dynamic.

There was pressure from my family because of how much money I was spending as well.

And somewhere underneath everything, I knew those friendships probably were not going to last.

Eventually, I was alone again.

So once again I searched for another external thing that might finally make me feel valuable.

This time, it was school.

I focused on getting into a good school and getting good grades. I became very good academically.

And once again, it worked.

And once again, I eventually realized that I did not care.

Around ninth grade, I also tried harder to integrate myself into normal Danish teenage culture. I went to parties and became socially accepted enough that I could finally see that world from the inside.

In some ways, that was worse.

I saw people struggling psychologically and then making their lives even harder through drugs, alcohol, destructive habits and relationships. I participated in some parts of that environment too, but I always had the feeling that it was fundamentally not for me.

I had spent years wanting to fit in.

Then I finally managed to fit in and realized I did not particularly want what I had been trying to get.

By that point, I had developed a strange disinterest in the social world around me in Denmark.

It was not hatred.

It was closer to indifference.

I rarely felt curious about the people around me. I rarely felt inspired. I rarely experienced the kind of connection I imagined friendship could be.

And that stood in complete contrast to the feeling I associated with Hong Kong and Japan.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Year Alone

After ninth grade, I left normal school for a year.

By then, the desire for freedom that had begun with FIRE had become much more concrete.

I had tried being academically successful. I had tried fitting in socially. Neither seemed to give me a life I particularly wanted.

So I thought perhaps the answer was to build my way out.

I went all in on entrepreneurship.

I tried starting businesses several times, and eventually one of those attempts became a clothing company. I became obsessed with making it work. I joined a design studio in Copenhagen. I even went to Paris looking for inspiration and trying to understand fashion and design more seriously.

From the outside, there was something exciting about it.

Internally, I was deeply unhappy.

I spent enormous amounts of time alone at my computer, working extremely hard without really understanding why. I was isolated, I was not building alongside people I cared about, and despite all the effort, I saw very few results.

At the same time, I went deeply into self-improvement.

I consumed content from people like Hamza and briefly joined his community. I trained constantly. I meditated. I became disciplined. I spent huge amounts of time alone.

In a strange way, it was easy to sacrifice my social life because I did not feel that I had very much of one to sacrifice.

That year became an experiment in how far I could push myself.

Could I become disciplined enough?

Focused enough?

Independent enough?

Could I somehow work hard enough that I would eventually earn complete control over my own life?

But something else happened during that year too.

I started making YouTube videos.

They were simple talking-head videos, heavily inspired by the self-improvement content I was consuming. I would sit in front of a camera and talk about the things I was learning, thinking about and trying to change in myself.

For a while, I uploaded almost every second day.

My first video got around two hundred views, which at the time felt insane.

Some of my old classmates made fun of me for it.

Strangely, by then I barely cared.

I had already stepped far enough outside their world that their judgment had begun to lose some of its power over me.

The videos never became particularly successful, and eventually I stopped making them.

But they left me with an idea that would become much more important later.

I had been trying to tell people how to improve their lives.

Eventually, I began wondering whether talking about a good life was actually the point.

Maybe the most powerful way to inspire someone was not to explain how they should live.

Maybe it was to build a life you genuinely loved yourself and let people see what that looked like.

I did not fully understand the implications of that thought yet.

But years later, in Japan, I would pick up a camera again.

And this time, instead of sitting in my room telling people how to live, I would simply film a life I was grateful to be living.

That year taught me a lot.

I learned that I could discipline myself.

I could work extremely hard.

I could teach myself skills.

I could create things.

I could put something online even when people around me thought it was embarrassing.

I could tolerate enormous amounts of isolation if I believed there was something on the other side of it.

But I also began to see the limitation in the dream I had been chasing since discovering FIRE.

Freedom itself was not an answer.

I had become obsessed with escaping a life I did not want before understanding what kind of life I actually wanted instead.

Freedom from something is only half an answer.

Eventually, you have to figure out what you want to be free for.

CHAPTER FIVE

What Do I Actually Want?

Eventually, I returned to school and, almost accidentally, ended up in an elite sports class.

I actually liked it.

For once, I was around people who took something seriously. They trained. They had goals. There was structure and discipline built into the environment rather than something I had to generate entirely by myself.

Then I was removed from the class.

I tried to fight the decision, but nothing changed.

I ended up in a normal class instead, and I hated it.

So once again, I moved.

I found another school that included spending part of the year in Canada. Around the same period, I joined TKS.

TKS became another obsession.

I threw myself into artificial intelligence, hackathons, startups, emerging technology and solving difficult problems. I traveled to the Toronto headquarters. I surrounded myself with ambitious people and started gaining access to worlds that, only a few years earlier, would have seemed impossible.

And objectively, things began going extremely well.

I worked on AI education projects.

I spoke at conferences.

I competed in programs.

I collaborated with talented people.

I started building the type of resume that my younger self probably would have believed would finally make everything click.

But something else was happening underneath.

The more possibilities opened up, the more obvious it became that the places I was actually drawn toward had been the same ones all along.

Hong Kong.

Japan.

Eventually, I stopped ignoring it.

I began applying to schools there.

I was accepted into prestigious programs elsewhere, including UWC Mostar in Europe. I was even accepted into a Japanese school, although the logistics and cost made it complicated.

That forced me into one of the first truly important questions of my life:

What do I actually want?

Not what looks impressive.

Not what other people think I should do.

Not what creates the strongest resume.

What do I actually want?

I looked back at videos I had loved since around ninth grade from creators such as Daemang and Hanna.

One of them had gone on exchange.

And suddenly it clicked.

I did not want to move somewhere interesting only to recreate another stressful life there.

I wanted to experience another culture wholeheartedly.

I wanted to go to school.

Make friends.

Walk around.

Take trains.

Join clubs.

Learn the language.

Be young there.

I did not want to arrive with some enormous mission hanging over my head.

I wanted to experience life.

So shortly after being accepted into one of the prestigious schools I had worked toward, I decided not to go.

Instead, I applied to exchange programs.

Only a couple responded.

I chose one.

That summer, before leaving for Japan, I spent time with my best friend between Denmark and Norway.

We explored, spent our days together and, for some reason, made our mornings almost absurdly difficult.

We would wake up around five and train.

Sometimes we would spend two hours doing the hardest workout we could come up with. If we needed a break from lifting, we would run instead. Ten kilometers. Sometimes much farther.

It was excessive, and not always particularly sustainable.

But I discovered something about myself that stayed with me.

Pain felt different when I chose it.

There was something strangely refreshing about waking up and deliberately doing something difficult before the day had really begun. Instead of trying to avoid discomfort and letting it slowly turn into suffering, I could meet it voluntarily.

Run toward it.

See how far my body could go after my mind had started asking me to stop.

I became deeply impressed by what I was capable of.

And unlike some of my earlier experiments with discipline, I did not leave this one behind.

I began running or training almost every day, and I carried that habit with me to Japan.

Looking back, I do not think my earlier lesson was that discipline was meaningless.

Almost the opposite.

I love discipline when it makes me feel more alive.

There is a difference between suffering because I am forcing myself toward a life I do not want and voluntarily doing something difficult because I respect the person it is making

me become.

I would take that distinction with me into Japan, even if I did not fully understand it yet.

CHAPTER SIX

Japan

Before Japan, I also spent part of the summer in San Francisco building an AI startup with an American friend and a Norwegian friend. It was an extension of what I had been doing through TKS.

I could have continued.

I was accepted into another year of TKS too.

But I said no.

For perhaps the first time, I deliberately gave up an impressive path because I wanted to put my entire heart into something else.

Japan.

And then I had the best year of my life.

For once, my ordinary days themselves were good.

I woke up and wanted to go to school.

I made friends I genuinely cared about.

I practiced Kyudo.

I trained.

I wandered around Tokyo and Chiba.

I took trains.

I experienced school festivals, Valentine's Day, club activities, trips and completely ordinary afternoons that somehow felt more valuable to me than many of the achievements I had spent years chasing.

I started filming those moments.

What began as documenting my exchange gradually became something more meaningful. I realized I loved capturing a feeling and trying to recreate it through editing, music and storytelling.

The videos reached hundreds of thousands of people and eventually more than a million views in total.

But the numbers were never the main discovery.

Years earlier, I had stopped making YouTube videos because I began to suspect that the best way to inspire people was not to tell them how to live, but to build a life worth showing them.

The discovery was that I could love my life first and create something meaningful from it second.

In Japan, without really planning it, I finally began doing exactly that.

That inverted almost everything I had previously believed.

Before Japan, I often imagined sacrificing my present life to build a better future.

Japan made me wonder whether the present life itself should be the thing I protect.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Succeeding at the Wrong Thing

Eventually, the exchange ended.

I returned to a more ambitious path and joined TETR.

The idea made sense to me.

Travel.

Entrepreneurship.

International environments.

Building businesses.

Intelligent people.

Freedom.

It seemed like a way of combining the ambition of my earlier life with the international life I had discovered I loved.

I spent roughly half a year in Dubai and half a year in India.

And I tried very hard to make it work.

At first, parts of the environment interested me.

But gradually I felt myself moving in the opposite direction from the person I wanted to become.

I did not deeply connect with the people around me. I tried to force myself to be interested, but genuine curiosity cannot really be faked.

More importantly, I felt that the system often rewarded behavior I did not respect in myself.

And the strangest part was that externally, I was doing well.

I helped build a chocolate business.

I worked on a dropshipping business.

My team became the number one revenue-generating team.

I learned more about business.

I became more commercially capable.

And yet, during some of the periods when I was being rewarded the most, I was also the least happy.

That disturbed me.

I had spent years believing that achievement would create a better life.

Now I was experiencing almost the exact opposite.

I could succeed and simultaneously dislike who I was becoming.

The chocolate company and the dropshipping company taught me something too.

I am capable of building businesses.

But if I do not actually care about the thing I am building, eventually I struggle to put my heart into it.

I can force myself for some period of time.

I can optimize.

I can compete.

I can make money.

But I cannot fake love indefinitely.

Eventually, I knew that leaving TETR was only a matter of time.

So I dropped out.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Now

And that brings me to now.

This summer, I have spent time again in Japan and Hong Kong.

For the first time in a while, I have had space to think.

And I keep arriving at the same conclusion.

I want to take a real shot at life.

My life.

Not the life that happens to look best from the outside.

Not the safest path.

Not the most prestigious one.

Not a reaction against those things either.

I want to find my people.

I want to find the places where I naturally come alive.

I want to discover what I genuinely love doing rather than deciding what I should love and forcing myself to become good at it.

I want to build things, but I want to care about the things I build.

I want ambition without sacrificing my character.

I want meaning without constant seriousness.

I want to work hard without hating the days in which the work happens.

I want friends who make me more curious about life.

I want environments that make me want to leave my room.

I want sunlight.

Beauty.

Movement.

Community.

Craft.

Love.

I still want to become exceptional at something.

That part of me has not disappeared.

I still want to build meaningful things.

I still want financial independence.

I still want to explore what I am capable of.

But I no longer believe that success can compensate for a life I dislike living.

When I look back, I can see that much of my life has been one long process of trying different answers to the same question.

Maybe people will love me if I am smarter.

Maybe if I can debate them.

Maybe if I become popular.

Maybe if I dress differently.

Maybe if I get better grades.

Maybe if I become disciplined.

Maybe if I make money.

Maybe if I build a startup.

Maybe if I get accepted somewhere prestigious.

Maybe if I become exceptional.

Each experiment taught me something.

But Japan gave me a radically different answer.

For once, I was not trying very hard to prove that I deserved a good life.

I was simply living one.

That may be the most important realization I have had so far.

I am twenty now.

There is no obvious institution determining what happens next.

And strangely, that excites me.

I have accumulated enough evidence to know that there are many conventional lives I could probably succeed at and still not want.

So this next chapter is not primarily about proving what I can do.

It is about discovering what deserves everything I can give.

I want to experiment seriously.

Filmmaking.

Business.

Acting.

Singing.

Creating.

Living in Asia.

Meeting people I deeply admire.

Mastering something difficult.

Building something meaningful.

Maybe some of these become my life.

Maybe some of them disappoint me.

I would rather find out.

Because perhaps the question I am facing now is not:

“What career should I choose?”

It is something much larger.

“What kind of person do I want to become, who do I want beside me, where do I want to wake up, and what kind of work makes me grateful that I get another day to do it?”

For years, I searched for a better life by trying to make myself more impressive.

Now I want to try something different.

I want to build a life I genuinely love, and then see just how far I can go from there.