On imposter syndrome

Filmmaker Andrew Ahn discusses the experience of being a first-time feature director

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As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2515 words.

Tags: Film, Beginnings, First attempts, Collaboration, Production, Process.

You'd made two short films, which both made the festival rounds, before you made your first feature film. By the time *Spa Night* was happening and you were making it, did you feel ready?

By the time I was able to make *Spa Night*, I don't know if I was ready so much as I was just sick of waiting. The process of making a feature is so tedious. You know, the fundraising and even the writing process, it's a really different beast than a short film, so I felt like whether or not I was ready, I was going to do it. I'd finally put myself in that position, and my team had worked really hard to get us ready. I was going to do the best that I could, even if I felt like I wasn't 100% prepared for it. I was fortunate that I had a great team, and anywhere that I felt like I was lacking, there was a solution or a process that would allow us to keep moving forward and for me to maintain a certain level of sanity.

How long was the development process for *Spa Night*?

I had gone to Sundance in 2012 with a short film called *Dol (First Birthday)*, and it was at that festival that I learned about the Sundance Screenwriters' Lab. It sounded like something that felt tangible and like a next step. I knew that it was really competitive and it would be difficult to get in, but because of conversations I had with people there, I was like, "You know, I think I can write a feature. I think I should *try* to write a feature." So I started developing the idea for *Spa Night* after the festival. By the end of 2012, I had finished the draft for the Sundance Screenwriters' Lab, and got in for the June lab. That was 2013.

It was, in retrospect, a pretty fast process, but at the time it felt really slow and torturous. I did the Sundance Screenwriters' Lab in 2013 and I ended up doing the Film Independent Screenwriting Lab in 2013 as well. I did the Film Independent Directing Lab in 2014, and then I was like, "I just want to make it." We started fundraising, I had my team of producers, but it still took time. It took an extra year. We did a Kickstarter in 2014, then ended up shooting the film in 2015, then we were fortunate enough to premiere at Sundance in 2016.

So all said and done, it was about a four-year process. I'm very aware of the fact that we were pretty fortunate, especially for a first feature, but we really made it under the radar, and we made it for super cheap. I don't know how we could have spent more time or money on it, and even if we did, that it would have been any better than what we made. We made sure that every penny spent on the film went in front of the camera. We didn't pay ourselves. I didn't get paid for it and my producers didn't get paid for it, so there was a lot of scrappiness in making sure the resources were used in the right places.

A lot of first-time creators, whether it be filmmakers or musicians or whatever, have this feeling that once they release that first big thing, suddenly everything is going to change. Everything is going to somehow feel different. Perhaps you'll feel more professional, or more doors will open. What was your experience with that? Did things change for you?

Yes and no. It was interesting getting to screen *Spa Night* at Sundance. It raised my profile for sure, and people were interested in me and in the work. I was able to get an agent. Suddenly I was meeting with these big production companies that I never would have imagined meeting before. I needed *Spa Night* for that to happen, but it still took me about a year and a half to get my first paid directing gig. It was still a year and a half of anxiety and twiddling my thumbs and wondering if I was going to be able to make a sustainable career out of this. I realized that there's a certain amount of patience you need to have to make it in this industry. It's *never* predictably fast, or as fast as you want it to be. You have to prepare yourself for moments of downtime. However, I will say that I had the best first feature experience I could have had with *Spa Night*. It really gave me a platform and an opportunity to make filmmaking a job.

It was still not necessarily a success on every level, but I know so many other first time feature filmmakers that after they make their first film still have to go back to the day job they had before, or they have to be scrappy and sleep on friends' couches. So I feel pretty lucky about it, but it was hard work. I'm working harder now than I was when I was trying to make *Spa Night*. In order to sustain the momentum, you have to keep trying, you have to keep reading, you have to keep writing. It's full time.

During that year and a half where you're trying to get a job, how do you keep from freaking out? Do you need to have to have a kind of crazy optimistic belief that eventually something good is going to happen?

Totally. I do think part of the creative process is just deluding yourself. I think you have to believe that this thing that's really hard to do is going to happen, because otherwise you don't get yourself emotionally prepared for if and when it *does* happen. You kind of have to imagine it so that you can get yourself into that headspace where it's actually possible.

For me, a lot of that year and half was spent riding the wave of excitement after Sundance and appreciating that I was in a position so few people get to be in. Like, let me just be happy about it! Some of it was being distracted by meeting people and building a community. I took it as a year to just get to meet people in the industry that I would never have gotten the chance to meet before. I was kind of unnecessarily excited and optimistic about what was happening that year, and it wasn't until right before I got the job directing *This Close* a year and a half later, like maybe a month before that, where I started to feel the, "Oh, crap, what am I doing next and how am I going to make it?" The job came at just the right time. I felt like that year and a half of meeting people and getting to know what the industry was like was valuable in helping me get that job.

So much of how you succeed in this world is based on community building, knowing people, and putting yourself out there in social situations. One thing organically tends to lead to another, but it's not something you can predict or plan. You just kind of have to do it.

Exactly! I really like thinking about it as community building as opposed to a dirtier word like "networking." I know a lot of people still use that word, and it does feel appropriate for certain aspects of the industry and of different businesses, but for artists I really do think that it's about forging genuine connections and meeting people who are inspiring to you and using that to fuel and inspire your own work. To me that just sounds like fun. It should feel good, not like work. To me that just sounds like living your life. I think people who are afraid of "networking" are thinking of it as something that you have to do for your job, and for me it's just something I enjoy doing. I'm curious about people and I want to know what their deal is.

This reminds me of a story from film school. One of my classmates asked this visiting director, "How do I get my actors to trust me?" And the director just responded, "Be a good person! Like how do you get anybody else to trust you?" I think a lot of what I'm looking for, in terms of people we want to work with or collaborate with, is just like, "Oh, are they someone you vibe with? Is it someone with a good heart?" That's all we're looking for. When I do my first round of auditions for any sort of casting, oftentimes it's just, "Oh, is this person nice? Is this person sane?" At least in the beginning, it has nothing to do with, "Are they right for the role?" In some ways, I'll think about that later, but let me just meet them and see if they're someone that I could hang out with.

I heard you speak this year at Sundance about the idea of imposter syndrome. It's that quiet inner anxiety a lot of people have that deep down they don't know what they're doing, or that they'll be exposed as a fraud at some point, or that people will figure out that they're just kind of making it up as they go along. It's refreshing to realize that lots of people, even successful ones, also feel this way.

My feeling about impostor syndrome is that if you're in the situation, if you've been given the opportunity to make something, it probably means that you deserve it on some level. If you got yourself there, it's because someone saw something in you that either showed potential or a skill or ability. So for me, if I get hired to do something, or if I find myself on

set, I have to believe that I'm there for a reason.

I remember before shooting *Spa Night*, realizing that I hadn't actually shot a film in years. Calling myself a director in that moment sounded crazy when I had only directed five days out of the past four years of my life. I had this moment where I was like, "Okay, I just have to take this as a learning experience." I think there's a lot of fear about not knowing something, and we just have to accept the fact that we don't know a lot of things, and that *not* knowing isn't something to be scared of, but is actually the thing that drives learning. I try and look at it from that angle… and then the anxiety disappears.

I like it when I hear people say, "I don't know, but I want to learn," or, "I don't know, but tell me more about it." That is the sign of a healthy artistic, creative process. I think of every film not as a show of my strength or abilities, but as a way to learn. I just think about it really selfishly that way, and then you get through it in a much healthier way. It ends up being a better, more compelling piece of expression.

If you were working on something where you felt like you knew everything, it would actually probably be a really boring project and you might not want to do it, you know? So I think the point is to actually get yourself into this situation where you *don't* know everything, because that's what's exciting and that's what will result in making interesting decisions and ultimately something that's really fascinating to watch.

You've been directing a television show, *This Close*, which is a different beast than directing a feature film. Not only that, you're working on a show where you primarily deal with deaf actors, which creates a different dynamic on set in terms of how everyone communicates. Was there a learning curve involved?

Yeah. I knew so little about television and I'd had very few meaningful contacts with people from the deaf community, so the whole thing felt like a great learning experience. I just decided that I was going to learn as much as I could. Interestingly, the challenges aren't always what you expect and they reveal themselves in unexpected ways. I thought communication would be a challenge, but actually, through interpreters and from taking lessons in ASL, I realized that wasn't really the biggest challenge of the project. If anything, the biggest difference between something like *Spa Night* and something like *This Close* was that I was directing something that I hadn't written.

I think it made me a better director and made me a better writer. There were some really fascinating observations that I made through the process of working on the TV show as well as working with deaf actors. I realized that I could never go super close for a close up, because you'd lose their hands, and you wouldn't be able to understand what they were saying. Also there's no such thing as an offscreen line. That was hard to wrap my head around. I realized that so much traditional narrative film grammar and editing practices is very much based in the hearing world. I also realized that was a bias. The experience made me think of film and narrative film in a different way, in a less conventional way, and that was really freeing.

That's the kind of insight that I hope I get to experience with every film or whatever I end up working on. I want to be able to dig into a world enough where I actually learn something meaningful and it's not just a simple take away of, "Oh, this time I shot things on this new camera."

The more films you make, the more those experiences come to bear on what you do later in ways that you don't always anticipate or even realize.

I realize that what I bring to a project as a filmmaker, as a director, is an attitude as well as my own experiences. The more positive of an attitude I have, and the more experiences I have, the more I can bring to a project. Something I think a lot about as I move forward in my career is the question of "What makes me well suited to something? How am I valuable?" I just have to tell myself, "Oh, it's because of what I've done so far." I have to think of those experiences as what makes me *me*.

Andrew Ahn recommends:

Chloé Zhao's *The Rider*

Félix González-Torres' "Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)"

Suzan-Lori Parks' "365 Days/365 Plays"

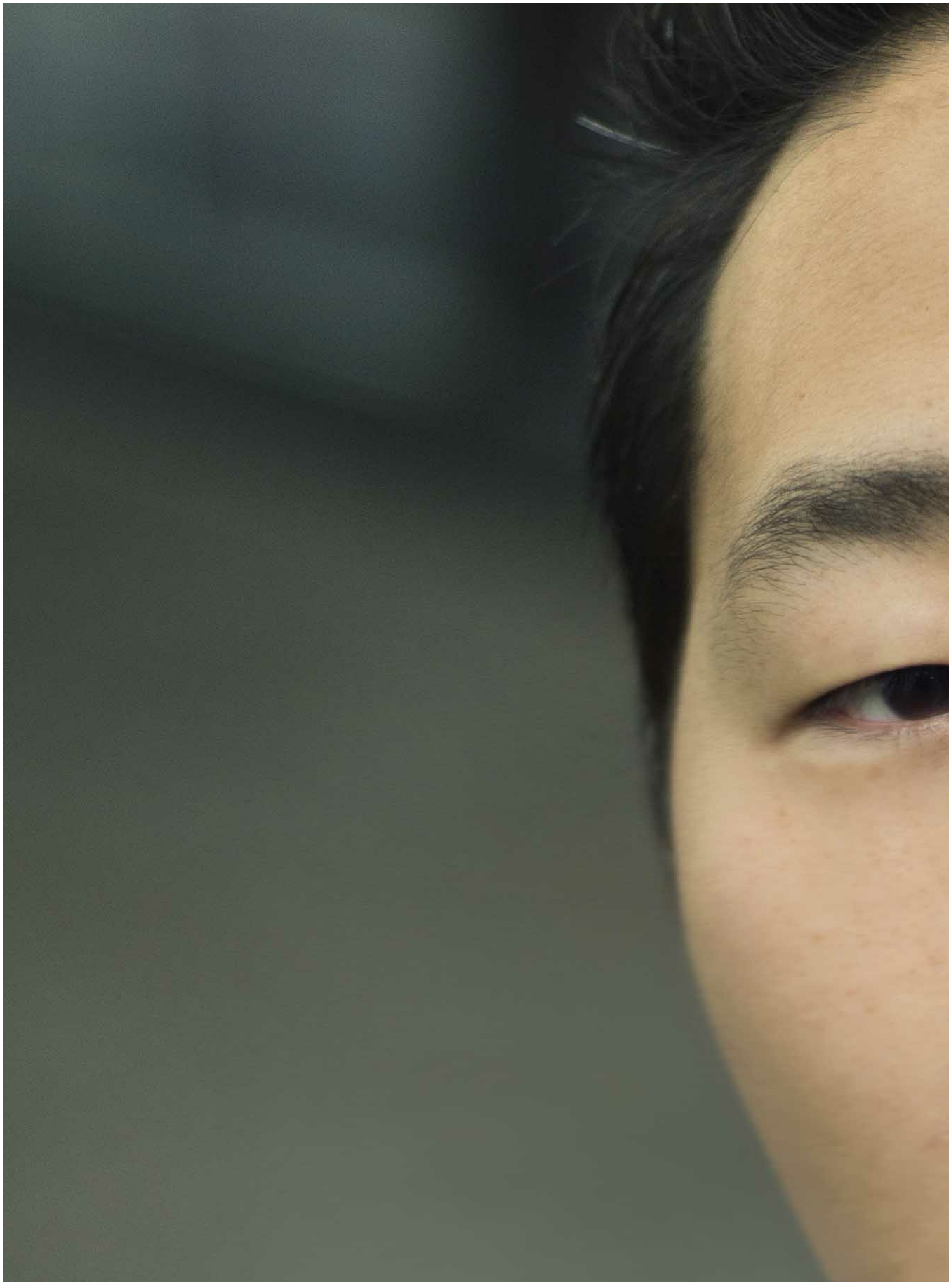
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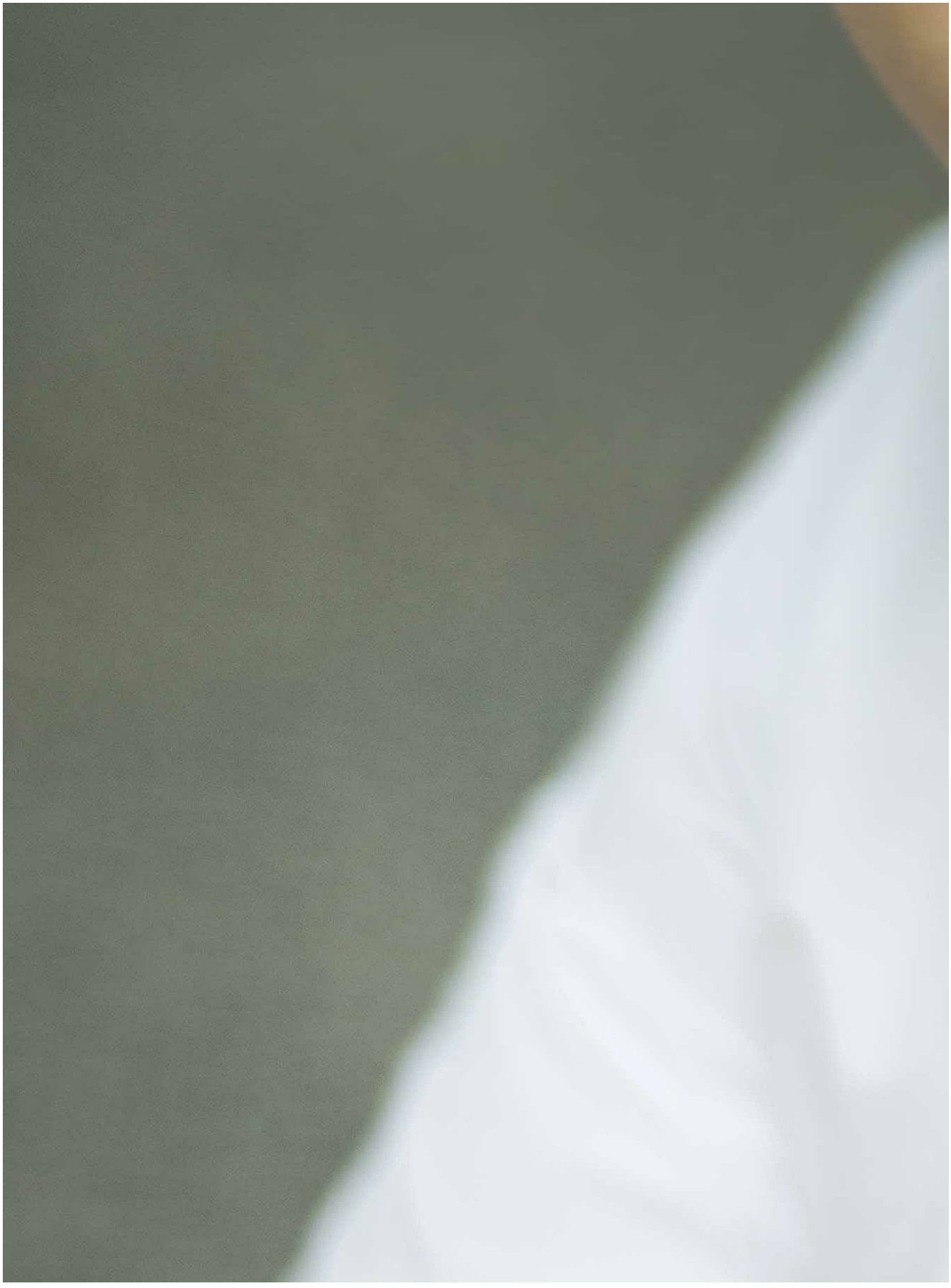
The Instagram of Crouton the Cat

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