

# RICOCHET



WHAT TO DO WHEN  
**CHANGE**  
HAPPENS TO YOU

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# 2



## SARAH AND THE EXPLORER

*You are free, and that is why you are lost.*

—Franz Kafka

**IT WAS A LITTLE AFTER NINE O’CLOCK** and Sarah J. Smith still had a stack of student papers to review. She sat in a pair of yoga pants and a baggy sweatshirt with her hair pulled back and her legs casually folded under the old wooden desk on which her grandmother had long ago signed checks and written letters. On the streets below

her apartment, downtown Toronto buzzed with the urban symphony of accelerating engines, squeaky brakes, and the chatter of pedestrians in pursuit of the next heated destination.

But fourteen floors above the street noise, there were only the sounds of Sarah's breath and the occasional ripple of a turning page or scribble of a note in the margin. Sarah's gaze had wandered out the window, over the tiny balcony, and out into the black winter night.

Suddenly, an idea popped into her head. *Someday, you will fund microloans to women in impoverished nations.*

"It was so clear I thought I might have overheard a conversation," she told me. But there was nobody around. Her husband Michael wasn't home. No one was chatting outside her apartment door.

"I honestly knew nothing about microloans. This was 1997," she explained. "Muhammad Yunus hadn't yet won the Nobel Peace Prize [for microlending in Bangladesh]. Micro entrepreneurship wasn't in the headline news."

Even though today billions of dollars are loaned and repaid through this innovative practice in which ordinary people volunteer to make personal loans of as little as twenty-five dollars to help farmers, craftsmen, and merchants in poorer parts of the world get their businesses up and running, microlending wasn't widely talked about back in the 1990s.

Crazy as it was, Sarah's idea stuck with her. "The thought was so crystal clear. I couldn't get it out of my mind."

She stayed up most of the night thinking about it, and continued thinking about in the weeks that followed. Over the next few years, a series of odd coincidences and unlikely meetings sent Sarah on a wild journey crisscrossing the globe from Canada to China to Central America and back to her hometown in western Wisconsin. The result was Sarah's Hope Jewelry.

Sarah's first product, a piece called Elia Rose, was a magnificent sparkling blue and green pendant shaped like a tortilla in honor of its namesake. Elia Rose, the woman, was a single mother from Nicaragua who supported her family by making and selling tortillas to her neighbors. With a microloan from Sarah's Hope and its customers, Elia Rose could finally afford to buy flour in bulk, which increased her tortilla profits just enough to comfortably send her kids to school and buy them the medicine they needed.

When I met Smith in 2010, Sarah's Hope had already been named among the top fifteen hottest-selling brands in the jewelry industry for the previous two years. It remained a fixture on the list for another five years. In that time, Sarah's Hope has empowered thousands of impoverished single moms and struggling female

entrepreneurs like Elia Rose to create successful businesses that can support their families and turn the tide of generational poverty.

Nobody is more surprised about the success of Sarah's Hope than Sarah Smith.

She is fit and pretty and looks a decade younger than she is. With her long and thick reddish-brown hair, she can pull off elegance whenever the jewelry industry requires it. Yet, she still can't help releasing a screechy giggle when she considers how unlikely it is that *she* is the founder of a successful jewelry business. Before she started Sarah's Hope, she claims she "didn't even hardly wear jewelry. Plus," she says with a cocked eyebrow and a grin, "I would have assumed one had to be able to draw—to *design*—if one were to own such a business."

At her core, Smith is a tomboy who is just as comfortable fixing fences on her family's cattle farm as she is displaying her latest designs at glitzy tradeshow for jewelry-store owners. If you paid her a visit today, it's likely that the only accessory you'd see sparkling in the light is the trusty pair of steel vice grips she hangs from her belt in a leather holster.

And yet, here she is. The path she took to get here gives us an important clue about how our brains respond to a ricochet event.

## THE KAFKA EFFECT

Sarah Smith's journey began a few weeks before that strange night in her Toronto apartment. She and her husband, Michael, had just moved to Canada from New Jersey where she had completed a master's degree at Princeton University. Despite her dyslexia, Smith had always been a good student with a strong work ethic and a magnetic personality. She had been married for ten years to a man she loved. She was traveling down a career path she was passionate about. Although still getting used to life in a high-rise apartment in the heart of a city, the small-town girl saw the challenging adjustment as a necessary part of an exciting journey. Graduate school would be finished in a few years, and she saw visions of babies on the horizon.

Life was good. Which is probably why she didn't notice the signs.

There was a scheduling mix-up here. Some suspicious phone calls there. There were also Michael's subtle foot-dragging about children, and a few isolated incidents of finger-pointing and flying accusations from acquaintances.

But Sarah didn't put all those pieces together until she accidentally discovered the damning evidence on their computer. Only then did Michael finally tell her the truth about the secret affairs he'd been having. Although Michael insisted they try counseling, he slipped up again a few months later, and this time they both knew it was over.

“I was devastated,” she told me.

For the first time in her life she suddenly found herself completely alone thousands of miles from home. The one person she had been able to count on to stay by her side and support her everywhere she'd been for the past ten years was now gone—and her clear understanding of the way life was supposed to unfold left with him. The fact that Michael was having affairs with men, instead of women, only intensified her confusion. Two false-positive HIV tests exacerbated her fear and anxiety.

Sarah's GPS had abruptly lost its signal.

Logically, she knew marriages fall apart all the time for any number of reasons. But she never expected that *her* marriage would end, and certainly not under circumstances of infidelity. She was haunted by questions that didn't seem to have answers. *Why did this happen? Why hadn't I seen it coming? What am I supposed to do now?*

Some people might label Sarah's situation “Kafkaesque”—a term used to describe situations that resemble the bizarre plots and strange events in the stories created by the early twentieth-century writer Franz Kafka.

A few years ago, a pair of psychologists named Travis Proulx and Steven J. Heine wanted to find out what happens inside our minds when we find ourselves in these Kafkaesque situations. So the researchers brought two groups of participants into Heine's laboratory at the University of British Columbia, and asked each group to

read a different version of a Kafka story. Here's an excerpt from *The Country Doctor* the first group read:

The youngster heaved himself up from under the feather bedding, threw his arms around my neck, and whispered in my ear, "Pull my tooth." I glanced around the room. No one had heard it. The parents were leaning forward in silence waiting for my verdict.

I yielded, and leaned my head to the boy's face, which shivered under my wet beard. I confirmed what I already knew; the boy had no teeth.

But as I shut my bag and put an arm out for my fur coat, the mother, apparently disappointed in me—why, what did these people expect?—biting her lips with tears in her eyes, the sister fluttering a towel, I was somehow ready to admit conditionally that the boy might have teeth after all.

I went toward him, he welcomed me smiling, as if I were bringing him a delicious candy—and this time I discovered that the boy did indeed have teeth. In his right molar, near the back, was an

open cavity, dark brown, in many variations of shade.

But on a closer inspection there was another complication. Worms were wriggling from their fastness in the interior of the cavity toward the light, with small white heads and many little legs.

Are you confused? Maybe disgusted? If so, that's the point.

The story continues on for another twenty or so pages—each one chock full of absurd plot twists that make absolutely no sense. At one point, the dentist's neighbor inexplicably gets down on his hands and knees and acts like a horse while wooing away the dentist's pretty young love interest. All the while, the dentist feels much like Sarah Smith did. He knows how absurd these events are, but he can't explain them and he can't ignore them.

The second group of people in the British Columbia study read a different version. It was the same basic story, except this story made sense. One event led to another the way you would expect. The little boy with a toothache actually has teeth, and none of those teeth were spawning worms. A friendly neighbor volunteered his horse, but he didn't proceed to act like one. You get the picture.

Now, here's the fascinating part.

Shortly after study participants read the stories, the researchers assigned each group to a task. The people

in each group were told to spot hidden patterns in random rows of letters. When the researchers tallied the results, they discovered that something strange had happened. The people who read the absurd Kafka story were able to correctly spot *twice as many* hidden patterns as the group who read the normal story.

Let that sink in for a moment.

The only difference between the two groups was that one of them read a confusing story. The other one read a coherent story. But for some odd reason the people who read the nonsensical story seemed to act twice as smart.

Since then, the British Columbia researchers have found the same bizarre results in study after study. After analyzing incoherent word pairs that have nothing to do with each other, such as “turn–frogs,” “careful–sweaters,” and “quickly–blueberries,” a different group of people also spotted more patterns in random rows of letters than did a group of other people who read words they expected to see paired together, such as “hot–lava” and “cheese–cake.”

The same thing happened after one group of people watched an inscrutable short film in which an ordinary family—mom, dad, brother Tommy, and sister Suzie—sit around an ordinary dinner table in an ordinary dining room eating an ordinary dinner . . . while wearing full-body rabbit costumes.

*Hub?* Exactly. The people who watched that strange clip for a few minutes spotted more correct patterns than

people who watched a coherent clip from *The Simpsons*. (Homer might be ridiculous, but apparently there is sound logic to his ridiculousness.)

What's going on here? Why does ingesting nonsense make us smarter?

## THE EXPLORER

It turns out that inside each of our minds lives a small but mighty explorer. The explorer spends our days scanning the environment for things that make us go *hmmm*. Most days we wake up, we eat breakfast, we go to work, we come home, we eat dinner, and we go to bed. Nothing unusual or unexpected happens, and so our explorers stay holed up like a Rocky Mountain survivalist in a region right behind our temples near a part of our brain called the anterior cingulate cortex.

But when something unexpected happens—like the neighbor in the Kafka story acts like a horse for no reason, or your spouse starts acting like a horse's hindquarters, or the boss who told you how valuable you are suddenly hands you a pink slip—your explorer leaps into action. It unleashes a psychological superpower designed to do one thing extremely well: find meaning.

It's as if a sudden change acts like a bat signal projected into the night sky. Once the explorer spots the signal, she puts on her cape and flies off to go make sense of the

world again. It's like the hundred-pound mom who lifts the car to save her baby, except in this case the strength is mental rather than physical.

The problem is that some confusing events have no explanation. Meriwether Lewis and William Clark were great explorers. But they never found a waterway to the Pacific Ocean. Why? Because there isn't one.

So what does your explorer do when she (or he) can't explain why your partner is suddenly being a jerk or why Neighbor Brown is wearing a saddle and licking a salt block? What does the explorer do when year after year of stellar performance reviews culminates with a layoff?

She compensates. She tries to find meaning in another area to fill the void. That's when the magic happens.

Your explorer begins hunting for unrelated connections between ideas and objects that were probably right in front of us all along, but we just never noticed before. She might spot patterns in random strings of letters. Or bust through writer's block. Or unleash a burst of colorful creativity. She might even reveal our purpose in life.

Sarah Smith's epiphany offers a perfect example of the Kafka Effect. Something about her strange new surroundings in downtown Toronto and the barely noticeable, unexplained changes in her husband's behavior caught the attention of her explorer. While her conscious brain was busy thinking about the daily tasks of school and work, her explorer was scouring the landscape for a way forward.

To find the scent, her explorer paid a visit to her hippocampus—the brain’s memory hub—where she sifted through images of important thoughts and events from Sarah’s relevant past. Since Sarah ran a small sales and marketing business to put herself through theology school, her explorer kept bumping into the themes of business, faith, and social justice. So the explorer tucked those themes into her knapsack and kept hunting.

Maybe confusion about her marriage creeping into her consciousness inspired the “empowering women” motif, or maybe it was a core value that had always been there and was now being reactivated. Either way, the explorer stuffed that idea in her knapsack too. Eventually, the explorer stumbled onto a forgotten news article about microfinance, or a glanced-at flyer on the school’s bulletin board, and . . . *aha!*

*Someday, you will fund microloans to women in impoverished nations.*

## SEED INCIDENTS

In her studies of creative writers, psychologist Charlotte L. Doyle found that witnessing a curious encounter at a coffee shop or experiencing an emotionally charged event on the freeway can plant the seed for a new story—or plot twist or new character. She calls this a “seed incident.” Seed incidents are often the first step in the creative process.

Because of your explorer, a ricochet event can become a seed incident.

For Sarah Smith, the seed incident was a disrupted marriage that inspired a new purpose for her life.

For busy professionals, the seed incident could be a job loss that spawns an idea for a successful new business, an exciting new career path, or a new set of priorities that moves the people in your life above the goals for your career.

A shake-up at work can become the seed incident for discovering something as simple as a new persona. After a frightening and frustrating three-year wave of layoffs and departmental shuffling at Tim Peterson's Fortune 500 employer, Peterson had an epiphany.

"I remember coming out of this team meeting where the negativity was worse than ever," Peterson told me. "I walked out of this little conference room with these seven other people and as I was silently judging them for being so negative, I thought 'what are *you* doing?' You're not any better!"

"But then it occurred to me that these new people on my team don't know me. They don't know anything about what I'm like, so I can choose to be whoever I want to be. I'd always been pretty timid before, and that's what people expected from me. I was the nice guy who just went along with the group. But then I decided to become the 'bold guy.' People were getting laid off left and right,

regardless of what they said or did. So why not? I'm still not a jerk or anything. But now people look to me for answers and opinions in a way that didn't happen that much before. It's pretty cool."

For me, my dad's heart attack coupled with the stressful move from California to Minnesota was the seed incident that inspired my first book. I'd been chipping away at this idea for over a year with little bouts of progress here and there, but nothing substantial. I'd also been able to get a few agents to look at my idea, mostly as favors to mutual friends. But none of them wanted to represent me or the book.

Then on the tumultuous drive from San Diego to Minneapolis, in the midst of battling snowstorms and lugging a U-Haul trailer through the Rockies behind a compact car with a very pregnant and very nauseated wife, the right idea for the book suddenly and almost magically popped into my head. Just a little over a month later, after we pulled into my in-laws' driveway, I'd finished the forty-page book proposal, found a literary agent, and had three major publishers engaged in a bidding war before Simon & Schuster made an offer I couldn't refuse.

Given what I now know about publishing, I'm even more amazed about that turn of events today than I was then. If I hadn't lived it, I wouldn't believe it.

I didn't realize until years later that the inspiration that led to the accomplishment of this lifelong dream

didn't happen in spite of the chaos surrounding me. It happened because of it.

Unfortunately, I was still too miserable in every other aspect of my life to enjoy this once-in-a-lifetime achievement. In fact, I was so busy wallowing in self-pity that I almost resented the book deal. In my mind, this outlandish dream that had actually come true was just one more obligation, one more nail in the coffin of my formerly carefree lifestyle. Pathetic, I know.

The point is that ricochet events—even events of the intensely sucky variety—will activate your explorer in a way that happy and stable times rarely do. No matter how torturous or baffling the change, your highly skilled explorer is now on the hunt. It's often right there in that messy, scary period of search and discovery that many of our most important innovations, our legacy-leaving creations, begin taking shape.

Nobody knew this truth better than the lawyer by day and writer by night, Franz Kafka. During the final months of 1912—one of his darkest periods, which was anchored by a failed suicide attempt—Kafka produced the beginnings of what many critics believe are his greatest works. In a beautifully disgusting description, Kafka told his best friend “the story came out of me like a real human birth, covered with dirt and slime.” (As a front-row observer in four real human births, I can say that “dirt and slime” pretty much captures the experience.)

But then again, maybe the mess is part of the pay-off? Maybe the mess is why we feel so alive, so very *human*, in those moments when our brains finally connect the dots between slimy beginnings and beautiful creations.