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Coming to Terms

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Leslie Smith. COMING TO TERMS. (Under the direction of Ms. Mary Carroll-Hackett.) Department of English and Modern Languages, April 2010.

The purpose of this thesis is to analyze the roles of resistance and acceptance in my life through creative nonfiction. In the six essays serving as my thesis, collectively entitled *Coming to Terms*, I have approached my life from different angles in order to both identify and explore topics of control and conflict, realization and acceptance. These originate in various degrees from my family, my schooling, and from society at large, but most importantly, from my own interpretation of what it is to grow up and assert myself, accepting the past in order to change the future: "If you're cognizant of the problem, and see the source, you can only blame yourself for not changing it." These essays explore moments in the past where I was forced to redefine the role I played in my own life. For example, in "Sun-Blind," my resistance to assimilating with my peers at school had physically damaging results, and only through accepting and practicing certain social norms was I able to identify how I had harmed myself. I use an adult narrator as the retrospective voice for each essay to take on the often hard truths about myself, which would not have been accessible to me from a younger point of view. These essays represent the continuing process of learning to recognize and accept that I have it in me to stop hurting others, and myself.

COMING TO TERMS

by

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Dedication

Neither this book nor my heart would be whole without my family.

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On Sharing a Story

"So, I've got a story," I said to the few friends standing around me. Parties generally facilitate clusters of three or four people standing or sitting, resulting in private conversation in a public space. Sometimes stories get lost in the noise of a party, or are interrupted when two groups collide. Or a story might get told over and over as more people ask to hear it, but somehow only one person hears it at a time, resulting in story fatigue for the speaker. But occasionally there are those people who appreciate a good story, and take the opportunity to help share it with everyone who cares.

"Story time, story time," my friend Caity called out. She and other guests of Schmidt's housewarming party draped themselves over the sofa and threw pillows on the floor in front of me, kicking up their heels. An expectant silence filled the room.

I laughed at these adults, and sipped my rum and Coke, giving myself a moment to collect my thoughts and allow my blush to fade. The rush of pleasure at being expected to entertain a crowd was directly followed by the logistics of telling a story.

I am not a trained comedian, or entertainer of any sort, and I'm sure many of you can say the same. Yet, I find that I am not usually shy in front of a crowd. I attribute my years working in retail to my understanding of our basic human need for implied camaraderie -- the shared eye roll, wink, or easy grin that brief, false friendship allows strangers. This same atmosphere can be found at parties during which you have just met new acquaintances.

Caity rallied friends and strangers alike for my story, knowing more of the people in the room than I. Having a friend who can convey your reputation always helps. This clearly means that you have to back up your source with a good performance.

Writers of every genre create intimate moments with their audience. By sharing a story personally, a whole new atmosphere of drama can be created through tone of voice and physical presence. This form of acting can be an inherent skill, or it can be learned from telling the same story over and over, testing new emphasis and word choice on fresh ears.

This was a story I had told several times since the night my boyfriend, Forrest, and I were robbed in the November of 2006. Richmond, Virginia, was the murder capital of the world in 1995, but this short rise to the

top had been followed by a fairly rapid decline of overall crimes. By 2006, Richmond was ranked fifteenth in Morgan Quitno's[1] State Crime Rankings, and we had experienced one of the 996 robberies recorded for that year.

While this is interesting information when people have questions, it isn't really part of the story as it needs to be told during a party.

"Gather 'round, children," I said, deepening my voice as the partygoers laughed. "I will tell you a tale of fiendish robbery and unsportsmanlike behavior."

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We had been living with our roommate Steven just inside the loop of Richmond, up the street from a hospital, in an apartment community regally named Bramblewood Estates for about three months when the incident occurred.

Forrest and I got home that Monday around 11:45 p.m., having picked up one of my co-workers from the local airport and taking her home. I was happy to offer her the lift, and Forrest was fine with driving us both.

As we rounded the community traffic circle into our particular parking lot, a white four-door sedan followed close behind us. Even now I can't say that I'd find it odd

[1] http://www.morganquitno.com/

-- people come home at all hours of the day and night in our predominately blue-collar neighborhood.

The main lot was full, so we lurched down the short hill to the smaller over-spill lot. I yawned and sat up straighter, ready to get back to our warm apartment. The car following us parked nearby, half-hidden by a dumpster.

Forrest and I jumped out of the car, and I wished, not for the first time that night, that I had remembered a coat. We huddled close to each other for warmth and physical support, like two drunks stumbling home. "We're exhausted," we had agreed throughout the final minutes of the drive. "We'll go straight to bed."

***

"Could you imagine easier targets if you were trying to hold someone up?" I asked the crowd. "We might have well been blind, our wallets already in hand. Forr and I are all about charity work."

By being up front about the crime, I was sending a clear signal to my audience: the crime was not the punch line of this story. By using this expected "main event" as a lead-in, I was setting the atmosphere for a surprise further into the story. This kind of set-up is important to practice -- it could just be that you're just accidentally letting out the most important information first. There's

nothing worse than having to say, "No, wait, pretend I didn't say that."

"We heard the guys get out of their car -- they weren't trying to sneak up on us," I continued.

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The biggest of the three approached us first from behind, muttering something. Forrest pulled me over to the side, apologizing, thinking we had just gotten in their way.

Next thing I know: "Ey, yo, give it all up!"

And there's the gun, pointed directly at my face. The gun wasn't very intimidating, honestly. In the dim of the parking lot, it looked more like an old Western six-shooter, the kind that duelers used to whip out and fire without hesitation, the blanks and smoke surprising the audience.

"Oh, whoa," Forrest breathed, and I couldn't help but agree. Even a toy gun at that time of night would be enough to scare us. Suddenly I felt very much awake, a sharp charge of adrenaline spiking through my chest.

"Give it up, man, give us everything you got." The man was black, and he towered over us, easily more than six-feet tall. His low voice steamed the air around his shoulders.

Thinking that eye contact was probably a bad idea, I tried to focus on other things -- that he was wearing a white, bulky long-sleeved shirt. No, coat. Sweatshirt? A white ball cap and it looked like maybe a bandana. I had never realized how poor the lighting was in this part of the parking lot. I ended up focusing on the outstretched gun.

I could make out that there were two other guys with him, both smaller than our gunman, but just as *there;* just as able to hurt us if needed.

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I took a sip of my rum and Coke, knowing I should look pensive. Telling a story can sometimes be seen as bragging, or even as taking pride in a malicious act. I had learned after telling this story several times that the comedy should be left for the parts that were specifically both humorous and in our favor. This helped create the gentle line of empathy between me and the upturned faces at Schmidt's party. Even the people in the room I had only just met were putting themselves in my shoes -- someone they know has been robbed in a scary, only-seen-on-TV, kind of way.

Over time, the robbers I remember have become featureless blobs of color through which low, indistinct

man-voices issue. I wrote a first draft of this story the day after the incident, and so was able to hold on to some of the specific details about the experience, but have found myself less and less able to relive the moment the more I move away from that night.

Oral storytelling can make up for a lack of details through physical movement and tone of voice, but the written word is more dependent on memory, which can sometimes resemble an imperfect drain catch -- the smaller details can rush past the edge of metal, lost down a curved pipe that can't be removed and picked through.

I took advantage of the physical while I could, and put my hand in my pocket, saying, "We fumbled through our pockets. I only managed my cell phone--" I offered mine then to the audience. "But Forrest pulled out his car keys, cell phone, and wallet."

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Forrest's wallet is a collection of cards held together with an old brown hair-tie. At the top was a gift card that my grandmother had given me the previous year, and Forrest had held on to, which happened to be a bright red card with sparkly snowflakes that could make anything look girly and diminutive.

In its non-conformed collective and rebellious design, the thugs didn't recognize it for what it was: what they wanted.

"This is all you got? Shit, where's your money?" The guy sneered at us.

"We left it at home, we didn't think we'd be out this late, I'm sorry," I managed, recognizing our luck when he didn't snatch up the snowflakes. "All we have are our cell phones." I took the chance to lie, straining with every cell to sound believable and look helpless, my adrenaline rush and the cold helping by making my hands shake.

He looked unconvinced, but grabbed our phones and started to back away, the gun still trained on us. I had been trying to edge away the whole time, hoping that the distance between us would slow any approaching lead.

The second guy came into view now, even more displeased with us. "That ain't all you got, come on. Where's your *money*?" He was shorter and gunless, but more intimidating than the big calm first fellow.

"No, honestly, that's all. You have our phones, that's all," Forrest said, his eyes wide in a "please don't hurt me; can't you see how fragile I am?" kind of look.

"Fuck, turn around! That ain't all!" He sort of sniffed around us like a hog looking for truffles, his face

low and searching, and that's when I remembered my wallet pressed into my rear pocket. I involuntarily glanced over my shoulder to see how noticeable the bulge was in the weak light, then, hoping that the movement was lost on them, I closed my eyes for a moment and set myself facing forward.

I decided my wallet would be my bargaining chip, should the group decide to get any more serious. We did not turn around -- I actually took a long step away from the mugger as he advanced just as Forrest took a protective step closer to me.

But then the gunman and the so-far-silent third man were edging toward their car, obviously ready to go. Relief flooded me when the big guy addressed the aggressive one, saying, "Shit, man, we got their phones. Let them go, they ain't got nothin'."

We started to back away faster, and one of the smaller guys must have seen me heave a sigh because he growled, "You better not scream or nothin'."

"No, no," I muttered, waving my hands in what I hoped was a reassuring pattern of helplessness.

We sort of shuffled around to stride off, uncertain if we should move any faster, when one of them half-shouted, "Nah, go on, you betta start runnin' before we--"

The rest was lost as Forrest and I darted away, happy to be given permission to get the hell out of there.

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I paused again for the collective sigh of relief, and to allow us to refill some empty glasses. Unless I was hiding some injury or scar, everyone knew I was fine after the mugging, but having the good guys get away with minimal damage is always a good note to relax the tension.

"The great part is, guys--" I interrupted their muttering. "That's not the end of the story."

The few people who had heard this story before backed me up, sitting forward in their seats and shushing their friends. The crime was just the lead-in, after all, only the first half.

"I was trying not to laugh by the time we reached the apartment. I was giddy, you know? Forrest unlocked the door while I checked behind us, to make sure they hadn't followed us, and I was giggling while Forrest looked at me with this stark panic on his face--"

***

"*Shut up*," he hissed as we finally got in the door.

"Yeah, sorry," I said, and slammed the door behind us, locking the main bolt, wishing we had more satisfying dials to click and thunk into place.

On the way up our steep staircase, I accidentally knocked into Forrest's leg, making him fall up the stairs. As I bent down to help him, I imagined some injury they had caused him that I hadn't realized before, and my breath hitched in my throat. How close had we come to actually getting hurt?

We got to the top and rushed to cram ourselves into our roommate's small bedroom.

"We just got robbed at gunpoint," Forrest declared, his voice still shaky, but now with some mix of my own feelings of relief and eerie calm. "They took our phones."

"What?" Steven looked up from his bright computer screen, his face scrunched up in confusion. "When?"

"Just now, in the parking lot," I said. Steven handed me his cell phone.

"Call the police," Steven said his voice now low and serious.

"I don't know the local emergency line," I said. "Where's the phone book?"

"What?" Forrest started -- "Just dial 911," Steven finished.

Oh, yeah. What was I thinking? Sure, I hadn't grown up in a 911-managed area -- when you called the police, you called a normal seven-digit number, even when you were

being robbed at gunpoint; but I was in the city now. The police were only three digits away.

Later, I learned that Madison County, Virginia, my hometown, had been wired for 9-1-1 in 2002, only a year after I started college as an undergrad. What had probably been a momentous occasion for the rural area had been completely lost on me until after this night.

I spent the next ten minutes or so explaining the incident to an indifferent operator who told me to calm down every time I talked too fast.

I got off the phone and headed to the bathroom. I had actually needed to pee since leaving the airport, but held it, and subsequently forgotten that I needed to at all until just that moment. Later, friends would tell me that they would've let it go the moment a gun was in their face -- I don't remember why I didn't. I think it's just too low on the list of necessary impulse reactions that I must have stored somewhere in my subconscious.

I was just turning on the light to the bathroom when our doorbell rang, followed by someone banging on the door. I sighed and turned away from the potential for relief, only to find Forrest in the middle of the living room, *thisclose* to panic.

"Go answer the door," I growled, frustrated. "It's the police, right?"

"Oh, yeah," he said, and ran down the carpeted stairs.

"Just check the peep-hole or something," I called down after him.

I was trying to shrug on a coat over my T-shirt before following him, knowing too well the November chill would be too much without the warmth of fear.

Forrest stood with his eye pressed against the scratched glass for a couple of seconds too long, and the banging started up again.

"Ask, 'who is it?'," I said, now on my way down.

"Uh, who is it?" he called out.

"The Richmond police," a rough voice called back.

I said, "See?" and opened the door.

Three officers greeted me, Short & Skinny, Short & Squat, and Officer Johanson (Tall & Handsome).

These three had come to help us out, and they patiently took down any and all information we had. Well, at least Skinny and Officer J did. Squat bounced around on the balls of his feet, talking rapidly into his CB and interrupting Officer J's questions: "Okay, they've pulled over a car just a little ways from here that matched your description. What kind of car was it again? What did the

guys look like again? Did one of them have braids? One of them was wearing a ball cap, though?"

He just wouldn't stay still, which wasn't helping me stay calm. I was already in trouble with Forrest, I could tell, for interrupting his side of the story every two seconds to add a comment; he was glaring at me, his short fingernails pressing into my palm when we held hands. And my bladder was finally speaking up, especially since I teased it earlier with a chance to be emptied.

Forrest said, "The car was waiting on the circle--"

I broke in with, "Yeah, tell 'em about that, they followed us into the--"

"--No, they didn't, they pulled out in front of us first, I had to brake and let them go--"

"But they did follow you in?" Officer J asked.

Forrest tried again, "Yeah, they pulled over and let us go in front--"

"--They were obviously waiting for someone to come home--"

"--Leslie, please. They followed us in, yeah, and followed us as we drove around the lot."

"How would you feel about calling your phones? Do you have another phone in the apartment?" Squat asked.

This got our attention. "Yeah, we have our roommate's phone that we called 9-1-1 from," I offered.

"So you could call the phones, right?" I could see the gleam in the officer's eye. He really wanted to pull a cool phone-hostage negotiation.

"I guess we could. Forrest, do you have that phone on you?" I asked.

"Oh, no, let me go get it." Forrest scrambled back up the stairs, still looking dazed.

"We should call it?" I asked, noticing now that Officer J had stepped a bit behind Squat, and I could tell he was trying to catch my attention, even sort of raising his hand, waving a little.

Squat stopped bouncing, obviously serious about his plan, which was all at once more interesting than Officer J. "Yeah, you call and tell the guys that you're gonna give them money for the phones, see, and get them to meet up with you somewhere close."

Officer J finally shook his head. "I don't think--"

But Forrest returned, interrupting him. "Hey, here it is." He held the phone out to me.

I filled Forrest in: "So, they want us to call the phones and set up a meeting or something. Tell the guys we have money for the phones."

"We do what? Set up a meeting?" Forrest repeated dumbly, opening Steven's phone. I could tell he wasn't excited about the idea, but I almost wanted to go through with it, just to see what would happen. I could tell that Squat and I had the same mindset -- this could be a cool experiment.

Squat nodded. "Yeah, you know, up the street or so."

Officer J looked sick, and tried to interject again, "That's *really* not--"

"Wait, I gotta go talk over here," Squat announced suddenly, and bounced away from us, muttering into his CB radio.

"That's not a good idea," Officer J said, finally stepping close to us, his voice quiet but insistent.

"Oh. Good," Forrest said, obviously relieved.

Officer J spoke quickly now, glancing over his shoulder to see that Squat was briskly pacing up and down the black tar path running to our apartment building. "Listen, here's the report number -- my name's listed here -- and if anything turns up, we'll contact you. Be safe, and let us know if you have any other problems here."

Officer J stepped in front of an advancing Squat, and I could hear Squat's voice whine with protest, "But, come

on, we could--" before we shut the door and walked back upstairs.

I ran to the bathroom and agreed with Forrest through the door that we were smart for paying the extra ten dollars a month to keep insurance on our phones.

***

"And *that* is the full story," I said to my audience.

Caity said, "I knew it would be good!" and gave me a brief hug before joining other friends.

I fielded questions from people who hadn't heard the story before, knowing that this was the benefit of having the storyteller there in person. Though some people hear a complete story in the simple retelling of events, others need to realize the experience for themselves, which can mean clarification.

"Weren't you scared?" is a common question. After the shock of the robbery wore off, I was gleeful at having a new story to tell. I told everyone at work and school about the incident. Forrest, on the other hand, acted like the more I talked about it -- especially the more I laughed -- I was inviting more harm down on us. That I was going to piss off some God of Thieves.

As people drifted into their groups once more, the story tucked into the back of their minds, Forrest came up to me.

"I can't wait until you're done telling that story," he said, not frowning, but not smiling either.

"I'm sorry, baby. I just think it's funny," I said, and knew that those weren't exactly the right words.

I have heard a couple of arguments for and against sharing traumatic stories: the story forces a victim to relive the past trauma, and so should stay private; a victim can influence their audience, teaching a greater lesson through their experiences, and so should be shared.

As I said, this is a story I had told over and over, and at first I had never thought that people might see a moral to the tale, or that I would eventually assign myself to that second argument.

"After you guys got mugged, I bought a Taser to carry in my purse," Forrest's cousin Holly told us. "I was scared to walk in your parking lot." We lived in that apartment complex for the next three years.

Though I talked as though the robbery had no effect on me, for about a year following, my response to people walking up behind me became one of fear and panic. Forrest and I, too, no longer felt safe in our parking lot, which

sometimes caused us to park all the way across the complex and then sneak home when we saw someone sitting in their car at night.

But I felt, during those first weeks of telling an exciting new story, that the story was supposed to stand apart from that fear. The anecdote was merely seeing the good in the bad -- in this case, the bad guys letting us go -- and the bad in the good, like the cop asking us to do something ridiculous.

Not more than a week after the incident, a friend shared his mugging story with me in return for mine, saying that the two skinny guys who got him and his friends held them up as they were leaving a bar.

"I told the guys that they should hit up the people going in! We had already spent all our money." He shook his head. "What scared me was that the kid holding the gun was shaking so hard that the gun probably would have gone off just because he couldn't hold the trigger right."

Like how a good joke's timing and rhythm stays the same during every performance, I felt that I had to preserve a certain way of telling the robbery story so that it would be more accessible to a wider range of people. But hearing his story changed my mind, and opened me to a new introspection.

What would they have done if we didn't have anything to give them? What would I do differently if I could go back, or if I'm robbed again? And though I want to keep from telling a moral tale, sometimes this speculation gets worked into the story, especially in quieter settings.

Would I slap the gun out of the man's hand? Laugh in their faces when I proclaim that I'm broke? Would I just turn around and keep walking or pretend to suffer a major seizure right there, drooling and thrashing on the ground?

Would they shoot? Punch? Break me from head-to-toe because I didn't have what they wanted? Because, really, what's the resale value of two phones that I originally bought two-for-one for twenty dollars?

***

Storytelling gives the storyteller a chance for change just as often as it allows the audience. As new experiences influence my personal story (how I define and present myself) I find that I'm given the chance to reflect more completely through storytelling. Those robbers, twenty years from now, may take on a whole new life through my office at work, or my parents-in-law. Maybe the police will be my siblings, or best friends.

As long as I recognize a story's potential for personal gain, I don't think I could do what Forrest

wanted, for me to keep it to myself. Instead, I hope that I can tell these stories even when I'm not present, that any potential for insight can be a shared experience, storyteller to audience, book to reader.

Sun-Blind

"Where's your sister?" Grandma asked my older sister, bending at the waist to talk to her.

Patty gripped Grandma's leg, standing as high as Grandma's hip at age four. "I don't know," she said, her bottom lip jutting out. Patty loved going to the movies, but hated the crowds, the press of unfamiliar people.

Grandma looked around, trying to see between the other people standing in line for popcorn, and was about to find an employee when she spotted my blonde hair in one of the mirrored walls.

"Leslie!" She pulled my sister along as she walked over to me. "What do you think--"

"Oh, it's all right, ma'am," the man interrupted, smiling up from his seat on the bench, a young boy sitting on his knee. "She was just talking to my son."

My grandmother broke here in her retelling, and made it clear that I might as well have been sharing national secrets instead of my address, phone number, and the names of all our cats. I countered with how impressive it must have been to know a three-year-old who could recite those facts.

"I just couldn't stand it," Grandma said. "She would talk to anyone, anywhere. No sense at all!"

***

As the second child of four, my early years centered on standing out, identifying myself as "Leslie Smith, one and only." I tried to be louder than my sisters and brother, more helpful, more interesting -- but, "I will always love you and Patty the same," my mother would say after Patty and I fought. Patty and Mom were never friends the same way Mom and I were, and I resented that Mom claimed to have feelings for Patty that I felt should be reserved for me. I wanted more than an equal division of my mother's time and adoration. But when Allan, my little brother, and then Lauren, my little sister, were born, I came to realize that I was never going to be able to stand out the way I needed to in order to be favored.

Going to school changed my focus. While I could never be the only Smith, I took pride in being the only Leslie in my class and actively started to build my reputation. I had learned that I gained favor from adults by being precocious, and quickly started trying to entertain my peers.

In kindergarten, my body was the easiest thing for me to manipulate. I could bend my fingers to the back of my

hand, curl my tongue into a clover, and turn my eyelids inside out. "Ew!" the other girls would squeal, crowding around my table in the cafeteria. I learned after the first months, though, that other children my age had short attention spans, and I could only tolerate so much pain; joints weren't meant to bend backwards. But I would push myself at their behest -- "You can't do that!" was the perfect reverse psychology.

By the time I left primary school, I boasted ten sprained fingers and had stitches on the inside of my lower lip after trying to execute a top-of-the-arc swing-jump. I wasn't brave; cowardice was just no match to peer pressure.

In first grade I got glasses, just as everyone in my family did. I loved the cool dark of the examination room, the mechanical arm of lenses winking at me, while the eye doctor would peer first into one pupil then the other. I usually got to pick out my own frames, though Mom would have the final say. The few times I didn't like a pair she picked out, I'd find some way to break them and start over; the gold-plated wire frames didn't last two minutes in my little sister's hands.

Having glasses made me fit in with my family and stand out at school, a perfect juxtaposition. I realized for the first time that it might be possible to physically change

my appearance to gain attention, until my classmates created a new stigma. "Four-eyes!" was their observation, fingers encircling their eyes.

I recognized that I was becoming associated with the other "weird" or "gross" children in my grade -- girls like Amanda Morgan, who often came to school in dirty clothes with unwashed hair, and Beth Bradley, who had an unfortunate set of buckteeth and learning disabilities. I rode the bus with both of these girls and took every opportunity to prove myself above them.

"Bucktooh Beth, chew down any trees today?" I called out over the top of my seat. Any guilt I felt while taunting them was made moot by the appreciative giggles around me.

While Amanda and Beth stood out in a way I didn't want to emulate, I couldn't help but understand why we were similar, especially when I overheard my mother gossiping over the phone. Both girls had easy smiles that hid disruptive home lives: Amanda continually had one more sibling on the way, in a house obviously not built with so many in mind; Beth's parents were in a constant state of distress, one or the other always in the process of leaving, but never quite getting away. Poverty and marital strife were a common theme of my own home life, and I could

have found ways to share that with both of them, if I had cared to. They actively gave our classmates a chance to see them as friends, but received only disdain in return, including my own.

But, ultimately, I had just as many counts against me as they had, if not more. I lived on a dirt road in the middle of nowhere even for Madison County, Virginia, and my parents were too poor to buy me much of what I thought would help; *Lisa Frank* notebooks and folders, name brand shirts or shoes, or whatever fashion was current at school.

When I was in second grade, my mother knitted us leg warmers, but the chunky mono-color or mismatched weaves made them stand out too much against the smooth nylon and perfect stripes of my classmates. Even when no one commented or noticed, I could feel the weight every dropped stitch, and would strip the warmers off as soon as I got on the bus. I stopped asking for them after that year.

I wasn't sure what I could do differently than Amanda and Beth. I had already established myself as smarter than most of the kids in my class, answering questions and speaking up more often, even when I wasn't called on. Nothing seemed to work.

As I moved into second and third grade, I found that my books held potential answers. I empathized with *Matilda*

by Roald Dahl, recognizing that Matilda's intelligence was ignored by her peers just as mine was. Instead of reaching out to a teacher as she did, though, I started concentrating on developing telekinesis, which was obviously the more dramatic option.

I began with trying to move books from my bookshelf to my bed so I wouldn't have to get up and ended trying to control feathers. The lighter the item, I figured, the easier it would be to control -- and the feathers were, but only by way of wind or breath. I was never able to actually convince myself that "mind powers" were possible. I moved on to more practical examples.

Patty and I collected the *Babysitter's Club* series by Ann M. Martin, and I learned how problematic life could be -- Stacy developed diabetes, Kristy dealt with snobs who made fun of her sick dog, Claudia's leg broke during a prank, among other, more normal babysitting adventures. I also read *Too Young to Die* by Lurlene McDaniel, in which the main character has leukemia and has to fight illness and negative diagnoses in order to live her life. Another favorite book was *Freckle Juice* by Judy Blume, about a boy who almost poisons himself to develop freckles in order to make a girl fall in love with him.

When I read these books, I thought I was learning a trick to help with school: these children had exciting stories to tell. As I saw it, if these cancerous, freckled, diabetic, broken-boned children could make friends, they weren't gregarious or interesting in their own right. My conclusion was "if I have a cool story or interesting disease, I'll make friends."

And, better yet, no one could make fun of those ill children, at least not to their faces. Those who did taunt the ill or unfortunate were punished, which was fine by me.

***

This was the easiest way when I was eight:

In a nightgown too thin for October, I would let my wet hair hang in cold, stiff ropes around my ears.

I avoided Mom, with her blow dryer at the ready, wanting to sing "My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean" and "That's Why I Love You Like I Do" above my contorted face -- I never thought to pretend to dry it myself.

Before securing myself under my sheets, I propped open the window above my bed, the draft leaking down the wall to settle around my pillow. I hoped to stand the cold long enough to fall asleep. When I woke in the morning, I figured, I would have a headache, or a stuffy nose, which

would be great, because that can turn into sneezing and coughing. Anything sinus can be easily overblown.

I knew that getting sick meant staying home. Staying home meant I would spend the day with Mom, helping her hang out laundry and fold clothes and make dinner. Chores were always preferable to another day in school.

But Mom was a fanatic about us doing well academically, and would deliver us to school sometimes even when genuinely sick, if only for the "Perfect Attendance" slips at the end of the school year. Though sometimes the teacher took sympathy on sick kids, generally it meant just having to power through a school day on the short high of having my peers ask if I was okay. When this was the case, I would both inflate my current symptoms and make up stories around my absences.

"Yeah, we went swimming up in the mountains, and the water's really cold up there. My dad caught a leech on his leg and made us all look at it -- yeah, it was really gross -- and when I woke up this morning Mom said I could stay home, but I wanted to come to school," I bragged, barely pausing for air or to pretend to cough.

Or I could have no symptoms at all, and move to Plan B.

***

Plan B rarely worked.

I held the digital thermometer under the hot water a moment too long -- the reading came out just over 105.

"Leslie? You still in there? Come on, girl!" Mom called from the kitchen.

"Coming! I just don't feel very good." I tried to cough loudly over the sound of the faucet, and adjusted the water yet again. Now the blinking digital screen read 102. Still too hot.

I yearned for the time when Mom only had a mercury line to rely on, with its hard-to-read glass face. If the temperature came out too hot, she wouldn't believe me. If it didn't come out hot enough, there wouldn't be a reason for me to stay home.

"Get out of the bathroom," my little brother, Allan, growled from the other side of the door, and I knew I couldn't hold out much longer. We four children easily overpowered our house's two bathrooms every morning, and Mom didn't stand for much dallying.

Giving up on the thermometer, I stashed it back where I had found it in the medicine cabinet. Throwing the door open, I hoped I might catch Allan by surprise, but he stood safely a few feet away.

"Thanks," he said, smirking at the simple pleasure of disrupting me. I stuck my tongue out at him.

"You said you weren't feeling well?" Mom asked, pulling a coat around her shoulders, getting ready to walk us out to the bus stop.

I thought I might be able to get away with yet *another* ear infection this autumn, so I nodded and hung my head.

"My ear hurts," I whined. "And my throat hurts and I think I'm getting a cough."

I really did develop ear infections easily, and knew the symptoms well -- but so did my mother.

"Let me see," she said, coming to me. With one cool hand to my forehead, and the other on my neck, she frowned.

"Well, your lymph nodes aren't swollen; you don't have a fever, and I've only heard you cough once all morning. If you're getting sick, maybe it'll wait until the weekend to come on strong." And that was that -- we were out the door, and I was on my way to another day of third grade.

***

When I look back now, I see that I could have stopped experimenting with my body or trying to manipulate the system. Other than Daniel Dodson, the boy at school with a fake leg and a mild case of autism that made him both sympathetic and annoying, no one positively held up my

theories that being radically different made a kid "better" or "more interesting" than anyone else. While I developed a hypochondriac's ability to produce and diagnose my own symptoms, my body resisted; my staunch immune system seemed prepared for my onslaught of tests.

As my siblings and I got older, I realized my home life was never going to be a place where I could be the center of attention. Patty was more graceful and delicately shy around a crowd, and Allan had more legitimate illnesses that kept my parents busy. Even Lauren, my little sister, with her adorable lisp and baby smile, was stronger than my advanced vocabulary at wooing adults into paying attention.

I came to realize that I was too cowardly to purposefully break any limbs, or even to go out with a borrowed BB gun and get shot in the eye, like my classmate Tyler Hurt did one weekend. He came back to school with a black eye and his name on every teacher's lips, warning us about the dangers of playing with guns. I realized then that I could be destined to be normal.

In fourth grade I met Mary McCormick, a pale girl who was allergic to practically every food available, as well as to bees, wasps, mosquitoes, and a number of fragrances. She had to carry her inhaler everywhere in case of an

allergy attack, and used it at least once a day when we played outdoors.

I loved Mary. She made up stories with me at recess while on the swings, and I could stay over at her house, where I was attracted to the devotion her parents lavished on her. She was an only child, so my bustling household felt like a circus to her.

Her being different fulfilled my need to be different. I was able to piggyback on her reaction to the cut grass on the running track, helping her step aside from the field to grab her inhaler -- a two-fold positive for me because then I didn't have to run either, something I hated to do. When we did school cookouts, I monitored her eating to make sure she didn't slip up. When we had school field trips, I'd stay on the lookout for signs of motion sickness on the bus, or bees at the bus stops. I took to cupping my palm over my mouth and nose, inhaling sharply -- my version of her inhaler.

Mary validated everything I had read. She didn't have loads of friends, but everyone knew her name and knew something about her. The teachers had to pay attention to her practically all the time. She had me, the doting friend. I shed the need to coax myself into being sick, instead using her as my guide into the world of illness.

I didn't become aware of my dependence until she moved during the summer between fourth and fifth grade. I wrote her letters and tried calling the only phone number I had for her, but the lady at the end of the line hadn't heard of a Mary McCormick no matter how many times I made sure I was punching in the numbers right.

Losing her meant more than just being lonely. It meant apprehension at turning ten years old and still being "just Leslie." Though I had lost my first and best friend, I just saw it as a new dilemma -- not only would I still not be interesting, I wouldn't even be attached to someone interesting.

Early that summer I read *Follow My Leader* by James Garfield. The main character of *Follow*, Jimmy, was blinded in a firecracker accident, and he went on to use a white cane, learn Braille, and ultimately, get a guide dog, Leader.

Everything about the story was attractive to me. Jimmy felt like a more normal kid than I: he already had a few faithful friends, only one brother, and lived in suburbia. I now had no friends, a mess of siblings, and lived in the middle of the woods in rural Virginia.

His new disability singled him out as an interesting character, one that his parents doted on, and his friends

respectfully feared. He was introduced to a new community of similarly disabled people, a community with which he was close enough to learn from, but far enough from that he was still part of his original community.

Blind was a permanent fix, closer to what Mary and my books had taught me to be true -- when the illness is beyond your control, no one can blame you for it. I was already a pro at Blind Man's Bluff, thanks to my ability to center in on the sound of my siblings stumbling around the backyard, giggling behind their palms. I walked around my house during the day, eyes closed, and concentrated on what I already knew the layout of the room to be like.

I also became obsessed with the white cane, Braille, and getting a guide dog. I requested books on learning Braille at our small library in town, and was repeatedly told that they couldn't afford to buy what otherwise wasn't going to be used -- no one was blind in Madison County, Virginia. I was hoping to change that, though, and would glare at the librarian after she turned her back on me.

The next step after pretending was doing.

***

Jimmy had firecrackers. I did not. Besides, firecrackers seemed too sudden, and painful. Jimmy ended up

in bandages -- I decided I wouldn't. So I considered different ways.

I had always been told that if I stared at the sun long enough, I'd go blind. It seemed like the perfect solution. I didn't know how long it'd take for me to go blind once I started staring, but I figured it wouldn't be more than a few days, a week maybe. If I started at the beginning of the summer, I'd have plenty of time before school to learn Braille, how to use a cane, and to pick out my guide dog.

We had a sturdy old lean-to in my backyard that had once served as part of our chicken roost -- that's where I started. My siblings and I often played on and around it. Blackberry and raspberry bushes grew in its shade. Built under a couple of thick oak trees, the sun would peek through the leaves when overhead. Lying with my back against the cool tin, I would carefully watch the sun through my fingers, laying my hands over my glasses to shut out the surrounding world.

While everyone said you could go blind, no one told me that if I stared at the sun for thirty seconds or more, the world around me would become bleached out, that the insides of my eyelids would be brighter than everything else, or that the sun itself would become a bright purple-pink, and,

really, very easy on the eyes. I had also never heard about how badly I would tear up. My eyes dried out quickly, their surface tacky against the back of my eyelids, so that blinking hurt, causing me to close my eyes for minutes at a time, wondering if being blind would be just like that, closing my eyes forever.

A few days of almost every week that summer, I studied the sun's surface. As I built up what I considered to be a tolerance to sun watching, my sessions grew longer and longer. I used my glasses to magnify the rays, adjusting them this way and that to get maximum pinpoint precision, like my eyes were ants on a sidewalk. Eventually I would just take them off completely, allowing the sun to blur into a huge ball of light.

My sisters and brother caught on to what I was doing, at least in part.

"Why are you doing that?" they'd ask when I'd sit up, eyes bloodshot and dry.

"None of your business," I'd respond. I didn't want them stealing my idea.

My mother and father, too busy with the everyday chores of being adults, never noticed. I didn't want them to, hoping instead to just wake up different, their changed child. They couldn't help but spend more time with me when

I went through what I thought would be an appropriate period of time to get used to my new disability -- maybe three or four months. I was thinking of them, after all, about how popular my parents would also be with their own new story to tell.

***

What I learned from my attempt is that if you're *lucky*, you'll get off with a mild photophobia (sensitivity to light), and a pair of glasses for life.

Not lucky, I developed terrible photophobia, and my eyes' health took a rapid decline for years following that summer. My cheap plastic lenses were cut thick, and my childhood pictures show off a pair of glasses so heavy that they left red marks on my nose at the end of the day. That I couldn't function without my glasses left me with the feeling that having to wear them was worse than being blind.

I didn't make the connection between my experiment and my eyesight's deterioration until I got older and found out that the risk for retinal damage is highest for children under ten, and that the true consequences of exposing myself to the sun wouldn't become apparent until well into adulthood. The retina has no pain receptors, so I couldn't tell if I was damaging my eyes until too late.

I never became blind, though I might be close one day. As the child with the worst eyesight in my family, I'm more likely to be functionally blind by the time I'm fifty than any of my siblings.

I stopped trying to blind myself by the time school started that year -- though I found it a hard habit to break at first, and I lost myself in the blotch of sun outside my bus window for the first few weeks. I couldn't give up the idea that if I just tried *one more time*, maybe the change would be instantaneous, and my attempts all summer would be justified.

My failure to become sun-blind left me feeling rejected. I couldn't make myself chronically ill, I couldn't force myself into the needless danger necessary to break my limbs, and I couldn't even watch the sun until I was blind. I needed to learn how to behave more normally, how to stop relying on "You should be my friend *because*--." I brought to fifth grade a new resolve to make friends.

***

That October, we were told a new girl was joining our fifth grade class. Emily Ellis was moving in from just a few counties over, and she didn't know anyone in our area yet.

I was determined to be her friend, and was glad that she wouldn't know me by my self-hyped finger splints or unnecessary nurse visits. I worked myself up the week before she arrived over how I would introduce myself and how I would act. My mother suggested I just talk plainly to her, saying, "She couldn't help but be your friend, second child of mine."

I rolled my eyes, keeping my comments to myself. I knew I wasn't at the top of anyone's invite list, having never been to a birthday party or sleepover not hosted by a relative.

To this day, after sixteen years of friendship and counting, Emily says that her strongest memory of her first school day in Madison centers on me striding up to her, hand held out to shake, announcing, "I'm Leslie Smith." It was, after all, what I had always been interested in pointing out.

Emily also met Marianne Buckland, and they became fast friends, resulting in the first mutual friendship I had ever known. We three ultimately became close friends that year. Marianne and I had been in school together since kindergarten, and she freely admits she thought I was crazy until she started hanging out with me.

"You just didn't do anything right. You weren't normal. I don't know," she says now when I ask her to clarify. "It's hard to explain it now that I have the context of who you are."

Hearing that makes me wonder if I had actually succeeded, in part, with my original plan. Marianne had known who I was, regardless of how ignorant I was of her.

I now know I couldn't have been the only one in my school trying to stand out. Dan Dixon started smoking in fourth grade; Lenore Knighting and her popular girlfriends set the standard for a clique before anyone even knew what that word meant; Tyler Hurt and his friends went out and played with BB guns long after the eye-shooting incident.

Concentrating on myself exclusively allowed me to disregard my peers unless they had what I wanted --interest in me. Until that fifth grade year, I made no effort to understand my classmates except through the recognition that they would treat me "differently" if I were damaged or special. I hadn't been trying to make friends at all, but rather make a name for myself, like a fill-in-the-blank problem: "That's Leslie, she does/is/can _____."

I had actually read more stories about fitting in than I did about standing out -- reading the synopses of the very stories that I had been taking cues from impressed on

me the use of the phrase "normal kid." Writers used it over and over: "She just wanted to be a normal kid."

I did not want to be a "normal kid," though the need I had to impress my individuality on everyone was normal, to an extent. It made me anxious that I was one of four at home and one of many in the world, and my inability to find control in those facts led to me testing control in other areas. My tests were extreme and dangerous, but I wanted to be important, and I never considered the damage involved to be significant, even when it meant losing my eyesight.

I could pretend that making lasting friendships that year gave me the ability to rely on my personality instead of my story, but I still want the reputation, for people I've never met to recognize my name, and to make an impression on strangers. I changed the vehicle of my attention seeking from an immediate cosmetic change to the more healthy ability of determining when to hold a conversation and when to be quiet and listen. I made the firm handshake and introduction a staple.

My grandmother even admits that being able to talk to anyone, anywhere, turned out to be a benefit, but manages to remind me in the same breath that being "normal" can be just as rewarding. I'm assuming her "normal" means someone who doesn't try to create the conversation or movement, but

just responds to life's stimuli in the most accommodating way possible.

That's not to say that there aren't peculiar calm moments in my life, where even I feel overwhelmed by what I'm trying to accomplish -- then I find myself agreeing with her. "Maybe trying to fit a new twelve-hour-a-week internship around a forty-hour workweek while trying to plan my wedding and my return to school next semester isn't such a great idea," I've found myself musing as I try to bend twenty-four hours into nearly impossible shapes.

But soon enough I figure out a new way to change my story, work with my strengths, and move past that calm into the rush of life that can sometimes rival the sun.

"R8 Mi Peom Plz"
One English Major's Attempt to Understand Online Teenage Poets' Boards

Before my dear reader chastises me for my dip into the seedy underbelly of the Internet that is a teenage poet's message board, I'd like to state that I actually wanted to go there.

I was in the process of writing a new play featuring a teenage poet as my main character, and I wanted some genuine insight, especially on how they feel about writing.

My own expectations of teenage poets, I was sure, were oversimplified, being based on loose allegations developed from reports by friends who were just starting as teachers. "They don't listen," Marie said. "That's why I'm with preschoolers now; at least you know why they're not listening." Teens are also "defensive," "emotional," and "underdeveloped writers."

I wondered at my inability to remember myself as a teenage writer, though only twenty-one at the time. I remembered, then, that I didn't have the same media access that these children have. What little negative feedback I received from my friends or teachers was almost always made moot by my own inability to continue working on a piece for more than a month.

But the Internet is a large classroom, and reviewers can't always be handpicked. For my own sanity, I chose only one board on one popular teenage website -- "Neopian Writers" on neopets.com, an adopt-a-virtual-pet site that has been around for a few years.

I prepared myself for the plunge one evening by putting what little I have in my bar within easy reach. A tall, strong rum and Coke sat on my desk, and I promised myself that when the glass was empty, I'd get off of the computer.

The message board is really like a slow chat room -- people start "topics" and post messages back and forth at one another, hoping for advice or companionship. On the Writer's Board, discussion is supposed to be comprised of mostly samples of work and critiques.

What it really ends up being, though, is a ragtag assortment of, "Should I keep my facial scruff or not?" and "Bang your head on the keyboard and see what it says."

I needed to concentrate on those few topics that seemed to be legitimate, like a hopeful, "Rate my poem?" or even a "Con crit my story?" -- translated to, "Constructive criticism on my story would be greatly appreciated."

A note on the use of language: the Internet has allowed the creation of a most creative form of writing

affectionately called "Net speak," a language free of traditional grammar or spelling constrictions. Phonetics thrive here, as people just guess at how to spell words, sounding them out through their keyboards -- "poem" comes out as "peom" and "me" becomes "mi." Numbers are used at great lengths too, and sometimes ingeniously when "rate" can become "r8," and so on.

My purpose in mind, I clicked on a "Rate my poem" topic, and came upon a six-stanza monstrosity. This piece was somewhat like stumbling into a room and finding your brother-in-law and sister making out -- not end-of-the-world traumatizing, but not really what you expected when you opened the pantry door.

For some reason, I assumed I'd have something short and sweet to work with first, that the teenage mentality wouldn't worry itself with stanza lengths that would make the likes of Wordsworth proud.

I gave in, though, and read the first few lines:

Gone but not forgotten
By: harry784784

Right there next to me
Right there you're standing

You laugh I laugh
You cry I cry

--and I stopped there. Scrolling down, I saw only a few criticisms, probably because no one was really willing to put themselves through reading all of it. But I was surprised to find actual constructive comments posted -- "It has no feeling. It's just words on a page," and "Too cliché. Make it more descriptive," and, "I've really heard all that before. Not even phrased differently."

And, instead of defending his poetry and making himself out to be the kid I was fairly sure he was, Harry wrote back, "It's always good to hear constructive criticism."

Better than I was expecting. Maybe I was wrong in thinking that teenagers would be quick to take offense. So I moved on, my hopes raised a little, clicking the next "Please critique my poem" topic. I read the first four lines again:

Once upon a time
By: twinkle_start_new

Once upon a time,
There was a girl,

A mask covered her face
It hid her from the world.

I cringed a little, and scrolled past the next eight stanzas, feeling slightly guilty that maybe I had become too impatient in my old age. On this particular piece, someone started in on it by saying, "Well, the word choice was nice, but it lacked in any type of flow or rhythm. The lines alternated rather awkwardly between short and long, which made the poem choppy."

This was similar to the types of critique I was seeing in my own workshop classes; it made me feel a little better, like I was on my own turf.

Feeling a little liquid bravado from the rum and Coke at this point, I wanted to join in on the fun. A person posted a short poem under a brand new topic, and I was the first to review it.

sk8er_girl_1010620 writes:
it may be bad cause im an amateur writer.

could you look at me and tell me everythings gonna be okay?
could you tell my i won't feel the same heart pain anymore?
Could ya?
I wish ya could, cuz i'm fallin' apart

and I don't think my life's worth livin'.
Could you tell me that everything's okay?

I critiqued it feeling like she would appreciate everything I had to say, based off of my sample teenagers. I picked ambiguity as my main focus, pointing out the fact that neither of her characters had been defined by the end of the poem.

"If I knew who 'you' and 'I' were, I feel like I'd like the poem a bit more, if only because I'd understand it more. As it is now, I'm struggling to find the point -- why should I care if I don't understand?"

I stayed on the post, waiting. I didn't necessarily expect a revision of the poem, as I hadn't seen much revised work posted to the boards, but I wondered if I'd get acknowledgement from the poet, as other critiques had.

In a show of loyalty I'd not yet witnessed in this arena, people started pouring into the room to tell me that the ambiguity in the poem was necessary. Several of the reasons they gave me I had heard before, mostly from the young poets who were coming into the undergrad writing program at my school.

Her acknowledgement: "Why would it be a better poem if I put my friend John's name in it -- it just means not as

many people would want to read it." Her new fans: "You can't understand it? She wants someone to tell her she's okay! How dumb are you?" and "How would names change that?"

I got a straw from the kitchen, so I could drink and type at the same time.

"I never said she *needed* names, guys, I just said that the relationship should be defined so the poem has a deeper meaning. Like, what if that's a 70 year-old man talking about his dead wife? That's a much different poem than a 15 year-old kid talking about his mom."

Oh, no, but, "That's the point. It could be about anyone and any situation, and that makes it better."

Eight or nine different users crowded the board, posting insults about my intelligence, insulting my presence - suddenly, I was George W. Bush during a media war.

At one point, right as I was at the bottom of my glass, someone posted: "I may not type as well as you, but at least I type faster."

I knew I had to get out of there.

I turned off my monitor and backed away, reeling with both the rum and the possibility that all of my schooling had been wrong.

"They're so right," I thought. "I can write *one* poem to fit *any* situation."

I was excited with the prospect, and went to bed thinking about how "you" and "I" could go hand-in-hand, across some "place" of beautiful emotion. Why did everything have to be so blocked in with definitions, relationships? I started to believe in the ambiguity of life, of love, and of pronouns -- before falling asleep.

***

In the morning, my headache followed me back to the board, where I refreshed and saw that the teenagers had crowed victory over my leaving the topic in the middle of the "discussion."

I started to get angry, my hands reaching for the keyboard, and then I remembered that I was out of rum.

Reading back over their arguments, I realized that there were flaws in both our approaches. I was trying to critique a piece of writing that should have never gotten past a personal journal. Sk8ter_girl was obviously just letting her emotions control her words, and while the rest of the teenagers on the board could feel that, could understand it, I, with my cold line-editing eye, could not allow it.

My workshop training had drained all sympathy for what I could now perceive as a young writer's dilemma -- you write what you know, but what if all you know is self-induced drama?

But my next thought was that very workshop training. If Sk8ter_girl's poem shouldn't have left her Princess Diary, how would any amount of constructive criticism honestly help her?

The same holds true for my first two poets -- if a poem is truly horrid enough, cookie-cutter answers won't really do the trick, even though the advice looks good on paper. The only constructive criticism I could give would be to scrap the poem and start over with something new.

These "poets" are using their community of peers' reaffirmations that they are "good enough" to justify their writing, even as their words are put together awkwardly, the images disjointed and unfinished. Should a teacher be the only one to bestow the "truth" about language?

I decide to disagree and barge in, vainly hoping to bestow some sort of quick and easy education for the teenage poet, hoping to make them realize how words can lie on the page and make their readers cry or laugh.

How did I know they didn't already have an emotional following? They obviously write for an audience of peers,

people who will understand "where they're coming from." How pretentious was it of me to assume that my advice would help them in that endeavor, regardless of my schooling?

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Later, after writing this information down to use for a character sketch for my play, I had to think not only what this reflection meant for my character, but also what it meant for me.

Writers live during "Periods" of writing, like "Postmodern" or "Realism" or "Naturalism," all of which have their own prescribed rules for content. Further, we confine ourselves to fiction or non-fiction, then the even smaller boxes of genres; fantasy, romance, horror, etc. These boundaries create reader expectations, which is good as far as considering books to be an industry.

My own expectations have been skewed, not only as a reader, but also as an educated writer; when a story doesn't perfectly meet my internalized standards I have an unconscious bias toward it, resulting in a conscious rejection.

Many famous authors were rejected several times over before being published. Steven King almost quit after thirty rejection slips, while Jack London's first story received over six hundred. Their writing was within the

norm of their Period; who is to say how many authors with just as much, or even more talent were dismissed for writing outside their genre's guidelines?

I worry that I will grow up to be one of those editors that ignores or rejects that my own current Period of writing is changing. As much as I hope "Emo" (short for "emotional teenager in constant crisis") doesn't become the next step in literature, who am I to keep it from developing?

I hope that I will consistently see good writing, regardless of overt content. I want to walk away from the screen knowing that I have interpreted each story and poem to the best of my ability. That when I recommend to my publisher to not publish something, it won't be because I haven't missed out on defining the next big step, but because I honestly don't see the point in crying.

Small Battles

I'm in the backseat of our station wagon. Mom and Dad are fighting, growling little words at each other. My older sister, Patty, and I are five and four respectively, and we busy ourselves with the books we have brought with us on our trip up to the mountains for a picnic. Allan, our little brother, is stuck in his car seat, and is no fun after he starts crying when we play too roughly with him, pulling at his hands.

The baby's crying and Dad's getting louder and Mom's getting more upset, and suddenly I stop remembering it from the inside of the car. Now I'm like a camera screwed into one of the trees alongside the road, zoomed in on my family. I can see my blonde hair on one side of Allan's car seat, Patty's brown hair on the other.

I also clearly see my mother stopping the car, pulling onto the shoulder of a curve in the road and stepping out. Her brown hair is down, she's wearing blue jeans and a long-sleeved shirt.

Though I'm not inside the car, her yell still rings in my ear: "You don't want me here? I can just get on home." She throws out her thumb at the passing traffic while my sister and I press our hands against the back window,

having crawled over our seat. We beat that glass and call for "Momma," but she keeps her head turned away from the car.

It isn't until the next summer that Patty and I know to sit quietly and exchange eye rolls. We secretly side with our father when he calls her crazy and drags her back into the car, saying that he'll drive for a while. Mom hasn't ever left us, and her crying goodbye for a whole summer only to hang around has taught us not to listen any longer.

***

"Why don't you guys get a divorce?" I asked my mother after one of their fights. She had retreated downstairs to fold laundry, throwing the baskets around, snapping out wrinkles. Being eight years old means I knew how to carefully approach a potentially volatile situation.

"What? No," she said, tossing me a pair of jeans. "I love your father."

"I can see you've got problems," I shot back, automatically folding the denim over my arm.

"Watch your mouth, girl," Mom said in a tone I take seriously even as an adult. "You don't know about problems and you sure don't know about us. Get on into your room."

But I did know about them, just like every child knows more than their parents think. They fought the normal fights that I have with my husband now, over the budget and chores. Their fights were created out of mood swings and expectations, fear and hope -- or Dad coming home drunk and eating every slice of bread in the bag, hoping to sober up enough to not puke.

"He thought it'd soak up all the beer in his stomach. But it meant we sometimes went through two loaves in a week," my mother explains twenty years later, a sigh in her voice. We sit at our old dinner table as I ask her delicate questions about the past. "He wasn't all bad drunk; you guys loved how he couldn't tell stories straight. You thought it was an act."

I still wonder sometimes as to how Dad managed to lose his license about once a year due to drunk driving until he got sober around my seventh birthday. Generally he would drink with Mom's parents, who lived in a big house less than a half-mile away. Cops never patrolled the woods, only coming out when called. I suppose it must have happened during beer runs, Granddad Petersen and Dad running out of a case too early in the night; Dad trying to be a generous son-in-law, offering to make the trip. Mom prefers not to

remember the circumstances, and Dad, when I chanced to ask him once what he remembered, plainly said he "didn't."

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My parents often fought with us the same way they fought with each other: unpredictably and angrily. My father, especially, liked to take any chance he could to "teach us a lesson" about how to speak to him or my mother.

I handed Dad my empty plate as he leaned across the dinner table. He started ladling green beans, and after a scoop, I said, "That's good.

His mouth tightened, and he kept going, the spoonfuls getting larger. My plate filled with green beans. "Thank you Dad, that's all I want," I said.

I remember myself small in my chair, smaller than ten years old, and Dad arched over the table, sneering, his dark brown hair long and thin, spiking the air, his eyes a bright, sharp blue in his sun-brown face.

Tossing my now-full plate in front of me, he said, "You'll eat what I give you." My mother "tsked," and gave Dad a sideways glance, but didn't stop cutting up my little sister's food.

We were home-schooled in their anger, and were forever testing boundaries, between each other and with our parents.

A normal evening consisted of Patty or I throwing things and saying something nasty. One night, I chased her back to her room, my mother following, hollering for us to stop. Patty flopped over into her favorite fighting position: on her back, boots up to defend herself.

I jumped on her. Her boots were in my chest, pushing me away, and Mom came up on my left side, reaching in to either push me off of Patty, or knock Patty's feet away from me. Patty only saw attack, and started kicking out at both of us, her thick brown hair cut short, spiking around her contorted face, her eyes a bright, hot blue set in a tan, freckled face.

The drama of this moment is not lost on me -- Mom and I are standing next to each other, Patty a flashing boot and hand between us, and I can almost hear music swelling as Mom and I pump our arms against Patty's flailing limbs.

I have lost chunks of memories to fights, my brain not bothering to complete the chemical tracks necessary to ingrain my sisters' words, my brother's actions, my parent's enabling, but I remember the general feelings.

Whatever details I've lost about this particular fight, I hold onto a feeling about my mother and me: 'We are a united front. We are in this together.' I have never tried to put myself in Patty's place during that fight. I

knew how it felt to be me on the receiving end in those moments of sudden violence, the shock and grief at being struck. Patty was just as often in my position, lashing out with a boot or fist, the momentary rush of power well worth the guilt and shame afterward.

When I tell people that Patty used to buy those big ugly boots and wear them to bed so she'd have the upper hand in our fights, I hear the pride in my voice. 'My sister was smarter than the rest of us,' is what I'm really saying. 'She protected herself, always.'

***

We got older, and we started to leave home. Patty moved into Grandma's house after she graduated high school, willing to go anywhere to get away from our mother. Their fighting was resulting in hospital visits, at least for Mom; Patty had thrown a book at her, catching her across the temple. After a few bad headaches, Mom got an MRI. Though Mom was fine, everyone agreed that Patty should probably move out.

"I still love your sister," Mom always made sure to say when we visited Patty, now one county over in Culpeper, Virginia. "We just needed a break from each other."

I left for college the following year. Longwood University was a small school in Farmville, VA, two hours

away from my house. I started to create a family out of my new community, complete with new friends and a boyfriend, Scott.

Since this was my first serious relationship, I started to understand new truths about who I was, and how I functioned. I often had crushes in grade school, but I was too awkward to follow them through. Now I had a boyfriend who made emotional demands and expected me to lean just as heavily on him. I became aware of friction the closer we became, as if the better I knew him, the better I knew how to hurt him. Guilt was often our game, making us play at who would apologize first.

"You just made that lady pull off the road," Scott said, the astonishment clear in his voice. His short brown hair had been dyed bright red, a sharp contrast to his pale skin, and I turned my head away so he wouldn't shine in my peripheral vision so brightly. I didn't like looking at him when I was angry, always able to find something new that bothered me. We had been dating for a year and a half, through my first three semesters of college.

"Whatever," I said, hunching my shoulders and staring hard at the car in front of us, trying to ignore the red minivan in my rearview mirror struggling to get back on the

pavement of Interstate-95 North. I hadn't even seen the van -- it was an innocent victim of my impatience.

"You need to calm don, honey," he said, his voice rising at the end, as if he was asking a question.

"You need to shut the fuck up and let me drive," I said. Except driving was the least of it --- we were in practically stand-still traffic, and I was only shifting from lane to lane, trying to find a way to work us into movement. "Or, you could call your family and let them know we're going to be late. We've still got like thirty miles to go just on this road."

Scott pulled out his cell phone and dialed. I was nineteen; he was twenty-one, and both of us were tied to our histories, holding them close to our chests like a secret.

He had jumped from an abusive home as a toddler to abusive foster homes, until he was adopted as a pre-teen. He most readily told the story of how he couldn't stand to eat raw eggs: "At one foster home, we had to sneak food whenever possible, since they didn't feed us. My sister and I had to suck down raw eggs in the middle of the night to survive." As we saw it, we had something in common -- we both knew that growing up didn't mean one more birthday.

"Yeah," Scott said, responding to the faint voice on the receiver I could barely make out. I swung into the middle lane, catching an open spot as the cars started moving. "Yeah, we'll be there in like a half hour. Okay, love you!"

As he tucked the phone back into his pocket, I couldn't stop myself: "What, are we moving at a mile a minute? How the fuck are we going to be there in thirty minutes? Seriously, your family is going to think we're idiots."

"Honey, they won't care if we're a little late. Don't worry," Scott said.

"I'm not worried, I'm just angry that the traffic's all fucked up and you don't know how to say anything right." I knew my hands would be imprinted on the steering wheel when we finally got out of the car. "Just, whatever. I'll just shut the fuck up now."

"I'm sorry," Scott said, his face bowed to his chest. "I--"

"It's fine, shut up," I said, lifting my hand reflexively, and he flinched away from me, his hand pressed against his window. My stomach turned suddenly, and I don't remember what else was said, just that I wanted to deflect guilt away from my attempt at more obvious abuse.

It's easy for me to want to blame myself for the whole of our failed relationship, but I recognize how we took on familiar roles throughout the two and a half years we were together, how we enabled each other. We got engaged eventually, seeing it as a normal evolution of a long-term relationship, and were excited to make small talk about how many children we should have, and where we would live. Scott was insistent on wearing a ring too, a prop he exploited often.

"I don't think you care about this," Scott said, ripping off his engagement ring and throwing it across the room. "I don't think you care about us at all."

I wanted to see other people -- no, I wanted *us* to see other people. I felt I needed something more than our relationship was providing and back then I thought that meant experimenting more. Now I know I wanted the freedom to have an open relationship, having multiple intimate partners with one primary boyfriend. I thought I was being fair, offering him the same outlet.

"Don't you think we should talk about this if I can't stop thinking about it?" I asked, running over to pick up his ring off the floor mat of my dorm room.

"No, honey, I think you should just stop thinking about it. I don't think you'd think about it if you loved

me enough." Scott was almost crying, his eyes squinting hard behind his black-framed glasses, his hands out in front of him, as if to shield me off.

"Okay, okay," I said softly, "I'll stop, you're right. I love you. I love you, okay?"

One gets angry, the other calms. The give and take proved that we still loved each other, that we were still involved. Saying "I'm sorry" really meant saying, "Don't leave me."

Like Mom, I first made excuses, to myself, to friends: "I really do love him. Love means working through problems." Then, like Dad, I left. Dad moved out with another woman my freshman year of college. I broke up with Scott, unable to ignore our problems any more, and knowing I couldn't marry someone I couldn't stand.

It wasn't that I didn't love him -- in fact, I believe that only very few people break up out of total lack of love -- but instead that I realized that I had to love myself just as much, if not more, than him. Two and a half years of our lives were spent trying to find a way of fitting ourselves to each other. Abuse wore our edges down, slumping us into one another, and I could see us dying under our own individual weight, only able to escape with outside help. Some people might use therapy as that outside

help, or good friends. My father found a rebound before he even tried to leave my mother's house.

I couldn't imagine living in fear that either of us wouldn't be able to emotionally survive without the other, much less trying to build a household on that principle. I wanted to believe in my own individuality, and know that we were partners, not just stuck with one another because we had been together for so long, and had friends who gushed, "You two make me believe in true love."

Though my parents had divorced more than a year beforehand, I recognized how the act gave me the idea that it would be possible to start again.

***

I fell for Adam hard not long after Scott and I split; certainly not long enough for me to stay true to my resolution. He was the opposite of Scott in practically every way, just what I needed -- he was big and hairy to Scott's thin and smooth, loud and friendly to Scott's quiet and shy, two years younger than me, while Scott was two years older. And unlike Scott, Adam wasn't one to talk about soul mates in the first month of dating. Though he played at being a boyfriend, he didn't care for the word *love*.

"I don't want to hide my feelings," I told him at first, and he agreed, "We shouldn't."

By the time we started fighting, our arguments centered on love. We went eleven months without the term coming up except in anger.

"I want to be able to say it," I said. "I think I do love you." His fleshy face pulled down in a frown, his mouth shielded by a three-week-old beard. I didn't push the matter, thinking that we'd talk about it again when he was in a better mood.

I was getting dressed in my dorm room one day, while Adam waited for me. Pulling up a pair of pink panties, I pointed to the slogan written across the front. "See? 'Who doesn't love a Virgo?'" I read it out loud.

"I don't," Adam said.

"Huh? Who do you know that's a Virgo?" I blinked.

"You," he responded, showing his teeth. I couldn't tell if he was smiling or grimacing.

I wonder now what might have changed if he had said he loved me. Our fights were superficial without love as a deeper hook, the need to be with each other. Now I like to think he was pushing away for a reason, as if he knew that my desperation to say "I love you" meant that we would be

opening a door into a new realm of what love really meant, how falling in love would allow us to control each other.

I came to realize that falling in love isn't just saying "I love you" over and over, as I had with Scott, but allowing the other person enough respect to listen, and expect to be heard. I came to the conclusion that the next person I would consider dating would be a person that I could speak plainly to. My intentions would be clear.

***

When I broke up with Adam, I said, "I need to be able to speak freely. You said once that we wouldn't have to hide our feelings."

"I don't think either of us did," he said, and while he didn't take it well, he didn't make my throat swell with guilt.

I wanted to respect that he didn't say "I love you" because he didn't love me, but instead I saw it as a personal slight. I felt that I had loved him, and because I wasn't "allowed" to express it, he was purposefully trying to antagonize me.

I saw that I needed to start looking to myself for answers for my own actions. Scott loved to blame his biological parents for anything he did wrong: "My dad was a

drunk, I guess I'm a drunk too," he said after I started finding him wasted on school nights alone in his dorm room.

"If you're cognizant of the problem, and see the source, you can only blame yourself for not changing it," I told him as I helped him change for bed. "My dad was a drunk, so I avoid drinking, see?" I made this my philosophy, and I thought I was following it perfectly. I started seeing my family as a straight line to my anger, but unlike Scott, I didn't own my reflexive responses as offshoots.

"Use your words," my mother used to tell us when we resorted to hitting each other, advice she often ignored herself. But up until this point, my words were my weapon, my fists both ineffective and too much proof that I wasn't in control of the situation.

I wanted to be single for a while, to get through the second semester of my undergrad senior year, through writing my final thesis and taking my tests. But then I met Forrest and fit myself into his life just as quickly as I had fit into Scott's and Adam's.

Now I can see my mother's history in me: she was married once before my dad, left the guy, married my dad, the guy left her, and at this point was already engaged to the next fellow along. She and I mother our men and use

that to a certain extent to bend our will over them. "I just like taking care of people," she explained one day. "I don't think there's anything wrong with wanting to be selfless."

But even as I didn't agree with her choices, I agreed with her advice.

"I don't want to stop seeing other people," I told Forrest. We weren't dating yet, but it made the hair stand up on my arms to be so truthful with a man I was interested in -- I was using my new rule to be clear with my intentions.

"Okay," Forrest said, his brown-gray eyes steady on mine. "I don't either."

"And if we ever end up long-distance, I don't think this will work," I continued.

"Same," Forrest said.

I felt secure, not in his answers, but because I could cite this talk if necessary. I understood this attitude to be a defense mechanism also, but I accepted it as a more healthy reaction.

At twenty-one, he had only dated one other girl, and she dumped him the day before their junior prom. He decided then that he didn't want to pursue relationships, and actively kept himself from dating, choosing instead to jump

from sexual partner to sexual partner. We had been dating for just over a year and had been living together almost as long -- after I graduated with my Bachelor's degree, I needed a roommate, and he needed a place to live.

It's hard for him to remember when he decided he was happy with creating a relationship with me, but has said since, "You cared for me. If we hadn't moved in together so quickly, I could have ignored that fact longer." He paused for a moment, then added, "I had never thought past the end of the week. With you, I could think past the end of the year."

But getting to that point took time and reinforced commitment.

***

"I don't need to be here, you know," I said. Forrest and I were lying in the comfortably overstuffed bed in the larger of the two guest rooms, enjoying free air conditioning in a house we weren't paying for. We were full from a meal neither of us had bought or prepared, and wearing nightclothes that had been laundered for us. I was seething.

"Oh?" Forrest asked. In late August, only a sheet was necessary to stave off any lasting electric chill. I tugged ours, some shade of blue or gray, over my shoulders as I

stared at the ceiling. A slant of light from the hallway cut across the pale cream.

"I could be at my mother's house. I could get a transfer to the Barnes & Noble in Charlottesville, and my commute would be longer to Longwood, but at least I'd be in a healthier environment," I said, my voice wringing out, almost taking my courage with it. I took a deep breath.

Forrest didn't say anything, but he rolled to face me.

"I don't need to be here," I repeated. "I don't need to be in a house ruled by a small angry man, with a boyfriend who can't get a real job because he believes everything the small angry man tells him."

I glanced at him as he nodded, but he didn't meet my eyes. We had moved in with Forrest's father, Howie, that past May -- not a comfortable decision, maybe, but an easy one at the time. Our plan was that this move would be our transition from our more rural house in Farmville, to the larger suburb of Midlothian, VA.

While I had landed a job in a small café chain before we moved down to Midlothian, Howie promised Forrest he'd help get him a job at Circuit City, the company where Howie held a well-paying position. Forrest did several unpaid day- or weekend-long jobs while studying for his Cisco Certified Network Associate certification. Howie paid for

the books and tests Forrest had to take, the intention being that Forrest would join Howie at in the Information Technology field.

We saved what we could off my paychecks, our greatest expense being the gas it took for me to commute to class.

I couldn't stop myself as the silence continued. "If I'm to believe that you're the guy I want to start a family with, I need to know you can go out and get a job. We're never getting out of here if you're not making any money. Your dad obviously has no idea what he's doing, sending you out on all these little odd jobs with no future to them."

"I mean, it's experience," Forrest tried.

"Yes. Yes it is. But it's not going anywhere any time soon, not until you get your certification. You need a paycheck now. I don't care if you end up quitting in two weeks to get a better job -- we need to move out. Or I will, by myself. You can have fun trying to do this all by yourself." I took a shaky breath. I could feel myself rambling, anger rising in my chest, but I still opened my mouth. "I didn't grow up to become dependent on anyone. I don't need any of this to continue on living. I'd be sad for a little while, but, oh well." My face grew hot, and tears collected in my aching throat.

I turned toward Forrest. He had his eyes shut, and made sure to keep to his side of the bed. He knew well enough that I didn't want to cuddle.

"Okay," he said. "Okay, I'll get a job. I'll go out tomorrow and start applying. You're right, we need to move out. We'll be okay."

"Good. Because I hate it here. I cannot stress how much I hate it here."

The difference between the fights I had with Scott and Adam and this discussion with Forrest was simple -- I was prepared to follow through with my threat to leave, deciding that I would be done if we couldn't compromise. I was eager to defend my decision, to fight, and that made me want to make Forrest strike back. So I provoked him, deliberately shoving our potential break-up in his face, hoping he'd get defensive too.

Forrest has proven one thing consistently as we've grown together: he is the most patient person I've ever met. We joined sides during that fight, and the relief settled in my stomach, making me turn and hug him tight. 'This is how I want adulthood to be,' I thought. 'This is the type of argument I want to have again.'

Because of his need for plain speech rather than convoluted half-arguments where nothing is really being said, I've had to learn a new way of talking.

My friends laugh at our fights now, when they hear them. I still speak in sharp words, stilted sentences, but they're respectful, explanatory. Instead of "shut the fuck up," I say "When you speak to me that way, it makes me feel angry."

At first, talking so bluntly made me feel stupid, and I could see why my father never tried. I felt like I was playing at a tone of voice, a choice of words. But I needed to embrace this compromise, in order to believe that I had the ability to change. With every resolved conflict, I felt closer to balancing out the anger in my past.

My little brother, Allan, ended up in anger management classes after he and his wife Heather divorced when he was twenty-one, and I've wondered if he learned how to speak that way, if the counselors explained how it makes your partner feel.

Allan had punched out the window of Heather's car while she cowered in the driver's seat. My father had to calm them both down and bring Allan in the house.

Later, Dad said, "She provoked him," and I thought, 'That's what I said about Scott.' And, previous to Scott,

about my siblings, about my parents, about everything that made me mad.

Allan and I don't talk much, and I don't approach anything explosive from his past. He has made a conscious effort to move on, and I can't think of any reason not to appreciate that endeavor.

Scott was right; our parents do give us basis for our actions. But continuing a destructive action, no matter how ingrained we feel it is, is our fault. Only we move our mouths and hands. When we were young, Allan was shown the moves, I was given the words, Patty learned a little of both; and all of us have had to create ourselves again.

"My worst memories as a kid come from school," Lauren, my little sister, told me at lunch one day. "I don't remember Dad being mean or you guys fighting that much at all." I expressed how jealous I was of her. Six years younger than me, Dad had been sober by the time Lauren started talking, and our older-kid fights almost never involved her.

"It doesn't mean I'm not messed up." Lauren laughed. "It just means I'm different than you guys."

Knowing how much my parents affected me impresses on me how important it is to continue to work toward being gentle before I decide to have children. While I believe

the truth that I am neither my mother or father, I don't know that I'll prove it until those tense moments when my children will look at me, their dark hair framing bright, clear blue eyes.

A Promiscuous Woman

I hydroplaned for the first time during July of 2009. Though I had experience sliding on gravel, packed snow, ice, and mud, nothing prepared me for the sudden lack of control that water afforded, especially going sixty miles per hour on a major highway at 9:30 p.m., in fairly congested traffic. I was driving through a light drizzle, going the speed of traffic, but my little eggplant-purple Scion was too light to bear down on a deep puddle that had collected in the road.

My car did a 360-degree spin to the left, crossing two lanes of traffic before nose-diving into the median's tall grass. While in the far left lane, I managed a headlight-to-headlight kiss with a small GMC truck. What could have been a surprise U-turn had just turned into an accident.

Though dazed by the sudden violence of the movement, I was fine. I sat in my car, fumbling to call 9-1-1, and two people separately stopped to check on me.

"Did you see who I hit?" I asked through the open window as I held the phone to my ear. The drizzle had picked up to a true rain, and the guy outside my door shielded his eyes with his hand.

"I didn't see you hit anyone," he yelled over the traffic noise. "You're okay, right?"

"Yeah, I'm fine." I nodded, gesturing to my phone. "I'm on the phone with 9-1-1 now." He nodded and took off back up the short hill to his car.

The second guy was an EMT who also hadn't seen me hit anyone, and said, "You could've hit anything in the grass. You cut quite a path out."

I called Forrest next. He was my fiancé at the time, and was at work about thirty minutes south. Technically not supposed to leave his desk, he called in a favor from a coworker and left the office. I had been on my way to my boyfriend's house, and when I called Patrick with the news, he said, "I'm already out the door. What mile marker are you at?"

I started to wonder whether or not I had imagined the impact. When I asked the state trooper who came next up to the car, he said, "I haven't heard anything on my end, and until I do, I'm not worried about it."

"Well, I called my fiancé, and he should be out here soon," I said.

"Okay. Stay in your car until he gets here, then. It's too wet out here," the trooper said, and made his way back to his car.

Patrick showed up first, living only a few miles away. By then, the trooper had been informed that I had hit a truck, which was parked a short way up the road. A second trooper instructed the first trooper to move us up the shoulder so all parties would be close to each other. I was almost elated that I had hit someone, if only because it meant it hadn't been my imagination.

I didn't bother clarifying with the first trooper that Patrick was my boyfriend, allowing him to believe that Patrick was the fiancé I had been talking about. Patrick calmed me down, backed my car out of the ditch, and moved it up the road. We sat together in his car while we waited for the second trooper to ask me questions.

"You okay?" Patrick asked. His hand was dry and warm around mine.

"Just a little frustrated." I managed a smile. "Forrest is on his way here, by the way. Keep an eye out for him?"

"Definitely," Patrick said.

The first trooper asked me to move to the second trooper's car, and with that short walk, I moved into my "I'm no longer calm" phase. I shivered from the wet settling into my cloth jacket and had to consciously try and not curse my way through my description of the accident. The second trooper worked through some of my

options with me, and I just nodded politely and asked where to sign.

We filled out the rest of the paperwork together, and then the first trooper came back up to the car and asked the second trooper what he should do about "them waiting" for me. When he used the plural, I realized Forrest must have shown up.

The second trooper tells him to get my friend -- meaning Patrick -- to wait for me off the next exit, at the gas station, in order to let us get off the road.

The first trooper said, "Okay, I'll let the fiancé and boyfriend know." The second trooper barked a laugh, I blushed, and that was that. No more questions were asked; I received my citation, and got back to my car. The front end was smashed a bit, but the axle was fine, and it drove with both headlights on.

I drove down the road to meet up with the boys and got the rest of the story.

Forrest had shown up and started walking toward the parked cars, looking for either me or Patrick to fill him in on what was going on. The first trooper called him down, though -- "Hey, what can we help you with? What do you need?"

"I'm the fiancée of the woman who was in the accident," Forrest said, not expecting them to know my name.

"Excuse me?" my trooper asked.

"I'm the fiancée of the woman who was in the accident," Forrest said again, starting to get frustrated.

"Wait right here, boy," the first trooper ordered. He walked up to Patrick's car and knocked on the car door. "What exactly is your relationship with the woman in that car?" he asked when Patrick rolled down the window.

"I'm her boyfriend," Patrick said.

"I've got a man back here who says he's the fiancée."

"That is her fiancée. And I'm the boyfriend." Patrick grinned.

"Uh-huh." The trooper grunted. "Want to explain how that works?"

"Well, you see--" Patrick held up both hands, and pointed to his left ring finger, "--in a couple of months, *they're* getting *married*, but *I'm* the *boy*--"

"Nevermind, I don't need to know the details, it's fine, you boys just wait a moment," he interjected, and started to turn away. Patrick said, "Hey, could I go speak to him?"

"No, no. You wait right here. We don't need you two hitting each other."

"But we're cool, officer."

"Sure. Just stay in your car."

And he made his way to the second trooper's car.

When I learned that Patrick had been so open with the trooper, I couldn't help but be surprised. "I don't like telling strangers," I admitted. "It usually brings up more questions than it answers."

"I don't mind taking the extra couple of minutes to explain it if they've got questions," Patrick said.

Forrest just wanted to laugh at the whole ordeal. He might not be one for up-front explanations, but he doesn't mind arriving on the scene when we've already managed to confuse matters.

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About a year prior to that incident:

"Hey, Patrick, right?" I asked, using the loud music as an excuse to lean in close, putting my hand on his shoulder. He wore a crisp white button-up shirt, and I could feel the muscle in his shoulder flex as he twisted in his bar stool to face me.

"Yeah," he said, smiling broadly. We shook hands.

"I was hoping you'd be here tonight," I said. Then I frowned. "And also that I didn't just sound too creepy." Patrick just laughed, and I continued, smiling, "I'm Leslie. Remember?" Timing is important when trying to make a good impression.

I had met Patrick about a week earlier through some mutual friends, but we didn't get a chance to talk. With my fiancée, Forrest, opting to play video games in our apartment for yet another weekend, I decided to join up with a few friends and go out. Fallout, a popular club in downtown Richmond, Virginia, was our destination of choice at the time.

Fallout was interesting in part due to its layout. A small dance area was flanked on one side by two pool tables and on the other by a large bar and several dining tables. A small social room was beyond the bar, allowing for more normal interaction, being so far from the speakers on the dance floor.

Patrick and I got better acquainted lounging on a couch in that back room, his vanilla White Russian sitting on the side table next to my Buttery Nipple on the rocks. As we curled around each other, I told Patrick about Forrest and our open relationship.

"That's cool," Patrick said, and I saw a familiar look on his face, as if he was trying to figure out what he could get away with. I was used to seeing the same narrowing of the eyes and shift in the hips in other men I told.

Forrest didn't usually get such reappraisal. Though he was generally honest about his intentions when meeting other women, his being open usually brought disdain rather than interest. Men saw me as a woman uninterested in pursuing a relationship, and they were right. Women saw Forrest as a cheater, regardless of his claims otherwise. I admit to feeling the same way when a man claims to have the same relationship as ours. I don't want to sound sexist, or support a double standard, but my gut feeling has been borne out of more than just society's training. This feeling changes when the situation evolves from a one-night stand to something more long-term.

My friends were ready to go before long, and Patrick and I disengaged. We exchanged numbers, and I only kissed him once, on the way out the door.

Later that week, when he took me back to his place, I gave him the "speech": "I'm not looking for a new relationship; I don't expect to be your girlfriend just like you won't be my boyfriend. But I'd like it if we were

friends otherwise. Dating would be nice." Only people that I had a genuine interest in got the speech -- random hookups at parties barely got my name, much less contact information.

If I'm starting to sound like a shade of society's definition of slut, you're basically right. From *Merriam-Webster*: "*n*. A promiscuous woman."

Between the ages of eighteen and twenty-one, I had participated in two long-term monogamous relationships previous to finding Forrest. I came to realize my own sexual frustration as I chafed against their expectations, but I didn't have the language to express my needs. I wanted to have more variety in my sexual partners and other relationships.

One was completely against us experimenting outside our relationship; the other said, "Girls don't count." Having dated girls, I knew intimately that girls could give me just as much of a reason to leave as a boy would.

"Open relationship" was the term I learned early on. "Polyamory" came with Forrest.

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"Poly" means "many," and is a popular prefix for a lot of terms, not only ones relating to sexual relationships. "Polydactyly" means having extra fingers or toes; a

"polyglot" is someone who can speak several different languages; in religious terms, "polytheism" indicates belief in many deities.

Polyamory (many loves) can lead to polygamy (many marriages), which can be practiced as either polygyny (one man with several wives) or polyandry (one woman with several husbands).

Most people are familiar with polygyny, which can be traced both historically and religiously. Ancient Hebrew, Chinese, African, and Greek societies accepted polygyny, though it is only widely recognized today in small off-sects of the Mormon Church, and in most Islam-practicing countries.

Polyandry is much less common, being prohibited by the ancient Hebrew bible, Islam, and in most of Asia. Instead it was practiced more often in ancient Britain and Europe.

In mammals, the practice of either is related mainly to size. When the males are larger and more dominant, polygyny occurs: this is the case with the great apes, or even one bull to many cows, or one adult male lion per pride. As the size difference evens out, monogamy is more likely to occur. Gibbons, and other lesser apes, pair off into monogamous couples. Polyandry rarely develops in mammal societies, unless there are severe living

conditions, when there needs to be several parents of either gender.

Other than mammals, the female Galapagos Hawk watches over a nest with two or more males, several honeybee males mate with only one queen.

And then there are humans. When you put aside religious and societal doctrine and just go on hormones and desire, humans cover the spectrum. Because males and females are about the same in size and shape, there is no biological preference that dictates an immediate sexual predilection to monogamy or polygamy. Some people attribute it to nurture and how polygamists are raised; others will say nature, claiming a genetic factor, like hetero- or homosexuality. A common term related to the practice of polyamory is "ethical non-monogamy."

Regardless of origin, polygamy is practiced more widely than the various churches of the world might want one to believe. As Jessica Bennett reported for *Newsweek* in her 2009 article "Only You. And You. And You," "…some [religious right] leaders have publicly condemned polyamory as one of a host of deviant behaviors sure to become normalized if gay marriage wins federal sanction."[2]

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[2] Bennnet, Jessica. "Only You. And You. And You." *Newsweek*.Web Exclusive Article. (2009). Web. 1 Feb. 2010.

"This group is really rising up from the underground, emboldened by the success of the gay-marriage movement," said Glenn Stanton for the same article, the director of Family Formation Studies for Focus on the Family, an evangelical Christian group. "And while there's part of me that says, 'Oh, my goodness, I don't think I could see them make grounds,'[sic] there's another part of me that says, 'Well, just watch them.'"

To clarify: "swinging" is not polyamory. That is, sleeping with multiple partners but not having an emotional relationship with any. Neither is cheating with multiple partners on someone who believes that they are in a monogamous relationship. Polyamory holds true to its definition -- many *loves*.

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Patrick and I had been dating for some time when I decided to tell my siblings about our relationship. My little sister, Lauren, was in the interesting position of being courted somewhat successfully by a man who expressed his interest in having an open relationship with her.

She expressed her inability to comprehend being in a poly relationship: "I can't trust that even a single person could ever love me, so how could I trust two people to? Or, worse, how could I trust that they wouldn't be stolen away

by someone else? I don't like poly relationships. You're exposing yourself to the potential for too much pain."

But being in a relationship at all carries the risk for emotional trauma -- I had more history with failed monogamous relationships than with my currently successful polyamorous one.

The rules don't change much from one type of relationship to another. My concept of cheating stayed basically the same, though each Forrest, Patrick, and I have a loose definition of sexual fidelity. We consider the emotional to be more important than the physical -- if Forrest ever admits that he's fallen in love with someone he's never introduced me to or talked about, I know I will be more hurt then I've ever been after finding out he's slept with someone new.

This is why I understood how upset Forrest was when I approached him about Patrick one day about six months after Patrick and I had started dating. At the time, I was spending a significant amount of time with Patrick. Forrest worked twelve-hour shifts every other weekend, leaving me to make plans with whomever I could. Patrick and I grew closer as time went by, and I found myself excited by the possibility that we were moving into a deeper relationship.

"I can't help but fall in love with you," Patrick said one afternoon as we lay on our backs in a nearby park. I propped myself up on my elbows and watched as tears ran from the corners of his blue-gray eyes into the grass.

"It's okay," I said. "I love you too." I sat up fully and pulled his head onto my lap, running my fingers through his short blond hair.

Patrick sighed. "But--"

"I'll talk to Forrest about it," I promised, and kissed him.

Up until this point, I had been poly in name only, and had never fallen in love with two people simultaneously. Though Forrest and I had agreed that if a third person were to join us, it would be someone we both cared about, this particular talk wasn't one we'd ever had to have. I brought the subject up not too long after that day in the park.

"So, okay," I said, staring at my hands. I was sitting on our bed, and Forrest was sitting in his computer chair. He turned to face me, his dark brown hair starting to grow out long, shading his brown eyes.

"Yeah?" he said. Looking at his smile, I suddenly felt how easy it must be to feel no objection to cheating. I could just take my relationship with Forrest and my

relationship with Patrick and never go through the trouble of combining them.

"I'm not sure how to start," I said.

"Just say it." Forrest used the same tone of voice with me that I tended to use on him, impatient but friendly.

"Well, Patrick and I have been dating for a while now, and--" I stopped. I have always been bad at admitting something I feel guilty about, and this was no exception. I wasn't guilty that I had fallen in love with Patrick, but that I had done it without Forrest's approval. Forrest had gotten to know Patrick over the last few months, but Forrest's work schedule and generally antisocial attitude made it hard for him to make close friends.

"And, what? You're pregnant?" Forrest smirked at me.

"No," I said, wrinkling my nose. "But. Well. We're falling in love with each other. We've been hanging out a lot lately, and there's so much going on between us, it's only natural that we'd develop deeper feelings for one another after a while, and you remember it was like that for us after we were together after a while and--"

"Leslie," Forrest said, cutting me off. "What does that mean?"

"We want to say 'I love you.'" I spoke to my lap, my head bowed to my chest.

"No," Forrest said. "I don't feel comfortable with that."

I was crying, I realized. Forrest came over to sit next to me.

"You can say something else. But I need for us to be the only ones who say 'I love you' right now," he said, rubbing away my tears with his thumbs.

"Okay," I said. "But you'll have to come up with something you're comfortable with, okay?"

"I'll think about it," he said, and gave me a hug.

Dr. Deborah M. Anapol describes five different types of jealousy in her book *Polyamory: The New Love Without Limits*: possessive, exclusion, competition, ego, and fear. In that moment, Forrest was dealing with all five. "I felt like I needed the security that he wasn't going to jeopardize our relationship," Forrest said about his decision to have Patrick and I use a different phrase when expressing our devotion: "I care for you."

By the time Patrick and I started saying "I love you" properly, six months after my talk with Forrest, Forrest and Patrick had developed their own friendship to a deeper level. "He's a good influence on me," Forrest now admits.

They became friends through more than their shared interest in me -- they are both video game and computer nerds, and often speak in a language I can't understand, concerning RAM capacities and router configurations. They have similar tastes in clothes, music, and food. Much like they complement my personality, they complement each other.

Most friends say our relationship is "complicated," but I consider it simpler than I could have ever hoped. People familiar with poly relationships would consider me at the center of a "V-shaped" relationship, with Forrest and Patrick at the ends of each prong. But as we've grown together, that V has become a strong triangle.

"Compersion" is a term used by most poly people to explain the opposite of jealousy. The Polyamory Society defines compersion as "the feeling of taking joy in the joy that others you love share among themselves, especially taking joy in the knowledge that your beloveds are expressing their love for one another." The term was coined by the Keristan Commune in San Francisco that practiced polyfidelity until the early 1990's. When I see Forrest and Patrick bonding over a new game, I feel compersion toward them.

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Much like the "love" conversation, we have had to create new rules and boundaries, learning more about the way relationships thrive than we ever thought we would.

I don't believe that another person possesses me, to the exclusion of all outside activity, and that we are not in competition with one another. My ego is not hampered or uplifted by their actions, though I may approve or disapprove of their choices, and I don't live in fear that they will one day leave me, as I believe my little sister implied I should.

These truths aren't absolute, of course, but they make for a nice philosophy, and sometimes provide the mantra I need to make my way out of a fight with one of the boys. And when I can't seem to be able to stop fighting on my own, I can trust that one of them will help me calm down.

"Forrest's being mean to me again," I said as I crawled into bed with Patrick, tucking the blanket over my shoulder and wrapping an arm around his torso.

"You need to stop doing this," he mumbled, just waking up that morning.

"Doing what? Getting into bed with you in the morning?"

"Getting mad at him and then running to me for comfort," he said, turning onto his back and taking the covers off me. "Now go make up. Okay?"

I frowned, but had to agree. If I was going to be upset, I should at least do it on my own. Using each other for anything more dramatic than breaking a tie could result in resentment later on, and that wasn't something any of us needed. We had all experienced bitterness in previous relationships, and were now vocal enough to make it clearly unwanted.

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"She doesn't know that Patrick's my boyfriend," I warned Stacey the day before we were to meet my friend Jenn for lunch. "We can talk about him, but be careful with your context."

"I'll be careful, thanks for telling me," Stacey said, and I could hear the question in her voice even over the phone.

"Forrest says we'll tell Jenn and Nathan soon. He's just worried, you know? Nathan's his friend, and he's worried that if -- no, *when*, because we are telling them eventually -- when we tell them, they'll not want to be our friends anymore."

"Yeah, but not telling them--" Stacey started.

"--right, I know, isn't okay," I interrupted. "I've been bitching about this for a straight month, and Forrest

keeps saying 'just give me a few more days, another week.' He's nervous."

"Okay. Well, I'll see you tomorrow. 10:30, right?"

"Right. See you!" I hung up.

Forrest and I had been close friends with another couple, for almost a year. They had come to our wedding the previous year, helped us move, and knew Patrick well enough to leave their kids with him for brief periods of time. Talking about not talking to Jenn and Nathan made me angry and impatient. Forrest and I had compromised and decided we would approach the subject with them together; that we would own the fact that we had a poly relationship with Patrick as our boyfriend.

But our compromise included a fuzzy deadline, one I couldn't hold Forrest to, and I chafed against his need for "more time." I considered this future discussion to be a practice in how we would continue to "out" ourselves to our friends, and even family.

Forrest generally takes pause before deciding to tell someone about our relationship, and I have a complex system of deciding how to approach and who exactly to be open with. At parties, when I don't care about what people will whisper or ask, I say freely, "This is my husband, Forrest, and this is my boyfriend, Patrick." At family get-

togethers, one or the other inevitably becomes "the roommate." Patrick tends to be open without guile in a wide variety of situations.

But when people often giggle uncomfortably when they ask if Forrest and Patrick have a physical relationship, I invariably raise an eyebrow and ask if they truly want to know. I have come to the conclusion that when I am the obvious center of the relationship, people consider us to be almost normal -- but as soon as the implication that the boys have a deeper relationship arises, our friends are struck by how odd we are.

All three of us are bisexual, and while I am aware that Forrest and Patrick are intimate from time to time, they are more likely to engage each other when all three of us engage in sexual activity together.

When I asked the guys if they had ever had an awkward moment fielding the question of their sexual history, they both shook their heads.

"I avoid all questions about my sex life. No one needs to know," Patrick said, his brow furrowed, as if offended.

"Yeah," Forrest agreed. "And I don't really ever tell anyone about Patrick without you there to catch the questions."

I personally don't volunteer a significant amount of extra information to our friends and family that we come out to. Our sex life is only one part of the greater whole, regardless.

We considered moving in together a good idea, so the three of us bought a home in Richmond, Virginia, to be closer to Forrest's and Patrick's jobs. Patrick had been practically living at our cramped apartment for the last five months, and Forrest and I needed help with the mortgage payments -- at least that's what we tell people who we aren't out to.

We three moved in together the same way couples do every day, our collective furniture not matching, books on the shelves sometimes duplicated, and a sudden influx of silverware and dishes. And then there are the three cats. Our uncommonly common life was a perfect fit for us, regardless of the peculiarities on the surface.

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I have always found comfort in knowing that my life is not "normal." I know that I am not alone in this unusual lifestyle -- we are only one of the half-dozen families who participate in the Richmond Poly Family Support Group's monthly meetings.

A good friend, Ellie Woodruff, once said that she was always impressed by my ability to learn from my mistakes. "You never make the same mistake twice," she said. At the time, I took it as a compliment, and maybe that's how she meant it. But as I've gotten older, that phrase has stuck with me, almost a challenge.

Whether I try to modify my personal story or my personal life, I manage to follow the same rule: nothing changes without pressure. The pressure to not make the same mistake twice, to move forward, to meet expectations.

As long as I consciously write my story, I will have the chance to revise, improve, and move freely into the future.