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Catholic School

When you look up Catholic schools mine still comes up, actually it's the first one that pops up. The school I went to doesn't exist anymore so somehow it makes me laugh to think someone thinks it might.

I'm the product of two people, not married, having a child, some may say that makes me a "bastard child". I'm the product of what the Catholic church always has seemed to frown upon. Ironic that they sent me to St. Mary Star of the Sea School in downtown Beverly, MA.

My grandmother, a devout Catholic felt that this was where I needed to be, I needed to go to a place that would teach me purpose in life and how to be a good (religious) person. I spent nine years at this school. Nine years that I thought were useless and pointless to me. What was the difference in my school compared to the one down the street? If anything their school seemed better because it lacked sweater vests and knee highs and they could wear any color shoe they wanted. Their school was bigger and had a wider range of people compared to the twenty I spent what seemed like forever with.

I knew better than to ever ask my mom to leave or switch schools because I would never ever be able to as I would be reminded of how much the school costs and she'd remind me that I was safer here than at the public school. I mean, I guess I was, there wasn't a sexting scandal at my school unlike at the public one. For the most part I knew nothing about sex or drugs and honestly thought it was something you only saw in movies. In a lot of ways I was really really sheltered.

My class of twenty people rarely changed over the years, we were brought up in the time where phones were just becoming more popular, and social media didn't really exist beyond Facebook and Myspace.

Looking back at Catholic school now I realize it came with its own invisible set of guidelines and rules. You were always being "watched" because God was always watching. Of the things stuck with me it always had to do with the type of person you were expected to be and they really have followed me for the most part except for the fact that over the years I've become what many may consider a lapsed Catholic.

The school itself taught me to be an understanding and sympathetic person. While many people don't have beliefs now, and it seems to be cooler thinking that your life is based on science and when you die you die.

Gel Pens

If you were to look at the bottom of any book bag or purse or from time to time a pocket, you'd find a pen. Some people care about the point type or the color or how it can be held in their hand though we all know someone with a favorite. For myself I didn't realize I had a favorite type until one year for Christmas my mom got me a 48 pack of colorful glitter gel pens. The colors would fill up my pages of notes in college and they would add physical sparkle to the pages when I didn't think my actual words would.

Growing up in a Catholic school my writing had to be in black or blue ink and the words had to be in cursive, a style of writing that I have never been able to really not use especially when I'm writing things in a hurry. Very often my "e's" curl and my "y's" and "l's" have loops, even when I try my best to break this habit. It wasn't something I was always very fond of, but it did occasionally find itself helpful.

When I finally left my Catholic K-8 School I went to a public high school very few people wrote in cursive and even more so very few people were told how to write and what to write with. While they didn't care whether I printed my words or wrote them in cursive, they did seem to care if my writing was colorful, something not encouraged, but not stopped, I tried to sneak it in anywhere I could. I always thought that while my writing may seem messy, if it was filled with reds and blues and pinks people wouldn't care as much.

A piece of advice I once received from a teaching coworker was to always have a pen, you never know when you may need it. I didn't particularly understand that this piece of information would be something I took literally.

On my first few days working in a high school I found that more often than not students came to school without a pen, just like in any school there is some black hole where the pens and pencils seem to go and never come back. I would wear this big red vest with my pockets filled with pens, though I only would give them black or blue inked ones; I didn't want my partner teacher to be mad at my encouraging the use of colored ink, plus I didn't think the students I had just recently met would care much for my sparkling colorful gel pens, if anything they might think I was weird.

One day a girl saw me take out a pink sparkly pen along with a black one and she asked to use that instead.

"Ya, sure," I said, not thinking much of it.

The pen I gave her was pink and sparkly, a color I personally enjoyed using, though I figured I would get it back so it was strange when a student asked,

"Is it okay if I keep this, miss?" I guess I didn't mind, I had plenty. "Ya, go for it.", I told her.

I had told my partner teacher that I had let her use a color pen and if it was a problem. She told me as long as she could read it wasn't a big deal, she was writing after all. The next few days a few other students asked me for pens and when I would pull out the plain black and blue ones they would usually pause a moment and ask if they could have the pens that were green and purple with sparkles in them. They soon became hooked; I now had more students writing in colorful ink than even I could have imagined. My partner teacher continued with the general statement when I would check in with her about it, that as long as she could read it to grade, it was fine with her. For many of them

their morning writing only had short sentences and few words, though now in an effort to use more of my colorful ink they filled their pages.

The tenth graders at Charlestown High School for the most part all saw the same teachers throughout the day, and everyone kind of knew who everyone was. Apparently my students started bringing their love for colored ink into other classrooms, and loose gel pens were found along with the regular pens and pencils.

“Where are you all getting these gel pens?” teachers were asking each other as if they were asking about who made who sick. This epidemic of ink was taking over.

“Miss Vitale gave them to us!” they would tell the teachers and I soon became known for my rainbow pen dispensary. No one really seemed to mind, because at least they were keeping track of their writing utensils for once.

From then on I become accustomed to having my pockets filled to the brim with an array of different colored pens. A few months into working I even ended up buying a giant 180 count of the pens just so I wouldn't run out. The pens made the words not just colorful by the look of it, but colorful in their wording. It was always hard for me to turn down giving them a new pen, it wasn't an expensive way to bribe them into doing their work so I always felt that it was worth it. “How about if I give you a gel pen to do your work with? You can even pick the color!” I would say pulling out a fistful of colorfully inked pens and presenting it to them.

I never thought I had left much behind when I left the school because just as it was fine before myself and my time with City Year got there it was going to be just as fine when we left. From time to time I get to go back for different things to do with the school, though

when I was there to see my past students football game with others I had worked with last year I was asked if I still had a million gel pens. I told them I didn't and I hadn't bought any since graduation. I guess I had just outgrown them.

I always looked at these gel pens the way people looked at regular pens, they only served a purpose to write and when you aren't writing they lose that. Pens run out of ink or they even dry up, but they aren't meant to be used forever.

Ever since I left City Year and teaching my students from last year I haven't used gel pens, maybe it was because it was summer and I had no need to write, or maybe it's something I no longer want to use. Now if you look in my bags you'll find Sharpie pens, in ink black and boring, though ever the same effectiveness in getting the words to the page.

I think when I think about gel pens now it's like when you give a toy to a younger sibling because you realize you no longer need it, I guess that was gel pens to me. Black fine tip ink seems much more "grown up." Famous authors weren't important pieces of literature with purple glittery ink so if I want to write something of importance I probably should be following their footsteps. Or maybe they just didn't know what they were missing & soon I'll go back to writing in colorful ink, no one really knows.

Grocery Carts

Pulling the carts from each other was something my mother would do once a week or sometimes twice depending what would be doing that week or if she had other plans for us. On the rare occasion I came with her she would pull it out and allow me to push knowing that if I hit someone or something she would take over.

Those days she would wake up early and go to Market Basket before we would wake up for school, she would be back home before 7:30 with just enough time to have us off. But on these days I would go with her it wasn't just her and I, instead another sibling or two in tow we would walk the red and white tiled floors pushing a carriage through the saw dust that lives on the floor and would often cause one of the few not broken wheels to become stuck or wing in a way that did not provide us with the assistance it was intended for.

The dairy department was always first, lined up with walls of cheese and butter and milk, all things from cows. It's funny now because my mom doesn't drink regular milk anymore and instead chooses from a different dairy section and picks some almond milk. The eggs would often be in the case in the middle, rows and rows of round smooth objects she would crack and scramble or poach for me in the morning because I didn't want to eat the pancakes my younger siblings demanded.

She doesn't really get eggs the same way she used to, instead she now goes to her backyard and finds one of her "ladies" to provide her with them. My younger sister one day came home with tiny chicks that are now the "ladies" and since then there hasn't been a

reason to enter that section of the market since. I guess the three chickens she now has in the backyard are a new way to take care of three small things in the morning.

She wouldn't often go through the middle aisles, maybe to get cereal or granola bars or my sister's unfrosted pop tarts. We would skip the areas of "junk food" though my dad would probably want Dorito's so we got him those and I really liked chips and salsa so I was allowed to have that. My mom never fed us junk food, she didn't eat it so I guess she didn't think we needed either.

My classmates would unload their lunches with things like lunchables, Slim Jims, cosmic brownies, and Fruit Gushers, things I didn't try until I was much older because my mother no longer bought my food and I realized I don't like those things anyway so it wasn't really a big deal. My lunches consisted of the cut strawberries I loved so much that one time made me really sick, but I still ate them anyway and cheese and crackers that required an ice pack because I was always worried about my cheese melting and becoming gooey, particularly if the school became too warm.

She would always go through the produce department. She would fill the carriage with those flimsy clear or green bags with apples and lettuces and any other healthy things she would try to feed my siblings and I. My brother only liked the apples and my sister didn't like any of it, but my mom still tried to get them to eat it.

Almost always she would get strawberries, though never blueberries or raspberries, maybe they were too expensive then or maybe I just didn't like them. Now that I buy my own groceries I almost never buy strawberries and find myself getting more of any other type of berry. The lettuce she would get would always go into a Caesar salad, the only type

I really liked because she would always add extra cheese and croutons just the way like I liked it.

When she finally had loaded up our cart with different pieces of produce we would walk through the bakery. We would hope that the long soft loaves were still warm so that we could eat it as we waited in line. My sister liked the end piece so she almost always had eaten both sides before it was our turn to check out. There would be piles of crumbs underneath, but it didn't bother my mom as she ignored us and loaded the groceries on the belt.

When she would load up the groceries the belt would make noise because it was old and overused. We would help place the things so that the full cart would become empty and the belt would have just enough room, piling the different shapes so that they fit together correctly.

We would want the cookies and cupcakes, though instead my mom always promised us that we could make something when we got home because she had the ingredients and she often made us something soon after we put all the groceries away. She would make us cookies and brownies, our favorite were rice crispy treats. We would eat the whole pan and she wouldn't get the least bit mad at us. This was our chance to eat all "the not good for you" things.

She still makes all the baked things, something that I still don't really like to do. Something about the measuring and exactness of it all really never did anything for me.

As I've grown up my mom doesn't use the same tactics in the grocery store anymore, she buys different things and shops at different places. Maybe now it's different because

she's not trying to feed three little children within a tight budget and now she purchases the nice cheese from Whole Foods or buy the things she would rather have for herself since we aren't even there to eat it anymore.

When we were younger she only went to the grocery store once a week or every other, to get just enough stuff. She goes more often now, only buying a few things at a time for if she decides to make a meal or if someone is coming over to eat. There are nights now where she'll have cheese and crackers for dinner and there isn't anyone there to say "I'm hungry" or "I don't like that" because frankly she doesn't care at this point. I'll now go over with a bag full of groceries hoping that she will make me something because sometimes I just want my mom to cook for me.

As an adult my shopping is a little different, and much smaller than my mom's. I've worked at Whole Foods since I was in college, so in an effort to keep things familiar I've only really ever shopped there just as my mom does. The aisles are familiar and so are the smells of the prepared foods and flowers and incense as I walk around.

Grocery stores and food are things that bring me comfort, not in an over indulgent way, but in a way that brings me a feeling of being home. In times that I have been away from home or needed to be recentered I find myself drawn to the stores and food and the aisles knowing that everything is the same. It's nice to be nourished and filled with the things I need and want.

Food is something that for my family has been something that brings us together, I'll stop by for a snack or treat knowing that my mom can always put something together even if she claims to have no food to eat at all. My siblings and I don't live at home anymore, but

in an effort to keep us visiting often my mom bribes us with food and baked goods just as when we were little. We no longer go with her, but just as before we

Tales from Third Grade

“What’s the worst thing you’ve ever done?” I’ve been asked. Every time I’ve had to answer this question my mind goes to this time in third grade when I cheated on my sticky point count. I should probably explain what that is though.

At St. Mary’s we were with the same twenty or so people from Kindergarten until eighth grade. We spent all day with our teacher and classmates that at times it could be a little annoying, but we didn’t have a choice since there was nothing we could do to change that. My class was mainly boys, so the girls were often overruled with things like what we would play during gym or a recess and particularly as we got older. Since there weren’t many of us the classroom was somewhere that we never got away with things if we stepped out of line, particularly in our third grade classroom.

In third grade my teacher was Sister Ruth, a tiny nun with quite a firey personality. She was brought in to fill the spot of educating my class, and my class got away with nothing. She had lots of rules and ways that she liked things to be done. Our classroom was set up in rows and the rows were perfectly spaced. We were pushed to be our best and were rewarded when we performed as such. This at times made it difficult for us to really feel good if we didn’t perform well on a test or quiz.

In an effort to make sure we recognized that our good work rewarded she would give us stickers on a chart that each of us had. Once a month, we would remove our sticky point charts from the walls, count the total and whoever had the most got to choose where they sat in the room. I was sick of it. It wasn’t my fault I sucked at math and it was so

annoying everytime Patrick got to pick his seat first and I was stuck in some lame seat in the back. This always bothered me.

Should I have done what I did next? Probably not. I did it anyway. Most of us got rid of our previous month's sticky points charts, but I realized that month Sr. Ruth used the same stickers as the month before so I used this to my advantage. It was easy for me to make sure that no one saw me put my old stickers up there next to my new ones. As I peeled one after the other I felt the guilt pile up. I didn't know what Catholic guilt was when I was just eight, but I would soon find out that the remorse and shame I began to sense was the early stages of a particular type of regret that was hard to shake.

She went seat by seat asking us the number of points we each had. In typical fashion my original number was low because I most likely hadn't done well on a math test or maybe it was because I missed something during the week, though I didn't ever miss a day of school so that wasn't really possible. I wanted to secure that I would get to move my seat before Patrick did so when he said his number first I made sure I only had a few higher than him just to avoid suspicion. Sister Ruth seemed shocked when I told her the amount. She called me up to the front to present my sticky point chart to her. I was nervous, she usually just assumed you were telling the truth.

I handed my chart over, hoping she couldn't see me shaking. As she counted the number I barely moved, and when she was done she handed it back to me and said, "Okay".

I had never been so nervous and relieved all at the same time. The class finished and when I got to pick my seat first I chose the spot Patrick always wanted just so I could say that I did it and he didn't.

One after another people would choose their seats and somehow by the end all I wanted was my seat in the back. The front to me felt like a spotlight was always on me and the expectations were set to a higher standard. Being eight is already hard enough and being in the back was safe and quiet and I was able to avoid all attention. The next month I realized I didn't want this again so I let myself fall back into the background of the back row and let Patrick take his spot in the front.

Sr. Ruth wanted us to do well because we were in the eyes of the Lord. While this was the mentality of all of our teachers at St. Mary's she had a particular fondness for this concept. Of all the Catholic School teachers I think if it was up to her, she might have been all for the slapping of our knuckles with a ruler, but fortunately for us it was no longer allowed.

She didn't just want us to do well academically, she wanted us to be well rounded. We didn't often engage in creative activities, but on the off occasion that we did there was coloring involved. Did you know that there were standards for coloring? Eight year old me had no idea, until I was told that I was doing it wrong.

"Coloring should happen in one direction," Sister Ruth said as she swatted at my coloring page.

I never thought that you could do wrong with coloring until she tried to instruct me on the proper procedure.

"You can either color up and down, or left and right, there is no need to be doing it all over the place.

This is what that really flipped my world upside down, considering in my eight years of life not a single person told me my coloring tactics were misguided. I assumed that maybe she was just picking on me until I realized that my entire class started moving their hands in very singular motions to avoid her all knowing eyes. She told us what a mess it was to be seen coloring in all different directions, though what was startling was to think that coloring could be messy if I stayed within the lines.

From then on we weren't allowed to color in any other way, and from time to time now in adulthood I'm not able to color in a way that doesn't represent what she wanted.

We were the only class that had her as a teacher and when we tell about our times at St. Mary's she is always the teacher who first comes to mind. While harsh in her tactics I believe she generally wanted us to do well and was the most authentic part of our Catholic School education. It's very rare now to see a Catholic school with a nun as a teacher now, so while most of us didn't love the experience it wasn't something that any of us regret experiencing.

There aren't many nuns around anymore. Looking it up there has been both a decline and incline of the practice over the last twenty years. Why though? I think looking at all the nuns that I knew growing up it takes a particular type of person, they can't be too sweet or too tough or too nice or too mean. They give up everything to devote their lives to God when most people can barely devote an hour on a Sunday.

Looking deeper into the world of nuns though, these people devote themselves so they can better the world they live in and in a way make it that much better. Nuns live a life of poverty, chastity, and obedience. In the world we live in now, most people could not

fathom doing that willingly. Nuns seem to not let it bother them and for that as a grown adult I have a great admiration for the work and teaching she provided.

From time to time my old classmates see her in different places and other people say different things about their interactions with her. She's now often seen walking through the streets of Beverly and Peabody heavily bundled up to protect her tiny body against the New England winters. She can be seen in the same simple comfort shoes she wore when I was eight, though I assume she got new ones and her clothing is as pristine as ever. I'm not sure I've even spoken a word to her since I was eight, though just as most things in the years when Catholicism played a major role in my life I can't seem to forget about her.

Chastity

I guess it's kind of silly to talk about sex in a way that sex was only intended to happen once, but in the Catholic religion that's all they expect from you, and absolutely you should never ever enjoy it. People are supposed to have sex after they are married, never ever before and they expect you to realize that the sole purpose of sex is to create a child. Anything outside of those strict parameters and you might as well have harlot written across your forehead.

"What do you mean you were at your parents wedding," I once was asked after showing a friend photos of me as a child.

"I don't know I just was," thinking that it wasn't such a strange idea.

I never thought anything was really out of the ordinary until I had to ask my mom what was weird about it. It didn't occur to me that children attending their parents' wedding wasn't the normal thing to happen, particularly as a small child.

"So was my dad not my dad?" I remember asking, knowing now my whole world was flipped upside down. This was too much for my tiny head to process, I always thought he was my dad, but now I wasn't so sure. I spent the next few days telling my dad he wasn't my dad, he didn't particularly like that, but no one told me otherwise.

When my mom finally explained the concept to me I was even more confused than when I started. I wasn't concerned about sex, that meant nothing to me. I had seen the movie Titanic so I knew all I needed to know, but I just didn't understand how I happened before I was "supposed to".

I should start by saying that my father is the least holiest of me my grandmother could imagine my mom being with, but after being together for six years her pregnancy with me couldn't have been that big a shock to people, married or not. While it's more the norm now not to be married to have children when I created it was the worst thing that could have happened to my Irish Catholic grandmother's world. This was a colossal embarrassment for my grandmother. This was the worst thing that could have possibly happened.

When I've asked my mom about it in previous years it never seems like something she ever regretted because she said that I was what was meant to happen. Whether she felt this way or not I'm still unsure, but it's a nice way to think of what could have been a much worse situation.

Now I don't point fingers at my parents for how I am, or the ideas that were put into my head. I also don't blame my grandmother for paying to send me to a school that reinforced this idea that sex was a bad thing or that God would punish me for it.

I guess as I got older I wondered what's so bad about sex?

Why was it that it caused so much trouble?

I Hope God Doesn't Hate Me.

That's something I thought soon after I lost my virginity when I was fourteen. I had grown up in a somewhat Catholic household and gone to Catholic school where you are constantly reminded that no matter where you went, God was always watching you. While my grandmother loved lots of things about our school, the instilling of God being so present and always watching was probably her favorite part.

Catholic guilt runs deep.

In their efforts to instill the fear of God in us the priests, nuns, and lay teachers chose different tactics to get their point across, whether it be little lessons or larger scale things. Sure, during my time in seventh grade I took classes just as any other seventh grader would take, though with my luck they decided we couldn't be just like any other seventh grade students. At the age of twelve we were given a week long training on CHASTITY, the idea of abstaining from sex most importantly until you were married. Until we were married was the most important lesson of this training.

This intensive week showed us the different reasons that you should never have sex before marriage and honestly if you were to do so it shouldn't be surprising if bad things happened to you. The training reminded me of the movie *Mean Girls* where the gym teacher stands in front of a group of students and teaches them that if they have sex they will get pregnant and die.

The class was structured in the same way that any other seminar is taught, they had pamphlets, graphs, movies, and demonstrations. Every morning a pair of old ladies would come into our classroom and set up their demonstration for the day for the twenty of us.

The demonstration changed daily, though each day had the same focus on making sure that we were pure individuals.

The flaw to their tactic was that they were trying to teach these skills to a bunch of middle schoolers. In between each of their examples and demonstrations was a collection of giggles to follow. They were unimpressed with this, but didn't really do anything to stop us or slow down.

In typical Catholic fashion they first showed us how a baby is born, reminding us that even with it being such a small blimp in a woman's stomach, the unborn baby is alive and needs to be treasured. As a twelve year old I didn't think anything of this, what would happen to the baby. They repeated the word abortion over and over again, not realizing we didn't really know what that really was or meant. We didn't really understand that concept, but it didn't stop them.

They spent a lot of time giving example after example, though my personal favorite example was the instructors teaching us how STDs spread using Oreos. They gave us a cup of fresh water and an Oreo cookie. We assumed that this was a treat for completing the previous lesson, but we were wrong.

They told us to chew the Oreos, but we were told not to swallow the cookie, so we did what we were told. With what we had in our mouths we had to spit it in the clean water and with our cup of now chocolate colored water we had to analyze if we wanted to drink that water now. We looked around confused, why would we want that?

"Now go around and pour your cup into another cup, do you still want it?" They asked us.

Were they serious? That's gross, but we did what we were told.

They made us repeat this exercise a few times, making the water dirtier and dirtier, a dark chocolate mess. What is this supposed to prove?

"You can all take your seats again," They said.

We did, and they told us to look at our glasses.

"This is what happens when you have multiple sexual partners." They said.

We didn't understand what they meant, or why Oreos would have anything to do with multiple sexual partners.

Let's just say that I no longer like Oreos.

By the end of this week long training we were more confused than when we started. We still didn't understand what sex was or what the big deal was except the fact the we basically shouldn't touch each other. On the final day they handed out plastic cards, almost resembling ones you would receive to take out books at the library. These cards in small letters had a statement that when signed instilled that we would stay chaste. We didn't know what we were signing, so many of us didn't sign them, we didn't want to make any promises about chastity being in our future. We didn't sign them, and instead pushed the cards into our desks, pretending this wasn't happening.

Weird.

Strangely enough this wasn't the first time they tried to approach this topic with my class. In fifth grade, when most students were simply getting the talk about our bodies changing, my class was given a speech about what not to do with those changes. As the boys sat in a separate room being told I'm sure something both similar yet different from

the girls sat there and learned about how we need to protect our virtue. Did I really understand what was going on? Not at all. What the fuck was my virtue? We sat there and listened, just as we always did.

The training was so intense you could only compare the level of importance to knowing how to swim. This training was going to save our lives somehow. Remembering that everyone at one point or another is going to be in contact with water and if you ended up in the deep end and didn't know how to swim you would surely drown. These videos and exercises were supposed to prepare us to either sink or swim when we were faced with the inevitable. When we were faced with, sex.

After having my only schooling experience be in a tiny school with only 150 people things like people having sex and doing drugs or drinking weren't something I thought really happened. I guess I must have assumed that all middle school children were given this talk, I mean why wouldn't they?

I know, I lived a very sheltered life, but it worked out well for me because it was never something I was worried about growing up. When it came time for me to go to high school my parents sent me to our city's public high school and going to this school was my view into what I guess "really happens."

Walking into high school on that first day I couldn't believe how different everything was and how different these people were from the twenty people I used to share my day with. There were so many people walking around, they weren't being pushed into a straight line and they had so many different outfits on. I was never allowed to dye my hair or wear nail polish to school, so that was shocking for me to see all the different colors

walking through the halls. I was also so used to having to be on time for everything that it was weird for me to see so many students still in the hallways after the bell rang. Were rules not as important here as they had once been in my life?

The teachers here were all teachers, no nuns were roaming the halls and there weren't visits from the priest or deacon. I went from a school census of 150 students to almost 1,000.

These weren't the most shocking things to me though because what really shocked me were the people holding hands and kissing and touching. This would never have been allowed. Watching all this for the first time my mind went back to when we were not allowed to have a hugging competition, a game we came up with to see who could get the most hugs. I'm sure we would have been allowed to do that here.

Gone were the sweater vests and khaki pants, and here came the days of jeans and tshirts.

First Time

I didn't know anything about sex when I went to high school. My unconventional training was the closest thing I got and even then I was still so confused. I didn't think I would spend much time even talking to boys since everyone could only talk about how hard high school was so it didn't really matter, I was going to commit to being a good student.

The problem with having expectations was that they were probably going to be broken, why should I expect now that after nine years of school I was now going to be this amazing student. In typical fashion I started out strong and changed my schooling tactic based on the boy I liked at the time.

We only dated for about two weeks before things really got as "serious" as I thought a fourteen year old could ever get. He told me he loved me and how amazing I was, but I believed every word he said and never questioned it.

He always claimed to be more experienced than I was because he had gotten a hand job one time from his ex-girlfriend. I don't know if he really had gotten that hand job, but I didn't really know what that would have entailed anyway to give one so I just took his word for it.

"I love you," he told me one day as he walked me to class.

He didn't mean it because at that point we had only been dating for about five days, but I didn't really mind because I thought it was cool that someone liked me enough to say that. What came of being so in love with me was that he did whatever I was doing and went wherever I wanted him to go.

Growing up I had always participated in a yearly 11 mile walk for charity called “The Good Friday Walk”. The walk raised money for homeless people and it was something I did every year with my friends because it was a tradition if you went to one of the neighboring Catholic schools. This was my first year that I was doing it now that I was in a public high school and he decided he wanted to come along to do it with me.

“Ya, I think he’s going to come!!!” I told my friends, trying to hold back my excitement.

I’m sure my friends didn’t care that much considering he now was always around. While he agreed to come he didn’t really understand what Good Friday was because his family didn’t practice any particular religion, but I did, I knew the importance of this day. I explained to him that Good Friday is one of the most important days in the Catholic church, it’s the day that Jesus was crucified. I guess to most people it was a pretty gruesome holy day to show reverence for, but I never thought much of it given my background.

The walk started just as it always did, everyone checked in and gathered in the groups we planned to walk it. The walk was early, but for my friends we were used to doing this so it didn’t bother us.

He pulled himself together though, and we walked holding hands, something I’d never done before with a boy, but just as with everything I figured this was what I was supposed to be doing with my new “boyfriend”. I didn’t know what really was acceptable or normal and not because I was just using what I had seen in movies or others my age doing at school. We would keep walking and sometimes we would kiss or stop or talk about random things, like school and our lives because we really didn’t know that much about each other seeing as we had only met two weeks prior. The walk finished over the

course of a few hours and it made me feel tired, too sleepy to do anything else that day and I assumed I would just go home and take a nap leaving him for the day, that wasn't what happened.

"Do you want to come over? My parents aren't home until later." he told me.

"Ya sure, I'm really tired though so I need to take a nap," I told him and he stared at me for a minute, I'm sure thinking about how this could work out well for him.

"Ya, a nap would be good, I need to take one too." He said.

I didn't invite him to nap with me though, is that what he thought I was suggesting we do?

I had never napped with a boy before, honestly I had only ever shared a bed with one of my parents or siblings, maybe a friend, but he was more experienced so I assumed again that this should be happening.

I called my mom and told her we were going back to his place to hang out after the walk, we were going to "watch movies" and his parents were absolutely home. I lied, and sinned again. As I hung up the phone I knew I had already done something bad, I had never ever lied to my mom, I hoped I could deal with that in confession in a few weeks.

I don't remember how we got back to his house, but we did. Whoever it was dropped us both off at the house and drove away, not seeming to care who was home or what we were doing. Walking through the front door we quickly made our way into the basement of his house. His basement was finished so it was an easy place for us to hang out and not be interrupted, usually making it easier for us to make out privately and not be caught by his parents.

We told his sister that happened to be home that we were going down to watch a movie, a harmless action that wouldn't seem to strike any suspicion, though she wasn't that much older than us so maybe she knew what we were up to. The movie we watched didn't matter as long as there was sound coming out of the TV to cover up our own sounds that come from moving along the couch as we made out. Those few times we hung out in the basement alone we made out a lot, I was practically a pro. It was even more impressive to me because I had a boyfriend to make out with.

Being still incredibly naive I believed I would still get to nap. He must not have been as tired as I was because he didn't actually let me take a nap. I tried to sprawl out on the long couch and find a comfortable position, though just as I did that I seemed to be moved to accompany his body as well. As he turned his body next to me we started to kiss, I thought it would be a simple peck that wouldn't matter and I could go on with my nap, instead it wasn't.

Just as we had done many times before we stayed together and made out, letting him maybe put his hand on my barely formed breasts or maybe moving around to touch my flat butt, nothing ever seemed to go beyond that. I didn't know what else would really happen, I mean I was only fourteen and I hadn't really known what sex was up until a few months prior to graduating from 8th grade, and even at that I barely knew what I was talking about.

There were many shelters that came from my Catholic education. The school had spent so much time jamming this idea of chastity down our throats that there wasn't anything to know except if you have sex before marriage you might as well be dead. Almost

two years prior to that moment I had been lectured on not having sex before marriage and why it was so important to us to be clean and if you were to have sex you'd be dirty, and no one would want someone that's dirty.

But there we were, making out. Our tongues were moving around and our hands seemed to follow, though this time it was different instead of touching my butt he moved his hand to the front of my pants and slowly removed them. I didn't really know what to say, I didn't think that being without pants would make any difference considering my full coverage underwear with the alphabet on them didn't exactly seem very sexy. We stopped kissing and he got up and instead changed the movie to music "odd," I thought.

He walked over to the stack of Xbox games on his shelf and took out one and opened the case. Was he going to play an Xbox game now instead of making out with me?? Did he think that my alphabet underwear was too childish??? Did he no longer want me??? I had never felt so horrible in my life, thinking then that the one boy who wanted anything to do with me beyond first base was dropping me.

It took him a minute to pick out a game, and the one he chose is one I had never heard him playing before, though he pulled it from the stack and opened it slowly, staring at the disc for a minute. Out from the green and black case he pulled this square foil, a condom, probably one a friend gave him or something because I doubt he was at the store buying condoms. Maybe he and his friends all took one for those "just in case" moments. Slipping it in his pocket we went back to making out, I now was a little more sure as to why my pants had been taken from me. He began to feel around and touch more of my body finding his probably dirty fingers into my vagina.

“Oh, you didn’t shave?” he asked me. The thought had never occurred to me to remove all of my pubic hair, honestly something that’s probably much cleaner than his dirty fingers.

“Was I supposed to?” I said, almost shocked. I didn’t think it made any difference and honestly I didn’t know that was something that would have been required of me. He seemed to have some ridiculous notion that I should be bald down there because it “makes it better.”

“My ex used to shave and I liked it better.” “Okay,” I told him, agreeing that I would for next time. He also told me that he shaved as well “just in case” though I didn’t even know boys had pubic hair. As I thought about what he had just told me we went back to making out with him now soon losing his shirt and pants.

I felt it before I saw it. It wasn’t exactly something that I was particularly fond of feeling not because it was a bad feeling, but because I had no idea what it was. I had never really seen a penis before except in those health class diagrams, so it was weird to me when his poked its way out of his pants.

“Why does it look like that?” I asked foolishly obviously unsure what a boner was.

“Should we have sex?” he asked, ignoring my question.

“Uhh okay,” I said hesitantly, knowing that Jesus had just died and I was about to have sex. I remembered though from school that they also called sex “making love” and he did tell me he loved me so it was probably okay, maybe it was even a loophole.

Reaching for the remote to turn up the music he put on his favorite Third Eye Blind song “Losing a Whole Year” to begin playing, he ripped the silver foil releasing this plastic balloon he would wrap around his erection.

“Here you do it, it’ll be sexy.” he told me. Or just gross I thought, what was this clear goo around it and why couldn’t he just do it himself. As I slid it on I couldn’t imagine how all of that was supposed to fit in a teeny tiny hole.

As soon as I was done and way sooner than I thought this would happen he removed my underwear and shirt leaving myself in just a bra. As everything had finally been taken from me he laid my body down flat on the couch and positioning himself on the top. Without any immediate warning inserted himself inside and I realized that this was it.

Honestly I think I might have blacked out slightly. It didn’t last very long, maybe thirty seconds before he finally left that space between my legs. Was that really all it was? That’s what all of the hype was about? I had heard about how amazing and magically it was and how great it was going to be only to have the time be filled with disappointment and regret.

As we both got dressed and, we could hear that his parents had come home, we went upstairs for dinner, knowing now I would have to sit there and pretend to his parents that we definitely did not have sex. That night for dinner his mom made beef tacos. On any other night I would have loved tacos, and if anything they would be the food that would help distract me from what I had just done, though not today.

During Lent one of the many sacrifices that you are supposed to follow is that on Friday’s you can’t eat any meat product. As I sat down at the table his mom put three beef

tacos on my plate, telling me to add topping and to help myself to whatever else I wanted. With each bite of beef I seemed to feel worse and worse, I just couldn't say no to what his parents were serving me for dinner.

My mom picked me up soon after dinner and all I could wonder about in the silence of the car ride was that I hoped God wouldn't hate me.

"Did you have fun?" My mom asked me. On any other day I wouldn't think much about what she was saying, but this question seemed to make me queasy as if she knew something was up.

"Fine! Why do you care?!" I snapped back.

She looked a little shocked, though didn't seem to know what to say at this point. Instead of responding my mom looked over at me and ignored me. Ugh I'm sure she knew I did something, I'm so horrid she should have made me just walk home.

Leaving his house that night all I could think about was how mad God must be at me. I had never had so much guilt, let alone Catholic guilt that somehow it's a miracle I'm still able to have sex to this day.

Around the same time I was taking classes to receive my confirmation, a process that makes you the most holy single person that isn't married or tied to the church. This was my first of the two year training I had to go through and a part of it that's important is that they make you go to confession to wash away any sins you may have. As they slowly lined us up and sent us into the room all I could think about was boy did I have a sin to wash away.

Everyone seemed to go quickly, apparently they didn't have much to share. Ironically in front of us was a crucifix which wasn't unusual for the space, but it made my issue loom even larger. Now it was my turn and I was worried that the other's would notice how long my time in the room would be.

"Bless me father for I have sinned...", I said as I sat down reciting things as I had countless times before.

"What are your sins?" he responded.

I panicked. At first I didn't know whether or not to really tell him. I'd known this priest my entire life and I'm sure he wouldn't take it well knowing a student from St. Mary's took nothing away from all our lectures about sexual abstinence. My head was still racing, but my mouth quickly shouted, "I used my body for impure things."

He seemed almost shocked or taken back when I said this to him, surely I wasn't the first person to confess this.

"What does that mean?" he said.

"I had sex...on Good Friday...and I ate tacos..."

I just started admitting to things, I wasn't even sure if all of them were sins, but I might as well make sure I had gotten it all out. Nothing would be worse than holding back the bad things I had done knowing that God had already been with me during the time.

I finally stopped talking and the priest started mumbling something, hopefully it wasn't about telling my grandmother, because she'd be so mad. Just as he had done from the time I was seven and received my first confession before he raised his hand up and

blessed me, and told me to go say the rosary, an act that would take me a long time to do and I know it would make people wonder why I was still on the kneeler praying.

I did as I was asked and went to start praying. Instead of focusing on the words in my head my mind went somewhere else. It floated into the other area

Honestly, even now I still feel this guilt and weight from my actions, but I guess I'd rather have sex and feel guilty than not have sex at all.

IB

When I was fourteen I was a very different person than I am now. Most of my concerns revolved around boys and having a boyfriend. Being fourteen though was always very awkward mainly because it's like being old and young, all at the same time. When I had just turned fourteen it was particularly awkward for me, a freshman in high school, it's even more awkward if you're starting at a school where you don't know anyone. This is how I felt starting high school "dating" the boy I met at band camp the summer before I started high school.

"Ugh, I don't want to be in a marching band, it's going to be soooo boring." I told my best friend.

"It'll be fun!" She told me as we walked slowly onto the field for practice.

We didn't know where we were supposed to go or what exactly to do so we found someone who looked to be in charge.

"Uhhhhh....do you see that guy...the tall one...go ask him," we were told.

As we walked over to this strangely tall and happy man we didn't really know what we were going to do considering everyone else seemed to have already been placed. I thought maybe if I'm lucky they won't be able to place us and I can just go home.

"Well who are you?!?!" This man said as we told him that we needed a spot.

As we explained who we were and why we were there he slowly moved us to the back of the line up, these spots he seemed to think were perfect for adding two extra clarinetists in the arrangement. I had absolutely no idea what I was doing.

“Okay, so everyone make sure you’re using your roll step!!!” They shouted from the front.

I had no idea what a was involved in a roll step, though I was quickly taught that it was placing my heel first and letting the rest of my foot roll along with it. As an adult at times now I find myself using that otherwise useless skill to glide across the floor and make no noise at all.

Everyone got into their spots for the start of our marching band number, the songs we were playing were a collection of Billy Joel songs. The collection featured many famous songs, including *Piano Man* and *Only the Good Die Young*.

I hadn’t had the opportunity until that very moment to take a look around and see the people that would soon be my peers. I was so used to my entire grammar school’s population being the size of this marching band that it never really occurred to me that this marching band would be just a small fraction of the people I would cross paths with everyday. Though what was particularly interesting standing in front of my friend Anna and I, holding a giant saxophone was a tall lanky boy with a sweeping blond bowl cut. He was taller than I was and I couldn’t figure out where his body started or ended. He was skinny and lanky, I hadn’t ever seen someone with a body like this.

I had just had my first kiss a few months ago, so now I knew all about boys and what to expect. I was ready to have another kiss with another guy, though I didn’t expect this saxophone player to be the guy, despite how cute I thought he was. Well, as always I was wrong and for about three weeks he was my boyfriend. The problem was I didn’t know much about him except he had fingers long enough to move along the giant keys on his sax.

My best friend was dating a boy who knew the saxophone player and when band camp finally came to a close it was the perfect opportunity for us to “run into them” only that was just code for a creepy meet up at a park. We broke off into separate pairs of he and I, my friend and her boyfriend. As we sat on the grass awkwardly asking the hard hitting questions figuring out who the other was, I found him pushing my hair out of my face and kissing me, and I decided that maybe this could work, he could be my first real boyfriend.

A few weeks went by before I changed my mind, and realized that I no longer wanted him to be my boyfriend. I had tried to tell him before school one day and while I thought he got the message I realized I was not clear enough as he tried to hold my hand as I walked into class. I was so confused when he went in that I made Anna go re-break the news to him.

“So didn’t you and Mia break up?” She asked him during band practice.

“No,” he responded.

“Well you did, so I’m telling you now.” She said crushingly to him, I didn’t think he would survive from the news.

Things were awkward for a few weeks, though he seemed to increasingly get over me when he realized that my best friend who had previously broken up with him started paying more and more attention to him. I tried to pretend I didn’t know it was happening, I know. Selfish. And selfishly I wasn’t going to have any of that, and instead made out with him in the hallway as she sat in the band room waiting for him. I was making sure he

would have zero interest in her anymore. Obviously I didn't care enough to get back together with him, but I didn't want anyone else to be his girlfriend.

"So do you want to get back together?" He asked me seconds after our lips separated.

"What???" No!!!" Insulted he would ever ask me such a thing. I guess I should have seen it coming, but I didn't really process that then.

Didn't he realize that I had no intention of getting back together with him and it seemed to crush him just enough that he paid less attention to her than before. This only lasted for a period of time and while I was dating the boy that I would soon lose my virginity to he and my best friend began hooking up. This didn't involve sex, though whatever else they could think of doing they did together. Try not to let your imagination go too far. She was obsessed with him though. I guess she figured for a while that if she hooked up with him one day he might like her enough to want to date her. I never really thought that it would happen though.

Years passed and they finally were dating, he was her boyfriend and she was his girlfriend, and boy did I hate them dating. I didn't care at this point about them being together, but they were just so annoying.

"Do you care if he comes too?" She would ask when we would do things that typically would only involve the two of us.

"Uhhh I guess not," I would respond annoyed.

It's not that I cared really if he came, but they constantly would fight, and the longer they were together the worse it was. They stayed together for a long time until one New Year's Eve something changed.

I think what kept their relationship together in high school and the beginning of college was their love of parties. They would go to these parties and get drunk and then fight and then not fight and the cycle would continue. One New Year's Eve they went to a party just as they always would, and their fight somehow ended up worse than before. It turned into him punching her in the face, not the best move, though on the upside he was so super drunk that the punch was practically in slow motion. But this was their breaking point, and when they broke up and it wasn't that big of a deal anymore, she went back to college, and so did he and they didn't talk for a long time.

A while passed and they realized they were better as just friends and as we grew up from time to time we would all hang out and the annoyance I once felt for them was gone. We would make plans to hang out and go do things, though there was always a problem. My best friend had a problem with being notoriously late and at times just wouldn't show up at all. He and I had grown tired of it so we found ourselves hanging out alone on one particular day, and one day turned into many days. Most of the time we would go get drinks or go get food, things that most people like to do. He and I didn't have a lot in common, the only things that really kept us hanging out was our love for cheese boards and all types of wine.

We just stopped inviting my friend and found that we tended to have more fun just the two of us. One night we decided we would make our way to a few different bars and eat snacks, just as we would do any other day. On this particular evening we drank a little too much and found ourselves drunkenly making out in the parking lot. Making our way back

into the car my choices became a bit skewed and I didn't really think much about what I was doing.

I don't remember much from that night because drinking thunderdome, a drink of vodka, champagne, and some type of juice, and the name really seemed to live up to their expectations. I also lost my flip flops, though that was a small problem in the grand scheme of having just slept with my best friend's ex-boyfriend.

I woke up the next day feeling horrible, "how could I do this to my best friend?? I really am the worst person ever."

I must not have felt that bad though because this happened a few more times before we cut it off for good. It was weird for me to be around my best friend and him at first because I knew I really fucked up. I wonder if this is what God said when he told us to not covet your neighbor's wife??? I thought.

"We aren't ever doing that again," I told him one afternoon when we were sitting around drinking wine and eating cheese, an action we frequented as one of the few things we liked doing together. One glass turned into another which turned into another and soon it fell into the same pattern as before. Somedays I felt worse about it than others, it wasn't a romantic thing, instead it was something that just ended up being fun.

This went on for the course of a summer, and then one day it just ended, we didn't need each other for this anymore and instead found ourselves back to being just friends. It may have been one of the simplest, most complicated things I had ever done with a boy. I think now when I look back on it the entire situation ties into how much guilt I carry with

me about it. This guilt isn't the same as the guilt I carry about with God, but instead it feels like a secret and I can't tell anyone

Rogaine

I began to feel sad, I began to feel all the sadness I had felt from him come back. Grabbing my beer, hoping he didn't see me I made my way to the patio, praying both the fresh air and the smell of cigarettes would calm me down. Allowing the nicotine flowing through the air to quickly fill my lungs and slow down my breathing I could feel someone staring at me, though I didn't look up. I didn't want anyone to see the mascara trickling down my face.

I shifted my body, thinking maybe that would keep whoever it was from approaching, though instead I saw a pair of feet stop at mine. When I looked up it was him again, the blonde boy.

"Are you okay?", he asked.

"Ya, I'm fine, don't worry about it", I said, finding myself now angry at this stranger, wishing he would go away.

"You don't seem fine", he said.

"Well trust me, I am.", I said.

"It's okay if you're not, you just seemed kind of sad out here crying by yourself", he said in a way that seemed to make me believe him.

"What's your name?" I asked, pushing away the tears that had fallen.

"My name's Paul, what's yours?"

“I like that name, my name’s Mia”, I answered.

As I answered I then realized I no longer wanted to be here, I couldn’t go back inside and face my friends and all of their questions, knowing that those alone would make me cry. The problem also became that I would probably run into my ex yet again, which would really make me cry.

“So Mia, could I have your number”, He was going to keep talking, but instead all the pain and confusion inside my body made me kiss him. When I look back I’m not sure if it was the alcohol or the smell of his skin or if I had developed a contact high from the guy pretending not to be smoking a joint but I did and as soon as that happened I knew I wanted more.

“Where do you live?” I found myself asking, thinking this could be the guy I go home with, thinking that I would rather be filled up with this boy for one night than be sad. I began to remind myself of how no matter how nice a boy ever seems, they never are, they are all the same.

“Why?” he asked.

“Because I don’t want to be here any longer and while I had planned to sleep at my friend’s house I would rather not do that.” I said in a forceful way, realizing that he could say no.

Really looking into his eyes for the first time he seemed so sincere, though I was losing out on the idea that he would take me home now.

“Okay, you can come over”, he said, shrugging his shoulders, seeming unsure about his choice.

“I have to go tell my friends I’m leaving, do you want to wait out here or are you coming inside?”, he asked.

“I’d rather stay outside.”, I said and could feel myself holding back new tears.

“I’ll be fast”, he said kissing me on the head and going inside leaving me alone again with the smell still wafting in the air.

As I watched him walk back to me I felt a sense of nervousness. He was tall and dressed in navy pants and a Patagonia pullover, something that his mom probably bought him, nothing about this situation is something I would have ever done. At twenty-one I wasn’t the type of girl that went home with guys or even slept around but I decided this would be the perfect person to do it with. Paul motioned me in the direction of his car, knowing that it wasn’t far down the road and even his house was not a far drive from there.

He drove one of those big Jeep Wranglers, the type of car that could run over my tiny Volkswagen and not have more than a scratch on it. As he backed out of his spot and moved onto the road we stayed quiet, there seemed to be nothing to say and the only noise came from the low of the radio.

We arrived at his apartment.

“Here we are”, he said as he turned off the engine and stepped down from the seat, waiting for me to do the same. As we walked up to an unlit porch I realized how much taller he was than I, though in the haze of my still blurry eyes from both the tears and drinks I didn’t notice much else.

“My roommates are sleeping”, he said “so we can’t make too much noise.”

“Okay”, I responded wondering how much noise I could really make.

When I walked in, I noticed that the apartment was much cleaner than any other house that had guys living in it before or at least those that I had been in. Moving towards the couch I began to get nervous, is this where it happens? Is this where we have sex?

As I went to sit at the far side of the giant couch Paul moved to the other side allowing there to be a large space in between the two of us. Yet again there are no words between us for a long time, instead we have silence and the silence is instead filled with the noise from the television.

“So what were you doing out tonight?”, he said breaking the silence. “My friends just wanted to go out and it was nice out so why not.”

As I found him asking me more and more questions it made me start to look for a reason myself as to why I had invited myself over to his house. I instead stayed quiet, I figured the less he knew the better.

Flipping through the tv I became curious as to what program he would stop at. What does the boy I was about to have sex with like to watch on TV?

“Is there anything you wanted to watch?”, he said looking over to me.

“No, anything is fine.”, I said as he went back to flipping through only to stop at *The Discovery Channel* containing some program about large reptiles and their lives, the one show that could kill any want or need for sex ever.

I could feel myself begin to fall asleep. My eyes started to feel heavy and the liquor that had been sloshing around in my stomach was making me sleepier and sleepier. As I found myself leaning back against the large soft cushions of the couch I tried to wiggle

myself awake. I thought to myself that if I fell asleep I wouldn't have my big one night stand or even worse I would begin to snore in my sleep causing him to think I'm ugly.

"Are you falling asleep?" he asked.

"No, just resting my eyes, I find reptiles to be a bore", I said, hearing in my voice that I would soon be passed out cold.

"It's okay if you want to sleep, you can have my bed, I don't mind sleeping on the couch", he said.

"It's okay, I don't mind sharing with you", I said knowing I truly didn't mind.

"Good, I really hate this couch anyway", he said with a smile, the same one I had seen when he first came up to me.

As time went on we seemed to start talking a bit more, it was now one in the morning so the talking seemed to help me stay awake.

"Ya, I'm here for school technically, but I was really recruited to play hockey", he told me.

"I don't know anything about hockey aside from the fact that it is a sport, and it's played on ice." I felt almost embarrassed to admit.

He soon changed the channel, though this time it seemed like he knew what he wanted to watch. As he punched the numbers into the remote the screen quickly changed showing me a channel containing men skating around on ice, also known as hockey.

"I'll teach you what's going on", he said with a smirk.

I could now feel my eyes rolling in the back of my head knowing how much I hated sports and no hot hockey boy was going to change my mind now.

“So this is the ...”, he began to say going on and on I could see the passion in his eyes.

As he continued on about how the ice and the game were so intense and meant so much to him I could find myself being drawn in. I didn’t want to know anything about him, I didn’t want somehow to find myself sucked into some stupid hockey boy knowing that they are all the same. I figured he could help kill some of the pain that the liquor couldn’t and instead he was doing the opposite.

At this point he had made his way closer and closer to me, I don’t think purposely but with some intention that the closer he was the easier it would be for him to convince me that the sport was as great as he thought.

As I watched the game and big hulky guys skating back and forth chasing this tiny puck, I became sucked in. I couldn’t tell if it was his voice or his hands stimulating various hockey puck moves around, I knew I wanted him. I knew right there and then that I wanted to keep him and never give him back. Not in a creepy killer way, but in a way that would keep us from leaving this room in this moment.

“Do you get it?”, he said.

“Ya, I do,” I said, seeming so sure, knowing I hadn’t been listening in the slightest.

“I’m tired, do you want to go to bed or did you want to watch more hockey?” he asked.

Knowing no part of me wanted to watch hockey to begin with, I said, “I’m tired too” and I stood up and he did the same, leaving me to follow him.

Crossing the hallway I followed him through the door, as I walked in the smell of the room was not of dirt or weed or sweat and instead it reminded me of my parents house, it was clean and had a slight floral scent. The room almost made me uncomfortable in a way, why was he so clean, was he a killer and I was about to sleep next to him?

“Why is your house so clean, and why does your room smell so nice?” I asked knowing it was probably a ridiculous question.

“My mom never let my room be dirty growing up and I guess it stuck”, he said with a slight laugh, “I guess I never realized how much it stuck”.

“Oh, sorry I asked”, I said, becoming embarrassed that I even asked. I began to take off my sweater realizing I was too embarrassed at this point to take off my jeans or any other piece of clothing, though as I looked over at him and he didn’t have any problem as he stripped off his t-shirt revealing his built athletic body.

When we crawled into bed next to each other we didn’t touch, his bed was just big enough that we didn’t have to. As I laid there I began to fall asleep, I fell asleep first slowly and then all at once leaving me to dream, though only for a short period of time. I’m not sure if he was the one who shifted first or if it was I, but that shift sent something through my body, something that made me want him. I knew in the back of my mind I’d probably never see him again and remembering what my last hookup said about me being “some slut” I wanted to test and see how true that really was.

When I rolled over and wiggled my body closer to his I quickly realized he too was awake. In the silence of the room I looked over at him and found an overwhelming urge to kiss him, and so I did, and he kissed me back. As we rolled around his bed kissing and

touching, I felt my clothes drift and fall to the floor next to me, my body now having no need for them.

Time seemed to move quickly, realizing soon that unlike most guys, he knew what he was doing. It was the time of interaction you never want to end, especially in fear of nothing ever again living up to it. If this had made me “some slut” I never wanted to be anything used again. It wasn't the type of thing you see in the movies though instead it was the best type of situation it could be. As things came to an end and we seemed to have had our fill of one another we fell asleep slowly, though like before our bodies had been separate, we no longer were touching though still knew the other was there.

As I woke up that morning I found myself conflicted, how long do I need to stay here before I can leave, I have things to do today and I can already feel this hangover kicking in. Looking over at him sleeping I felt sadness, knowing I probably won't see him again, though happy knowing I got to have this one night.

I carefully pulled my naked body out of his bed. I began to search for the articles of clothing my body needed once again, quietly pulling on my jeans and letting my shirt fall over my chest, I realized even if he did want to see me again he didn't have my number or anything. I reached into my purse and found a receipt and eyeliner, knowing this was all I could use. I wrote down my number with the words “just in case” and grabbed my shoes, turning to get one last look at this boy I had just slept with, I realized I might miss him, though I would be soon over it.

Stepping out the front door onto his porch I realized I didn't have my car. The only things open right now were coffee shops so I walked to the only one I knew of around this area. As I began walking I started to think about my day and all the things I won't be getting done due to how tired I was. I wondered if he would text me or if maybe he did this type of thing a lot and instead would just throw the receipt in the trash and go out again tonight.

Walking through the door of the coffee shop I decided on black coffee, a drink that would help my day because after last night I could barely put anything into my body knowing I already wanted to puke.

As I drank my coffee I began to miss him, I knew I would never hear from him again so I found myself pushing it out of my head, in the same way one would push out negative thoughts, as hard as one can. I didn't want to spend the money on an Uber ride so I called my friend, then explaining the situation to her she agreed to pick me up. As I was waiting for my ride home I became sleepy, I wanted to crawl in my bed and have no one bother me, unless it was a text from him. When she finally pulled up I felt my phone begin to vibrate from a number I had never seen before, saying "hey".

Tuck Tuck Goose

Of all the guys I've spent any amount of time with they never seem to stick and for me maybe that's because I only ever hook up with them and then choose to never talk to them again. I've never really had a real adult boyfriend. Sometimes this is something that is really convenient, and I'm sure there are those people that don't understand this because they are so engulfed in the idea of being in a relationship. I mean I get it, it's more comfortable, but then there are different negative parts of being in a relationship. First of all I don't need someone telling me what to do. Secondly, I'm so flakey with plans it's basically a recipe for disaster that you think I'd move my schedule around. But, then there's the third thing, no one has ever asked, so I've always assumed that no one really wanted to date me. I was just used to simply hooking up and it being over with.

The only boy that I've ever had as my boyfriend was never ever supposed to be my boyfriend, if anything, it was supposed to be quick and not matter, just add him to the list in my phone and forget that it ever happened.

When I met him I was already talking to someone. The guy at the time was thirty and the closest thing to being an adult as I had ever been with. I mean wow, thirty, and he had a real job. I had never felt so grown up. My issue with this thirty year old while on paper he was great, spending any time with him made me want to barf. He would talk about things that I couldn't care less about, like why did he think I wanted to know what was on CSPAN that day?

He was always questioning the things I would do too. The way he would talk about women and people who weren't white always seemed to bother me, though I didn't ever

try to challenge what he said. Honestly, I thought this guy was what I needed or should have though, so I hung out with him and did things with him despite knowing that I didn't really like him.

The night I met my boyfriend I was in a fight with that thirty year old guy or at least I thought that we were, maybe I was just looking for a reason to be mad. Now that I look back I'm sure he was probably just sitting on his couch not even caring what I was doing or where I was going. Different than other days I was over him, and I wanted absolutely nothing to do with him and for the first time in a long time I went out with all my friends. We went out and started drinking and eating and found our way into a bar that I hadn't been into in awhile. We originally weren't going to go in, the cover was expensive and none of us had cash to cover it, until my one friend found all the singles from waitressing in the bottom of her bag, it was like we were meant to go in. Realistically I was wishing that she didn't find the money because I was ready to go home.

Entering the bar my attitude was nothing that would impress anyone in there and it was probably not very impressive that I was wearing a flannel shirt, jeans, and very little makeup, not to mention I was standing around looking angry and bitter standing in a bar watching my best friend get hit on while I absolutely couldn't believe he still hadn't texted me that entire day.

What. An. Idiot.

I looked up from my phone trying to find my next wall to go stand and pout against and sip my drink when I saw a boy walking towards me that was smiling and giggling to himself as if he had just told himself a joke that he didn't bother to share.

“Hi”, he said as he approached me.

I looked at him only seeing his big green eyes that were so happy and kind that it almost bothered me. I don't really know what I said in response, it may have been a “hi” or a “what do you want”, but he continued to talk to me so I reciprocated in asking him questions and he asked me questions until I realized I knew who he was. He wouldn't have known who I was, but that didn't matter because now he did.

I knew this conversation would end soon so I took it for what it was knowing that no one else in the bar was going to talk to a girl with such a bad attitude anyway. I'm assuming his phone started vibrating in his pocket because he took it out and looked at it as if he was a small child who was told he couldn't play with his friends anymore.

He said, “I'm sorry” and walked away to answer the call.

I was only a little disappointed, but after he left it gave me more time for me to pout and drink.

I had already been drinking all day so adding two more vodka sodas I didn't think would make or break how I was feeling for the rest of the night. Idiot. Three unanswered texts later I found myself at the bar with the boy and his friend again who had apparently ended the call he really needed to answer.

For some reason he looked happy to see me, I wasn't really sure why because I had been so rude to him before. I don't really remember what we were talking about, but I didn't care because I really was looking for anything that would distract me from my non-vibrating phone. He had these really intense eyes, I couldn't tell if he was looking that way because he couldn't figure out what I was saying or if he really cared.

He never looked at his phone sitting on the bar despite it continuing to light up with each notification, and he only seemed to pick it up when I looked at it, receiving a call saying “*she* is calling you”, breaking the contact and causing him to pick up his phone and walk away. This was the last time I saw him that night.

After the the bar was boring and uninteresting so my friend and I headed to another bar, and I became a little sad thinking I would never talk to that dumb boy again, but it would be okay because that thirty year old guy I knew would eventually text me back.

“Well maybe I should see if I can find him on Instagram or something, you know, just incase”, I thought.

I quickly found him and five minutes later my friend messaged him from my phone saying “**hey, wanna hook up???” He never responded that night so I blacked out trying to forget about it.

Waking up groggy and hungover I picked up my phone to see what time it was, not that I had anything to do today, but I figured I should eventually leave my bed.

OH MY FUCKING GOD. He responded.

The conversation wasn’t very exciting except for him saying “I ended things with *her* last night.” There wasn’t much that he said after that and all I could say was “I feel bad for *her*.” I thought it was weird that he told me that he ended things with his girlfriend, why would he think I wanted to know that or honestly why would I even care.

He didn't respond after I said that, and honestly I wasn't really that surprised, he seemed like the type of person that broke up with his girlfriend for a hot second and they would be back together by the end of the weekend.

When I look back through the messages now I was shocked by the few times he randomly messaged me and the one random day he sent me a message saying, ****Can I have your number?***** I thought about how funny that was, did he really think I was going to hang out with some guy who just broke up with his girlfriend and had been messaging me on Instagram?
What a dummy.

About a week later I had consumed just enough alcohol that allowed me to still drive, but gave me too much courage to finally want to go to this basically stranger's apartment.

"Fucking fuck fuck this place is a maze", I thought as I pulled into what I guess you could call a complex of different apartment buildings.

I parked where I could find some spot and called him, "Uhh, so I have no idea where I am."

He agreed to come pick me up because no part of me was able to figure out where to go next. He picked me up, and all I could think to myself was that I just got in the car with basically a stranger. He parked just outside his apartment and we went inside. I went through one door, to go through another, to go through another until finally we were inside. The apartment was both empty and full, none of the stuff really went together as if

the place was completely furnished by things his mom no longer wanted. I was greeted by a tiny tailed dog with two different colored eyes, he was covered with this incredibly thick fur that I assumed must have kept him incredibly warm. He seemed to be so excited to see the dog, it was weird considering they mustn't have been apart for more than five minutes though it seemed as if part of him was missing without this dog.

We both sat on the couch, untouched and separated by a couch cushion finding that I had moved into the far corner of the sectional so that we could have as much distance as humanly possible.

"FUCK this is the worst idea I've ever had, why am I here," I kept thinking. He looked at me in the same way that I remembered from that night almost a month before, it was long and gazing and it was as if he knew something I didn't.

"Fuck, he's probably going to murder me, my mom is going to be so mad." Sitting there we watched a movie, the title doesn't matter and I couldn't really tell you much now about the conversation that followed because I assumed the entire purpose behind this was waiting time until we had sex. Isn't that why people do things like this or why I would ever be asked out or invited over.

"Where do you want to sleep?" he asked.

"Umm I assumed I'd be sleeping in your bed," I replied.

Did he expect me to sleep on the couch after we hooked up? At that point I'd rather just go home after.

"Okay that's cool," he said with a smile and those big eyes still looking at me so intently.

I just wanted to get it over with so I could go to sleep, sneak out, and have him never talk to me again.

We went into his room and his dog followed as if this was some weird version of a threesome, but instead the dog just laid there on his bed. He took off his shirt and got into bed, I followed though instead keeping all of my clothes on because I was too self conscious for him to see my naked body.

“Honestly why hasn’t he turned off the light?!” I thought. I knew I just wanted to take off my jeans since they were way too tight.

Laying there quietly I was beginning to wonder when he was going to make any move until he said, “I want to kiss you.”

Why would someone ask that, wouldn’t they just do it? The only thing I could think to respond was saying, “you should do that.” How would he respond to that? Would he really do it? He did, he kissed me and somehow things progressed.

After we hooked up I fell asleep and woke up with these random arms around me. I tried to wiggle away from him knowing that if I fell asleep like this it would be harder to sneak out. I was convinced that this would be the last time I would see him, and I didn’t want to be too attached.

My body woke up around 7:30 am, the same time I usually wake up on my weekend, and it seemed for him it was much too early. As I moved my body off the bed he didn't move, and he stayed very still.

I wanted to be up before he was because I didn’t want to have to go through the awkward goodbye and fake promise of saying you’ll text them later, I’d spent enough time

with guys to know what would happen and I didn't want to stick around and hear it. I gathered my clothes and tried to be as quiet as possible, holding my breath and freezing every time he moved. I was followed out of his room by his dog as if he was walking me out in place of him. I walked back to my car and drove to my apartment feeling a little sad because I knew I wouldn't ever talk to him again.

As I walked away from the building I had absolutely no idea where I was going and no idea where I left my car. There were signs posted everywhere saying **NON-RESIDENTS WILL BE TOWED NO EXCEPTION.** Unfortunately I hadn't seen that sign the night before, but I was hopeful that my car would still be there. I had my key fob in hand and kept it beeping as I wandered the property

The property that he lived on was huge. The houses all looked the same and the parking lots were filled to the brim with cars. Remembering that I couldn't find his house last night it made it harder to remember when I even left my car, or even if it would even be there. I wandered for a really long time, longer than I would have liked. The property was a collection of tiny circles, all put together, honestly I'd assume it was to bother me or make my life harder. The process took me almost twenty five minutes, the hook up gods must have been on my side to not have my car towed, because with these signs you'd think they would be more on top of it.

I got in my car and started the engine, I took a short minute to collect myself, look around and realize I would never ever come back to this place. Our one time together was fun and all, though it was a little too lovey for my typical hook-up. I backed up my car and soon let the cold air blow away my hangover and my sex hair from the night before,

knowing that if anything could make things new again it would be the fall air. As I drove home I called one of my friends to see what everyone else did that night.

“I went to a guy’s house, and I think so did the others,” she soon told me. Dang. I thought I was the only lucky one last night.

“Wow, that’s crazy,” I said back, not caring much about everyone else’s experience because I was then struck with the stress of who I would have to hook up with in the future. That was the nice part of always knowing and now instead I was struck with the unknown again.

As all of my roommates made their way home we found ourselves gone again in search of food, bagels. We all stood in line and waited for it to be their turn. We talked about our nights, all trying to pretend as if we didn’t care, but I knew I did. Though just as I was about to feel sorry for myself I looked down and had a missed message...

You gave me the Irish Goodbye this morning.

Was he trying to say that it was rude of me to just up and leave? What was the problem? Didn’t he get what he wanted, our work here was done? He made it seem like I had hurt his feelings and when he finally wanted to tell me that he had a lot of fun last night and wanted to do it again I was in shock. Would this really go anywhere?

It's Soul is a Part of Mine

I drink a lot of seltzer water. I drink a lot of regular water too, but I always have empty seltzer cans on the floor of my car, and you can hear the clanking and clunking every time I make a stop or turn. If you were to go into my car I'm sure you'd be a little disturbed by it, though I don't usually have guests in my car. My car is usually only filled with my body and collections of odds and ends, such as pens, books, hair ties, shoes, clothes, and receipts, nothing really of value.

Over the years though I've grown to have collections of things in my car, things I'll almost never use, but can't part with. If you were to look at the rest of my life it's rather minimal, I like the idea of being able to quickly be able to pack everything up if need be and not carry much excess.

My mother is the one to often remind me, "don't get attached to material things, if you can buy it again it doesn't matter". I agree with this mentality in all things except my car, my first car that was really mine, that I didn't share with a member of my family, or have someone else's name on the registration, or someone else was paying the bill for.

My 2011 Kia Soul was purchased the year I graduated from college, and it was with me for a long time, until it wasn't, but that's another story and we'll get there. Before I talk about that story or about the car I have now I should tell you about my first few vehicles that took me through monumental stages in my life.

I got my permit the day I turned sixteen. I, like many others, asked my mom on my birthday to drive me to the DMV so I could take the test and soon be one step closer to

driving all on my own. Six months and so many days later I got my license I looked for almost any excuse to use it and be able to drive. My only option for a car to drive me around was my moms big blue Toyota Sienna minivan, complete with broken handles, a missing mirror, and a broken door button.

This was the car I drove my siblings around in, and the car that I would drive my friends around in. This car barely had any “cool” features, and to listen to music we had to use a weird cassette player that connected to our phones, but it was the way we could drive around at night and pick up more friends to eat French fries and milkshakes and go to parties. We weren’t supposed to be driving around past midnight, but that was our secret and somehow we never got caught.

This was the car that was meant to be filled, my mom had it to be filled with small children and as I was getting ready to graduate high school and therefore no longer did the Sienna serve its original purpose for such a large vehicle.

It didn’t keep me from using the car as a place to cry every time I got a rejection letter from college, and I would act as if it didn’t bother me, but the only one that knew was the big blue van. When I realized I wouldn’t be able to leave for college, because the only school that accepted me was in the next town over, I laid my forehead on the old worn steering wheel and cried for the last time, letting the teardrops fall onto the steering wheel’s horn. My folks got rid of the van soon after.

When I made the decision to stay home for college my parents agreed to buy a newish car that I would share with my mom so that I could get to and from school. One day in the middle of June my mom pulled up in a 2006 Audi wagon, the car that would see most

of my college years. I loved that car as much as I hated going to school. It was there when I was eighteen saying goodbye to my friends as they went off to college. We all sat in the car together and said things like, "I'll see you soon" and "Please come visit me." While I planned to visit their college campuses, and I knew I'd see them again it still was an overwhelming feeling knowing that when I pulled away I was filled with uncertainty. I went through my first few weeks of school numbly only telling my car how much I really hated school, and how mad I was for being so stupid as to not find another school to go away to. I let it's speakers fill my ears with my sad music as I sat in Salem State's parking lot crying.

"Will I ever like it here?" I'd ask myself over and over.

I'd cry over boys that didn't love me and grades I didn't think I deserved and coming to realize what it felt like to be really alone for the first time.

I let the floor of my car house the books I never brought to class, and writing I ripped to shreds not thinking anything would ever come out the way I wanted to it on the pages.

"I should change my major," I'd sometimes say, knowing I never would.

I would sometimes sit in my car and write papers on my computer or edit what I printed out. The walls of the Audi were tight and snug so it felt like the most comfortable way to write a paper when I couldn't find a space at Dunks.

My backseat and trunk were never bare or empty. I treated my car as if it was a second bedroom, there were bottles of vodka and gin, and empty dunks cups and clothing and more pairs of shoes than days in a week. I probably spent more time in my car than in

my house that first year of college because frankly I made my schedule with little to no guidance so I was always on campus.

And there were the nights after class when I just didn't want to be home and wanted to drive around, my car would take me on the long winding roads that make up route 127, somewhere just far enough away from home where I could cry or scream or yell without people asking questions as to why. I'd let myself be comfortable in the absence of others, and from time to time when I felt particularly like I needed a friend I'd put more clothes in my car and go visit my friends at school. I'd see how great and independent their lives were and cry all the way home the next day. I had that car for a few years, until I wasn't able to have it anymore.

I can remember the last time I drove the car, I was going to a party in Swampscott and then all of the sudden it just stopped, and that was it. I watched them pick the car up to be towed and after that I never rode in it again.

After that it was a string of cheap cars that my dad would buy and flip and sell again, nothing that I loved the way I loved that Audi wagon. These cars weren't really mine, so I never felt that they understood why I didn't want to go to class or finish my homework or why I felt it was better to hang out in a car than in the dreaded commuter "lounge". To put it simply, these flip and sell cars just didn't get me.

In April 2017 a month before I was to graduate from college I begged my parents to help me find a car that I could have all for myself, and I had saved up money for. I wasn't really picky, except I wanted it to have a sunroof like my old car did. We spent a few weeks looking until we found an ad of an older man selling a used 2011 dark blue Kia Soul. The

man who had the car before me kept it neat and tidy with barely a crumb to be found. I promised myself I wouldn't do what I had done before, I wouldn't let my car become the mess it once was. At least I tried for a while to keep my car in a similar way, though just like before I let my car see my whole self and become a place that I could "live in" again. I let things get comfortable and I let the crumbs fall and seltzer cans and coffee cups stack back up.

When school would end for the year those books that lived in my car would be removed and other things would be replaced in its place. It has taken me through summers of sand and beach chairs and bags and towels that don't seem to move from June to September. The sand is the one thing that may never leave the car unless I were to pick it up grain by grain.

This car saw my tiny tears as I pulled up to Salem State for what I assumed would be the last time, it waited outside of my graduation and took me home when it was over.

The path of this car soon changed, it was no longer taking me to Salem State, but instead it was taking me to Charlestown and Jamaica Plains and all other boroughs of Boston, MA. My car, still filled with clothing and shoes and Dunkin' cups was now also filled with not my own work for graduate school, but the work of my tenth grade students. This Soul helped me figure out what I was good at and everyday took me to where I never felt alone and when I was hired for my first real job it was there to make sure I made it into my classroom and every single day.

In November 2018 I didn't know I wouldn't see my Kia Soul again, I didn't know when I left my car at my parents house my little sister would take it upon herself to drive

my car into another car. I didn't see the car after that, strangely it made me too sad to see what had happened to my baby. I let this car get towed and hit and dirty, filled with dogs and people and furniture, if anyone was going to crash it I wanted it to be me, but I didn't get to. After that I wasn't really sure what I would do, I had loved the car so much that I didn't know what I would have after that.

I could get any car I wanted to, well within reason, but what was it going to be? My parents showed me picture after picture of cars, but I had very specific things that I wanted to have, things that you would only find in a Kia Soul. My old car had these weird disco-like colorful lights that seemed to be the best part of my car. They would change according to mood and music and I knew I wasn't ready to live with them. As my car rental was coming to an end via my insurance policy, I drove down with my mom to the south shore of Massachusetts to look at a Kia Soul, only one year newer than my old one. Even if I didn't like it I still would get to go to Ikea in Stoneham, so I wouldn't be too disappointed.

When we pulled up to the tiny car dealership and an hour later I bought another Soul and just as before it fit right in. The lights were the same and they brightened up the sad car rides and the breakups and breakdowns. The car may have been a different color and had different things in it, but it still had the same feeling I felt the year before.

This car moved me from one apartment to the next and for the last year it's held a giant sun hat that hasn't been in use since September. It still has sand and seltzer cans and now for some reason it has a collection of jackets ready for any season. I still pile my friends and my groceries and do the same things I did before only on four new wheels.

I've let my cars know it without them judging me. My cars have housed my secrets and my sadnesses. It doesn't tell people that I'm secretly going to see a boy I shouldn't or going to the mall when I shouldn't be spending money or eating at McDonald's when I'm training for a half marathon. It takes me to the places I want to but shouldn't without judgement, it doesn't try to tell me what is right and what is wrong.

While my mom is right in the idea that you shouldn't be attached to things, yet I think cars, my car this is something different. I might not have to explicitly be attached to one car, but instead the idea of what a car means. My cars have given me freedom, allowed me to venture away from what was difficult, allowed me to drive towards what I wanted and needed in life, such as my friends, my students, and provided me protection and solace.

The four wheels in a way are connected to me and keep me moving forward without stopping. These cars are what kept me moving in more ways than one and most importantly they kept me from standing still.

My Half Marathon Journey

Training: October 2019-March 2020

When I realized I couldn't call you anymore it was 7:26am on a Tuesday morning and I thought I should do something about it. I mean, you weren't a bad person, or someone that really ruined my life, but you were just really really selfish and you thought you knew what was best for me when I knew you didn't. You wanted me to be all these things, like be more active and be more like you, and less like me, but I like being me, so I absolutely was not going to change a thing for you.

I needed to do something absolutely amazing though, I had a new life now. A life without you. What could I do though? What would be a monumental enough thing that would make you think that I had moved on too?

Changing my appearance was one option to mark the end of my relationship with you. Cutting my hair wasn't something I really wanted to do, but you told me once that you liked long hair and I had finally grown mine out to a point that I liked. Bangs would never look good on me either. Dyeing my chestnut colored hair would never be a good idea, especially since I had fiddled with hair dyes before. What if it looked worse? That would defeat the whole purpose of this. I could get a new boyfriend, I mean I had found one before. That would show you, that would say, "I moved on before you." That seemed like so much work though, it probably wouldn't even be worth it anyway, it would be another ghastly idea, almost as bad as bangs.

I needed to do something extreme, something you doubted I couldn't do. I probably shouldn't have cared enough to want to do something, but that's just how I am. Going

through my thoughts I sifted through some lesser memories, things that I'm glad I no longer have to put up with being told I couldn't do such as run or swim.

You were never impressed that I couldn't run. I mean, I can run for a short distance, but I never had any desire to run for "fun" or at least that's how you referred to those two mile jogs you urged me to go on with you. What is really fun about moving your legs really fast with no purpose? I couldn't find a reason.

I guess I always thought my other skills were better, there are so many other things I am able to do. I am a teacher after all, I have degrees to prove my intellectual credentials. Though when I impulsively decided to do something to prove you wrong I did feel a little dumb.

I did it though. I didn't just do a regular 5k like I had in the past, that wouldn't impress you. What would though? I knew it had to be shocking so when I pushed submit and paid the money for a half marathon I knew I must have been crazy. Probably not enough to think that this crazy choice would make you rethink things, but crazy enough to have your mind go back to a time where I didn't really run and feel sad that I never wanted to when I was with you.

When I pushed submit I let my mind wander. What would it be like when I crossed the finish line? Would I feel this weight lift from my shoulders? Would I finally not care what you thought? I had a few months to train and think about all the positives that would come to my life once I crossed that finish line.

It was helpful that I had a witness, a friend to watch me sign up so I didn't have an excuse to not do it.

“You need to ask me from time to time how I’m doing with my training for this race, got it?” I told her.

“You’ve got it,” she reassured me.

I knew if I didn’t tell anyone or didn’t have continual check ins I would probably let this fall through the cracks and pretend I didn’t really do it.

As I walked out of her classroom and let my feet slowly hit the ground I let it finally hit me. What the fuck did I just do. Was this really a good idea? I could barely run three miles...did I really just think I could run 13 miles? Let alone 13.1 was I losing my mind!? Probably.

“I’ll start on Tuesday, that’s way better than starting on a Monday.”

The rest of my Monday came and went, I figured I’d need to start eating better to train for something like this, but when I opened the fridge that night I took out some mac and cheese and a beer. Carb loading? Isn’t that what runners do?

I dreaded the end of the next day, I was more eager to stay after school with students and avoid my run. When I got home from work after only having consumed iced coffee and a cookie I put on my clothes, laced up my sneakers, and sat on my couch trying to let the magic in my old sneakers catapult me onto the road. I only had to complete two miles according to the running schedule I printed out from the online training guide so that wouldn’t be too difficult, I mean I had done that before.

When I finally walked out the door and started my music my mind went somewhere I wish it hadn’t, it went to you. I thought about you, and the few times I had to run more than a mile with you, a very rare occasion.

I could never really tell why you wanted to run with me, did you want me to look differently or was it really all about how great it would make me feel. It would always take so much coaxing from you. I usually spent the first part of my run with you stressed that I looked horrible and I never wanted to look horrible in front of you. My mind went back to the present with the cold air engulfing my lungs and started to put my feet quickly to the pavement and let my breathing increase with every step.

“God, I’m out of shape,” I thought.

Those few times I let you talk me into running with you I was always so far behind, like you wouldn’t wait for me. I guess I never really wanted you to, that’s why I always ran alone. There were those periods in our runs that you would stop and wait for me, as if you were mad my short little legs had not reached the speed or the length that your much longer legs had. Sometimes when you made it too far ahead, I would start to walk, just in the hopes that I might lose you. I would think that maybe if I took a wrong turn or didn’t follow the trail you wanted me to I would be a whole lot comfier. It’s funny to think now that having lost you is what brought me back to running.

When I finally made it home after those two miles and looked at how long it took me I can’t say I wasn’t discouraged. I saw very little hope in sight and didn’t think there was much that could really change even in the coming months. The first few runs I did were horrible and when I would travel from the street to a less sturdy trail it was like my feet were giving up on me. My mind would go to weird places, and it was as if I couldn’t find a purpose to doing this aside from trying to prove you wrong. Why did I even care what you thought anymore, it’s not like you’re watching me run everyday. I kept running anyway.

I keep my phone connected to my AirPods so when I receive a call I just tend to answer it so that their ears can be filled with my heavy breathing and be reminded of just how athletic I really am. I mean it was usually just my mom calling me to ask what I was up to, or how my day was going.

“Hey,” I said answering the phone.

I assumed whoever it was I would immediately know from their voice, but then it was yours. When I heard it I stopped, my body almost fell forward in shock, as if my head and feet weren't thinking the same things.

I started walking and tried to muffle the sound of my breathing so I didn't sound like a dog after a game of fetch. Did you know I was running? Did you call to stop me? Of course not, I reminded myself.

I'm not even going to bother replaying the conversation. You just wanted to see how I was and make sure things were good with me. Of course they were good, they were much better now that I had my new running lifestyle that was actually killing me slowly, but I couldn't tell you that.

“Uhhhh, I'm good. Can I call you later? I'm out for a run...” I told you.

You paused. Maybe you were shocked? Impressed? Confused? I didn't ask. You told me I could, it wasn't anything important. I think that day I ran the fastest, probably just to get home and call you back.

I had made it up to five miles when I really started to fall off my training. I spent two months really dedicated to working out and running that honestly I had gotten really bored

with training. It was heading into the holidays and the weather was getting colder so my motivation wasn't as strong as it was before. I continued to remind myself that even if I stopped running for the month of December I would absolutely get back to it by January first because it was a time when everyone was starting the year with new resolutions for fitness and making their lives better after everything.

January first came and went.

"I'll start tomorrow," I'd tell myself.

I never went back to running long distances after I stopped. I would occasionally run a few miles here and there, though nothing beyond three miles. I switched to just doing yoga and weight training since it never took as much time in my day. I hoped that this would help me a little, but as race day got closer the organization sent an email reminding people that what I feared would soon take place.

HAMPTONS HALF MARATHON MARCH 8, 2020

This left me with a short three weeks left to figure out if I would still run 13.1 miles or if I would just do what many had and switch to the 5k that occurred at the same time. I knew I would be able to finish that, but I would be so disappointed if I did. How could I prove him wrong if I didn't complete what I set out to do? Part of me really regretted letting him know that I was doing this, but how would I prove it to him if he didn't know. He seemed shocked when I told him a few months prior.

"I can't picture you doing that," he told me.

“Well I am,” I responded.

When I thought of that conversation again and again it was what ultimately made me decide I wouldn't change and if I needed to I'd just walk the last bit. I could do that, couldn't I? I'd still count it.

I spent the few days before looking up all the ways that I could contain my energy for the big race knowing that by mile six I probably would run out of energy on my regular diet. The night before I ate all the pasta and carby things I could. I packed energy gummies that I read gave you fuel, and I had everything laid out and packed so that I could make sure nothing would make me late. When I finally tucked myself into bed I realized I couldn't sleep, not one part of my body would relax and I soon became restless. It felt like little elves were dancing all around my head demanding that I not sleep. Maybe it was his fault because he clearly wanted me to fail. I think they finally tired because my body finally gave in and rested. I counted down the hours I would still have to sleep and they trickled away quicker than I would have liked.

Five hours. That's how much rest I was able to get in, not horrible, but not great either. My alarm went off and I finally dragged myself out of bed knowing that the sooner I did this the quicker it would be done. Slowly placing each piece of stretchy clothing on my body I let out sigh after sigh. I didn't want anyone to hear me leaving because even though I told my roommate I was doing this I didn't want anyone to talk about it or even mention it to me. I walked out the front door and it thankfully wasn't as cold as I had expected it to be, and stepped into my car knowing my mom would soon be calling me to wish me luck. I knew I didn't need luck, I needed a miracle.

I pulled up to the Dunkin' drive thru hoping that coffee would help, it's what fueled me everyday so why not.

"What can I get you?" Asked the box in the drive thru.

"Medium iced black and an order of hashbrowns," I responded.

"Okay, drive up"

I drove up where a small woman with glasses handed me my coffee and a bag in exchange for my money. I drove away and headed towards the highway. The drive would take me about 30 minutes to get all the way from Danvers, MA to Hampton, NH.

My mom called me to wish me luck.

"You'll do great," she told me, knowing it was a lie.

"Mom, I need a miracle to finish this." I told her.

She said a few more encouraging things, promising me that she would take me to get pizza and beer after, whether I finished or not as a reward for at least trying. I hung up the phone and went back to my drive. During the short thirty minutes I tried not to think about what I needed to do once I got there and instead focused on the fact that by 1pm this would all be a thing of the past.

Before the Race:

March 8, 2019 8am

I guess I should have asked someone to come meet me at the finish line or cheer me on as I ran. I mean I barely told anyone that I was even going to run so it's not really that surprising that no one showed up or had called to tell me they were on their way. The parking situation for this race was a pain last year and I assumed it would be the same this

year, but unlike last time I remembered cash to pay within the small lots close to the starting gate. I figured that if I parked closer it would make the end of my race a little easier.

There were large flags waving around as if screaming with the colors, “come here, park here!” I pulled up past the flag to a man holding a large wad of cash, I only had ones with me, but I figured that wouldn’t be a problem. Money’s money, right?

“\$10” he said.

“Here you go,” I responded, handing him my wad of a five dollar bill and five ones.

“I hate ones,” he said snatching up my money and shuffling me along”

Hmmm, that wasn’t a great way to start the day, but no matter the closer I am to the starting line, the sooner I can go home after this. I pulled into the spot I was shuffled into and took a moment to collect myself. It became a little stressful when I realized this would be the last time I could sit down for a while. I took a few more sips of coffee and ate a few fueling gummies, grabbed my fanny pack, and stepped out of the car.

It wasn’t far to where the race registration pick up was so I made my way there. The hotel where they were holding everything was called Ashworth By the Sea, and they mean it when they say it’s by the sea, really it’s just across the street from it. The Ashworth is not a very large hotel and it being the end of winter I can’t imagine they had a lot of people stay there that weren’t part of the race. When you walk through the doors there are people swarming the place, many of which were stretching or running around in an effort to warm up their bodies.

I walked to the back room in the hotel that was dedicated towards packet pick up. The room had rows of t-shirts and signs ranging from A-Z along with breaking people up according to what race they were running, many of which were only running the 5k, as I had last year. I walked up to the sign that said **S-Z Half Marathon**. As I approached the table there was a smaller sign next to the table that reminded us that now was the last time you could back out of doing the half marathon, that once you were in it you were in it. I took a moment to reevaluate if I was sure for the last time and that hint of doubt that came from you played in my head again, "Are you really sure you can actually do that?"

"Vitale," I said and the woman handed me my pin and handed me four safety pins to go along with it. As I walked away I figured I should stretch and get myself together before I walked back into the cold air that I would soon have to live in for the next few hours. I listened to the conversations that happened around me, it was nice to hear that it wasn't just me that was nervous about the next 13.1 miles.

"I don't know if I'll make it," one woman said.

"We're doing it together," one guy told who I assumed was his wife or girlfriend.

"I hope I get under two hours," another said.

These people and their conversations brought me back to you and to how stupid a mistake it was to sign up for something like this just to prove you wrong. It's not something that impacted your life at all, and honestly I didn't think you would even acknowledge that I did it when or if I even finished. I told myself I wouldn't post anything on social media unless I finished, that would be how I told you I completed without actually having to tell you.

During the Race:

March 8, 2020 10:01am

It was a few minutes before 10am when we all walked out to the starting line, I tried to stay pretty far in the back so that I wouldn't get trampled by all of the eager people because frankly I was the least eager of them all. They quieted us all down to begin the playing of a poorly pre recorded Star Spangled Banner, no singer accompanied the music, just the staticky anthem coming from large speakers at the front of the line. When the music ended they kicked the race off.

The race was done in two parts. The first was with those in the 5k, and to make the first three miles of the race seem the easiest, or at least that's how it felt with me. I had done that part of the trail before so it wasn't too hard, very flat and there wasn't much to do, but run.

I didn't mind those first three miles, I went really slowly and honestly I was probably just barely keeping up with those that were walking it. The area that we were running through was the main tourist part of Hampton Beach, it went by other hotels and restaurants. Very few were open because most of the people that were even in the area at the time were only there to be in the race or watch it take place. I tried to reserve my energy for way later in the race, three miles was such a short part of it and even when that was over I still had ten miles to go. When those three miles were over it really hit me that I couldn't turn back. Mile four through six was along the coastline of Hampton Beach, it was incredibly windy and the water was at high tide. There were waves that crashed over the tops of the walls causing the runners to be misted by the salty water air. I can say that it

wasn't my favorite part about the race because all I could picture was slipping and breaking my ankle or something else bad happening and not being able to finish the race.

Unlike the beginning of the race we spent a large portion of the race running through a residential area. There were collections of people standing on their porches and on the side walks so that they could watch everyone as they ran by. After mile seven things started to become a blur for the next five miles, I couldn't figure out if I was just tired or bored. There were the occasional people that had tiny cups of water for us and the singular stand that provided us with race gel in an effort to keep us going. I spent most of my run listening to podcasts and trying to keep my mind occupied reminding myself when I wanted to slow down that I had to finish to prove you wrong. As the run progressed I spent most of the time with the same people and we would almost seem to occasionally race one another or use one another as the motivation to keep going because if one of us could do it all of us could. When I made it to mile 11 I knew I would make it, I wouldn't be doing well, but I made it. By that point I was really hurting and I started walking a bit, I knew if I stopped though I wouldn't be able to start back up. It's hard to explain, but my body had started keeping this motion going so that it couldn't stop.

When I made it to mile 12 I was so excited. There were no words to describe the feeling I felt. For the first time in a while you left my mind. I knew that I didn't really do this for you, it was for me, it was so I could prove that I could do it. It was nice to keep moving forward, I used the last of my energy to keep myself from stopping. My knees hurt, my hips hurt, and I really just wanted to sit down, but I had so little to go that I couldn't stop. Seeing the end in sight I called my mom, I figured I should facetime her because really

she was the one who wished me luck in the first place and I needed someone to witness this happening.

When I crossed the line and they announced my name I realized it took me until six months after my breakup to realize that this was the best thing I could have done for myself. It was an amazing thing to be able to push myself way farther than I thought I ever would.

They handed me my ribbon that declared that I finished, it was heavy and said finisher, and that was me, a finisher. I went back inside the Ashworth, grabbed a beer and sat down. I probably should have stretched or something when I hit the floor, but I didn't, instead I drank three beers, ate some crackers, and got up. I could barely walk now so I was glad that my car was close. The woman waving the flags in the parking lot was gone and many of the cars had left. I hobbled along back to my car alone, ribbon around my neck, and I slid my hurt body into my car and drove home.

I made it home by 1:45.

I was ready for pizza and beer and for a good nap. My legs started feeling worse and worse, but I figured my mom would be here soon and I'd be ready to stuff my face.

"Are you going to ever do that again." My mom asked.

I didn't really know how to answer that question, would I? The fact that I could barely move my legs told me no, never again, though my head told me yes. I shrugged my shoulders and gave my typical response of maybe, that wasn't a yes or a no.

Teaching is like a Forest Fire

My day starts about 5:30am, I lay in bed for about fifteen minutes before I get ready for work. I really hate waking up this early, I would rather stay in bed. I work at a large public high school in Charlestown, MA, that's about 45 minutes away on a regular day. The school has six floors and with it comes lots of stairs. The students I teach range from fifteen to eighteen years old, so they usually have more energy than I do so I need every ounce of rest I can get in.

I don't spend much time getting ready, I usually don't wear makeup or anything out of the ordinary because I'm only required to just look "put together". It's still dark out when I'm leaving, but I pick up my bag and drag my body into the cold morning air so that I can start my day, by now it's about 6:06am.

I always need coffee, and it's the only thing that gets me moving in the morning. I go to the same coffee place every day, they know my order and they know what I like so it's a sense of comfort seeing the same faces. My same student everyday reminds me that I have a coffee addiction, and I really should work on that. He's only half kidding. As soon as my coffee is in my hand I'm off for my forty ish minute drive.

Commuting isn't my favorite thing, but I've found over the last three years that the quiet in my car in the early morning keeps me from hating the drive too much. I try to listen to music or different podcasts to bring my mind somewhere else as I drive down Route One.

My route sometimes changes and I go based on traffic or the weather. I pull into the parking lot at work around 6:55am. I don't have to sign in until 7:20, so I sit in my car until

7:00. Getting out of my car collecting my things I go across the field in the main school building, walking up the stairs to sign in and go to my office. By now it's almost 7:20 and I need to get to my first classroom, and the quiet part of my day is now over.

To me each day of teaching is like a forest fire. Things happen quickly and there is constant chaos and if something is even the tiniest inconvenience in their day my students get nothing done. When you watch movies about teachers and students you see them all often quietly in their rows and they raise their hand to ask questions, and if they really like the teacher they bring you an apple.

My day has very little in the way of apples and quiet rows, instead my day can sometimes be compared to having a forest fire and only being able to put out one or two trees at a time. From 7:30 until 1:49 they don't stop and they continue to have problem after problem and question after question.

While it may sound horrible and hectic, these seven hours are the most rewarding part of my day.

While the beginning of the day is often the slowest, the first period, we call A block, is greeted by a few students and they trickle in slowly. Many of them take the subway or an MBTA bus so rarely are students on time. I tend to stand in the back and answer emails or do some writing, and check in the students as they spend their time independently reading. They tell me about their books and they tell me about their yesterday and their today and anything else they may want to share.

My B block is my favorite block and my favorite class to teach. It's filled with big personalities who I've had for a few years. There are some students that I had my first year

of teaching so I know what they like and need and what works best for that. It's helpful and hurtful all at the same time, but they sit with me while they do their work. For some reason proximity is what they want, they don't like to do their work unless someone they trust is right there next to them. Sometimes I feel like a crutch, they don't ever seem to know what to do by themselves if they don't have someone mothering them throughout the day.

C block is the hardest part of my day. It is always filled with the most energy and the most excitement and the biggest personalities. They come in ready to drive me crazy, "MISS, MISS, MISS, I NEED HELP!!!!", they yell across the room.

This block has lunch smack in the middle of it so we only get one really productive half. By the time people get back the entire place is off task and unfocused so sometimes we color or just sit and talk.

D block is my off block, it's usually quiet and peaceful and no one bothers me or asks anything of me for 42 minutes. I try to make sure that I get this time to do other things before my last block, but most of the time I don't get it.

"Miss, are you busy?" One asks.

"Miss, can you help me?" Another jumps in.

I can never say no, so I open the door to the students or leave my office to make sure they get the help that they need. They complain about the food I'm eating or that I'm not paying enough attention to them, though I continue to remind them that I don't have to be helping them.

"You don't need a break, you're fine," they tell me.

So I sit there and help them, answering each question in between my bites of food. I keep snacks in my desk because I like to always be able to eat, though more often than not my snacks are given to other students. It's much easier for me to control things with the students if I can bribe them with chips and popcorn.

The bell finally rings, usually as I just finish my last bite of lunch. The hallways are filled with shuffling students, waiting to just finish their day. They are filled with so much energy, just ready to go home.

E block is the end. It's not any easier or simpler, but everyone at this point is a little more tired and they just want to get work done and go home or to wherever the next part of their day takes them. It takes a while to have everyone in the room though and get started. When you finally get one student sitting down another gets up and for the first five minutes my partner teacher and I have to go through the same cycle for the first few minutes.

When everyone is finally settled class begins and ends over the course of about sixty minutes. It's never really the end though, even after the bell rings many hang around to ask more questions and talk and tell us about how they're feeling.

It's not bad, I never really have a bad day, I love my job. My only problem is there are constant complaints, everyone is always upset about something. They are always tired or hungry or sleepy, honestly it's like I have a whole mess of giant babies.

By around 2:45 I'm finally able to leave and head home. I walk back to my car, going the same way I did hours before. The parking lot is now much less full and my bag is both heavier and lighter having left things at work and taken more home.

I get in my car to drive back home with much more traffic than before. It takes almost an hour to get home. The traffic stacks up as I get onto Route 93 and in small pieces it allows me to go faster and slower as I move from 93 to Route 95. At times the drive can be a little faster or slower, but my car always makes sure that I make it home. Route 95 turns into 128 and I know I'm almost there, home is only ten minutes away. I get off at Exit 23, park my car, collect my things, walk in the house, and finally sit down and take a break.

We're So Young

"You're sooo young."

A typical response I receive when my sixteen year old students find out how old I really am. It's always funny when they think I'm thirty years old considering teachers shouldn't be young to them. I remind them that I'm not thirty, but I'm still a student so I understand how they're feeling.

Being a student can really really suck.

I've spent my last twenty years of my life being a student, something that I find a great comfort in and something that I fear to leave behind. It's an identity that I hold close and something that I find easy to fall back on, despite not wanting to do the work or take on the extra things that come from the title of student.

Being a student is comforting. For myself there was never really a sense of being lonely. You were never lonely in a classroom because you can look around at people who are both the same and different from yourself, there are teachers and people there that keep you grounded and secure. It's something that has always kept me feeling warm and loved and safe. Classrooms setups can all be different. Some rooms are designated into rows and groups and circles, all of which are meant to bring us all together, to keep the conversations, the discussions and the learning going.

When I became a teacher it was by accident, it was a way for me to fill time before I got my masters, something that even now I'm not sure I really wanted to do, but I knew I wanted to be a student again. Being a teacher to me means that I have to have all the

answers. I didn't want to be the one with the answers and still that's the thing that scares me the most. What if I don't say the right thing? Or what if I just don't have the answer at all.

There is a specific type of person that I always associated with being a teacher. Have you ever seen the movie *Matilda*? In the movie it shows this teacher Ms. Honey who lives up to her name. She is sweet and kind and has all the answers. That's not me and in a way I don't know if I really want that to be me and sometimes I get nervous that I don't want to be a teacher at all.

This comes from my own collection of private insecurities that in a way push me into this feeling of regret or disappointment and sometimes I'm even scared that I don't know if I am doing the right thing or making the right choices with my students. I wonder if I had done things differently or not at all where I would be. It's the tiny thoughts that run through all of our heads as we look towards the next phase of our lives and for me I have to remember that there are all have the option to keep growing.

It's weird for me to think that when I walk across the stage at graduation one last time or receive a large piece of paper it catapults me back into the uncertainty I felt years ago when I first walked across the Salem State stage in an effort to move forward.

When I began this collection of essays I think I was looking for a way to make sure that I had proof that I had grown up, that I had messed up some relationships to the point

of perfection. Does that make sense? Because now as I look back on what I've accomplished I'm still not sure that I made it any farther than really where I started and I think that's okay. I've started to understand that through everything it's the mistakes that I've made and the things that I've regretted that move me into the future and move me forward.

At first my enrollment at Salem State made me feel as if I came from a collection of mistakes, my parents not getting married, me not working hard enough, and yet from that I was able to move into the future.

I remember the first day I ever stepped onto the campus, I had no intention of going to Salem State, let alone apply to it, though my dad scheduled a tour for us to go on and only being seventeen I really didn't have much of a choice about going or not. So we went, and I shuffled my feet unhappily as I followed along with a group of other perspective students. I remember the duct taped floor of the Sullivan Building and thinking, "what type of school does this to the floor?" I knew it wouldn't be mine.

As any seventeen year old would be I didn't want to apply or even go there knowing that my parents had picked it out in a way for me, instead I applied to other schools, ones that were out of my "reach" and the other appealing actor of being far away from Beverly, Massachusetts, Salem State was in the next town over, I'd be a commuter, when so many of my friends from high school, were going away to school and I longed to have that in my life. After I had sent out all of these applications I finally agreed to apply to Salem State, my

parents paid for the application so I figured it would get them off my back, I mean maybe they would reject me, remembering the awful essay I included.

I watched everyone receive their college acceptances and as months passed by after submitting my applications I slowly received back rejection after rejection, waitlist after waitlist, until one day I received my one acceptance, Salem State University. With this one acceptance letter I knew what I would be doing for the next year of my life, as summer 2013 came and went it came time for my first day of school. I saw the pictures all of my friends were posting about their new friends and dorms and all the partying that you can't really do when you still live with your parents.

I was miserable, I had spent two months wishing that I could have gone away and blaming my parents for making me apply and quickly found myself applying to other schools to transfer thinking that I don't care about the extra money I'd be spending. To me being eighteen meant living away from home with all your new friends and to be "cool" in college does not mean having no friends and a part time job.

If you had told me on my first day of school I would be sad to depart and even more so that I would come back for more I never would have believed you. My eighteen year old self couldn't think beyond my single unhappiness I thought I had, the mistakes that led me to where I was. Over the past six years I have made amazing friends and been influenced by the types of teachers I never would have met outside of Salem State. Very few of us believe that our parents were right, and that for once they really knew what was best, but here I am six years later so thankful they were.

Salem State University has given me more in six years than I ever could have imagined, and it instilled in me that you end up where you are supposed to, because I know this was where I was supposed to be despite it taking so many years to prove that to myself.

Even after all this and all the time that has gone by and all the mistakes I've made I stand by the idea from a tiny fortune cookie I got when I was fourteen saying, it can't rain all the time. Despite things being bad or not where I think they should be it's nice to be able to say that things have changed and that growth happens even in the most unlikely ways. If you aren't able to see where you should be or where you came from there isn't a chance to appreciate it all and you lose the idea of your mistakes. I'm too young to be done with mistakes. I think we're all too young.