

February 1, 2017 – Tamara Yajia was a child star in Argentina. She's now a comedy writer living in Los Angeles and works a day job at a hospital doing translations for non-English speaking patients. You can follow her on Twitter.

As told to Brandon Stosuy, 3005 words.

Tags: Comedy, Writing, Beginnings, Independence, Multi-tasking, Anxiety.



Tamara Yajia on having a day job

You have a day job. Your comedy writing and Twitter are actually things you do on the side. I'm interested in talking about creative outlets that don't necessarily result in a paycheck. What's your background? Do you have plans to try to write full-time?

I studied literature. I've always loved reading, so that's how I got started. I would always journal since I was, I don't know, 16 years old. I have my journal that talks about the first time I kissed a guy and the first time I gave a blowjob and all that stuff. I've always been really detailed on keeping journals.

I come from a background of hardworking immigrants—I immigrated with my parents from Argentina. This is the other side of the story. We moved here in 1995. We came here with \$2,000. My parents were doing really badly economically in Argentina. We came here with what we had, and I had the example of my parents busting their asses at trying to make a living for us. That's what I learned. Working has always been: making money and making ends meet. This has always been instilled in me as the number one thing.

But I'm also creative. This is something that happened when we lived in Argentina: I used to be like a child star, I guess. I used to be a singer and a dancer and do commercials and stuff like that, so I also have that other side, which when we moved here, just got completely shut off because I was learning to adapt to a new culture.

I think until I was about 16, 17 years old, I didn't sing or do anything creative. Then, with my older years, the creativity blossomed again, but I was still going to work. I've worked since I was 16 years old and that just became my norm. It was always two different things: It was work and then it was creative stuff on the side.

I started Twitter two or three years ago, using that to replace my journals in a way. Or to go along with it. I think the reason I started gaining followers was because I built a community of friends that were also on Twitter, people who would spread the stuff that I was writing. That also helped shape my voice I guess, or what I write about on Twitter.

You see what people like and what they don't. People follow me for what I like to say and it always works better that way. When being creative, I think you can sound phony so easily and people pick that up.

It was crazy. I was at 1,000 followers and I remember being like, "Oh my god that's so much! That's all these people listening to what I have to say." Then suddenly within a year and a half, I was up 30,000 followers. It's an incredible platform. Here's the problem, though, and a lot of my friends who tweet have felt the same: It can also be easy to get stuck making jokes that are 140 characters. That's when one day, I was like okay, let's put this aside for a moment and start doing other things.

So, two years ago, I put on a play, *Cumming of Age*. I took a lot of the journals I'd written when I was younger and I turned them into monologues. I put on a play. I funded the whole play myself; I was continuing to do my job during all of this. It was kind of awesome because it allowed me to have complete control of what the play would be about, of what it would look like. It was all in my hands.

But it's really exhausting, it is—I have a job that's mentally draining. I work in hospitals, mostly with illegal immigrants that don't speak English, and I translate for them. I do that for 10 hours a day. I'm talking all day and absorbing all of these energies and seeing how shitty these people are treated and abused by their employers and stuff.

But it pays well.

I imagine Twitter functioning as a break, or brief decompression, from dealing with the intense parts of your job. Like, Raymond Carver working as a custodian in a hospital. He'd cram all his work into the beginning of the night, and then write for the rest of his shift. It's a good way to keep going, too.

Absolutely. I'm glad I have that. It's like comedic relief for all the depressing stuff I'm seeing all day. Even though I would love to eventually make a career out of writing, there's something about this real life, gritty stuff that fuels my comedy. I try to take advantage of the situation that I'm in as well and not just complain about hating my job all day. A lot of my ideas do come from the stuff I see at work.

Was it different doing *Cumming Of Age*? Do you want to do more performance, or are you in the zone now of wanting to do more long-form writing?

I think I would be happy doing either of those things. This year, I finally admitted to myself that I do want to do that. Up until now, there was something of a defense mechanism of me saying, "Oh no. I'm okay doing my day job that I don't particularly enjoy because it allows me to write and perform the things that I want without a boss killing it for me." Like, if I worked for a TV show, then they'd tell me what to write and I don't want that.

It's safer to go to work and have a steady paycheck and do something mindless than to put yourself out there. That's the thing about being creative: You're trying to make money off of something so deep. It can be really scary.

This year, I finally decided, "You know what, I'm going to go for it and maybe spend a little bit less time doing my day job, and putting a little bit more effort with the writing." It's interesting: ever since I made that decision, opportunities for creative work have come in, and they didn't before.

I think it was just me opening up and accepting that I could do that. I believe in that stuff, too, but it took so many years for me to make this decision—that I was going to put myself out there and even if I was going to interview for writing jobs and fail and not get the jobs, I was still going to go for it.

I think now that I've decided that I do want to go for writing, and I've put my fears aside, the opportunities will start coming. When you're blocked off to something and you're like, "I'm not going to do this. I'm happy the way I am." Then nothing's going to change. I think since I changed my mentality, things will start to change. I can already tell.

It's going to take some effort on my part to cut down the amount of days I do my day job, and dedicate more time to writing. Because if not, it's kind of like, well what comes first? I think it's going to be also me saying okay, I won't have as much money as I've been accustomed to having. It's not that I'm like rich or anything. I'm just making it but it's a sacrifice I have to make.

I think in the next year or so, there's going to be a big shift with how much time I spend writing versus doing my day job. I think I'll start to tell the difference then. Like I said, this is a very, very new thing for me—to decide to go for it without fear.

There's the fear that leaving the job will somehow shift the energy, or that the job has fueled what you've done so far.

That was my fear. I thought I was going to start hating writing if I became a full-time writer. Who knows? I still don't know. It might happen, but it's like, "Well, it's not like I love my job anyways so what am I going to lose?" That's the thing. I have a strong voice. I'm very crass. I don't tone things down. I'm pretty gross with my writing.

That's another thing. Since I write for myself, I can afford to talk about the things I want. The other day, I had an interview over the phone for a potential writing job. It was my first like legit writing job interview. When I got off the phone, I was like: "Shit, all of the writing samples I sent in are so my style." It was all about sex and shitting and that stuff. I'm like, "Okay. Well, what does one do? Do I need to tone it down or do I just keep doing what I do in hopes that someone will recognize that there is a strong voice behind that?" I don't know. I'm still figuring that out.

You don't need to be worried about being fired for tweeting about Barron Trump, which is something you've done.

It felt so good to tweet that Barron Trump could eat a turd. It felt so good. You're right. It's moments like those where it's like, "Fuck off. I don't owe anything to anybody." If I never have to answer to a boss that's telling me what to write and what not to write, I'll still be happy for moments like that.

That whole thing with Katie Rich. She immediately got hired by Dan Harmon as far as I understood. But it's just crazy that she had to even apologize and then lost her job. I mean come on, that's crazy. Those are the moments I'm telling you I'm so happy I don't have to answer to anybody. I think Saturday Night Live really fucked that one up.

Have you ever done a tweet where you end up deleting it, thinking, "I've gone too far?"

Oh my god, I delete like five tweets a day. Or more, because I'm so stream-of-consciousness. But, yeah, I did a tweet about... This is really gross, but one of my first was about sucking a dog's dick. I obviously have never done that, but it was a joke and some girl that followed me was like, "You've gone too far. Abort, abort." She just kept writing, "Abort." I was like, "Okay."

Whatever. I don't feel like I've gone too far for others. It's when I've gone too far for myself that I'm like, "Okay, I'm embarrassed about what I just wrote." I delete tweets all the time. Especially during the time that I'm about to get my period. It's like the week before when I'm just insecure as hell. I just write so much crap and I'm like, "Oh, god."

You also have a book of short stories.

Yeah, it's called, *Life Is A Dance Floor And We're Dancing Like Shit*. It's like poems about puberty. It's a lot of stuff that I had from my old diaries. Then, I have the main story on there, which is called, "Diary Of A Trip Back Home To Argentina." It's about the last time I went back home.

I usually go once a year but this is the first trip I actually logged everything that happened. I found out some really crazy family secrets. I really love that story. It's the first time I actually processed what it was like to leave my place of birth and what it's done to my psyche and stuff like that.

One thing I really liked about a piece of yours, "I Fucking Love My Perfect Life," was that when you tweeted about it, the headline was, "I wrote an article about how I'm so young and so hung." Then you read the piece and it ends up being this really thoughtful, tender writing about how your life is not perfect.

Absolutely. That's my style. *Cumming Of Age* is the same. It can be so funny but, it can also be so sad. It feels phony when I just try to be funny. In my tweets, I notice that, too. If I just try to be funny, I hate them. That's when I'll go and delete them. It's that perfect balance of being able to laugh at yourself but also being honest with yourself. My life isn't perfect. I kind of hate my job, but thank god I have this voice and this platform and that I'm trying and not giving up.

I have those moments once a week at least, where I just want to give up because you don't get the positive reinforcement to keep going. If you battle through that, you will eventually get just a sign of hope that keeps you going. I wish I didn't need that. Some people just create and create and create. I don't think I'm like that because I'm too insecure. I need some validation. At least every now and then.

Twitter has provided that for me, because there is a validation. People are reading what I'm writing regardless. I think that's been kind of a driving force for me, too. Knowing there's always an audience.

True, that's the scary thing about trying to write full-time, I imagine-hoping that audience will follow you off Twitter and into other areas.

I know, and it's scary. I'm 33 years old. If I was 25 or something, it'd be a much more freeing situation, but it's scary. But then I seriously think of having to do my day job for the rest of my life and it's not happening. It's not happening. It was that kind of get-to-work mentality that I saw my parents have when they moved here and I know I'm recreating that. It's what I learned. It's part of being an immigrant, too, but then I start thinking you know, well they did this for me so that I could do this stuff. It's okay if I take some chances instead of go for the steady paycheck type thing.

Twitter validates you. It's instant gratification. Now everybody wants that, and it's fucked up that likes and retweets and all that stuff keep us going, but it is a driving force. It's like I can't really talk bad about it. It keeps you going and it lets you know what your strong point is, what isn't, what your voice is, what you have people relate to.

I'm really happy to have Twitter as a platform. It's weird now with the election. Voices are shifting. It's weird when you still see people just making jokes about unrelated stuff. You're like, "Uhhhhh..." A lot of us on there are shifting our voices a little, and figuring out what it is we want to use the platform for. It's a whole other thing. And, yeah, Barron Trump really can eat a turd. I stand by that. Nothing is off-limits for me-at this point, at least.

5 Worst Jobs I've Ever Had by Tamara Yajia:

1. Hat Tagger/Quality Control: My very first job when I was 15 was tagging and inspecting hats at the Quicksilver Factory. I was fired after 4 days for "sexual harassment" because a manager overheard me asking an older female coworker for advice on how to suck a dick.
2. Retail Manager: Some schmuck decided it would be a good idea to make me the manager of a home goods store when I was 16 years old. I was actually a good manager for a while (one month). I was in charge of the schedule and of counting the money at the end of the shift. I never stole anything for myself, but I'd let my high school friends come in, fill carts with merchandise and walk right out without paying. They must have stolen \$10,000 dollars worth of merchandise. I got fired after they installed cameras without telling us. I was so pissed when they fired me. I said "I didn't even take anything for myself!" I should have at least stolen a candle or something.
3. Delivery Girl: I worked for a small company that provided boxes of coffee to businesses around California. I drove a huge van that didn't have a seat belt. I never understood why they'd make me drive an hour and a half to deliver a small box of coffee. It didn't seem profitable. Then I opened one of the boxes and realized it was full of cocaine.
4. Interpreter for the Florida Women's Prison: They would call me whenever one of the inmates had to visit the prison doctor and I would translate for them via telephone. There were lots of intense STDs happening in there. There was one lady I was supposed to translate for whom I could not understand for the life of me. It sounded like she was speaking a different language. Like she had a potato in her mouth. Eventually I told the doctor that I was unable to interpret as I did not understand the patient. The doctor told me it was because her mouth was so full of herpes that her tongue had swollen to the size of a grapefruit.
5. Promoter: This was actually my very first job. I was 5 years old and I would sneak out of the house to walk around the community, knock on doors and tell people to shop at my parent's restaurant. The

restaurant was called "Fancy Chicken." Laugh my tits off. "Fancy Chicken." I would just knock on stranger's doors and say "Hi I'm here to tell you to eat at Fancy Chicken. The tastiest chicken in town." I was FIVE. Fuck.

Name

Tamara Yajia

Vocation

Comedy Writer

Fact

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