

# BEMIDJI

STATE UNIVERSITY

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## Impossible Year

Creative and Professional Writing

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HONORS PROGRAM


Bemidji State University

Honors Program

Impossible Year

by

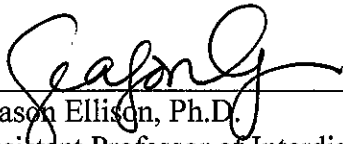
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## Abstract

This thesis features three non-fiction stories that take place mainly during my junior and senior years of college. In *Life on 119<sup>th</sup> Street*, I reflect back on the years growing up in my childhood home and my parents' abusive relationship. Despite this, I also bring to light the positive relationship I had with my parents and the happy childhood they gave me and my sister. I talk about the dogs we had, particularly a Great Dane Duke who was given away, as well as the tense few years before the divorce. For example, I describe in detail a stressful fight I remember witnessing at my house when I was sixteen. A focus is spent on the last summer at my home (following my sophomore year of college in 2016) before it foreclosed for good in May of 2017. I relate this to the difficulties I face now with letting the house go, such as a scene at the end of the piece where I say goodbye to the house and to my dog Duke, not knowing that it would be my last time seeing him. The undertones of this piece are about divorce, loss, letting go, and the family changes I undergo in the matter of a year. At the heart of it is me struggling to make peace with everything I lost, as well as the happy and dark memories of living at the house.

The second piece, *Starlight*, takes on a different tone as I reflect back on my first relationship with a woman. Though it was short-lived and not meant to be for a variety of reasons, I struggled with the heartbreak for a while following the breakup in February 2017. Though I moved on long ago and do not think much about her anymore, I wanted to write about the times we shared and the things she taught me. I narrow in on scenes of adventures we took with her friends and meaningful moments on dates. At the end, I touch on the dissolution of the relationship and why things ended up the way they did. Even so, I note that things eventually got

better and I was able to grow from the experience, build a new relationship, and still occasionally look back with a smile.

*Golden Days* sort of picks up where *Starlight* left off: where I was grappling with heartache but found happiness in spending time with Lindsey, my girlfriend now. Back then we were best friends and I did not know she had feelings for me. When she finally came out to me was when things changed for us. I focused on the beginning memories we had together, such as cuddling for the first time and listening to music. We grew closer but things grew complicated, too. What I don't directly mention in the piece but only touch on, was that her parents were against LGBT relationships and raised Lindsey to believe they were immoral. Of course, her viewpoints changed when she realized she loved me. Her parents were horrified when they found out, but are a bit more open to us being together than they were before. Still, it's been a rocky road.

All relationships are hard at times, but LGBT ones in particular can be made especially difficult due to other factors straight couples do not have to deal with or even consider. I am proud of my identity as LGBT, but I do not want it to be the most defining characteristic about me. Yes, we are the same gender, but besides that we are no more different than straight couples. At the end of the day, it does not matter whose arms you occupy. If it's a healthy, happy relationship, that's all that's important. Through it all, it's the same love.

### Artist Statement

If you are going to write nonfiction, then do it honestly, even if the truth is difficult to face; even if you risk hurting others or putting yourself in a vulnerable place. Because at the end of the day, it is your story, and yours to do with as you wish. Your words should be heard. This last summer the words were growing inside me, multiplying and bubbling in my chest, begging to meet the paper. I didn't listen for a while, but now they're out.

This year has been wild, testing me in ways I could never have imagined, bringing so many permanent changes that I am still trying to figure out how to cope with. However, I have a few best friends that got me through these hard times: my roommate Sam, Ashley, my friend since childhood, and my girlfriend Lindsey. They are very important people that play different roles in my life. I don't know where I would be without them. It's not that my family isn't loving and supportive. They definitely are. They have helped me so much and gave me a wonderful childhood. But when my parents decided to divorce and the house was subsequently lost, my friends were there for me. That summer of 2016 I did not want to talk or write about it. I tended to keep my feelings inside because I just couldn't speak them out loud. When I was ready though, I opened up and my friends helped me through it. At the time Lindsey wasn't my girlfriend, but after facing a painful breakup in February, she became a larger part of my life.

We have known each other since high school but were more of acquaintances back then. We had classes together and participated in a school club. Coincidentally, we both ended up

going to BSU, where we became much closer. It was not long before we were best friends and going to hockey games together and watching movies in my dorm. At the beginning of this year she finally admitted her feelings for me, which changed our relationship again for the better. We have our petty fights and moments of disagreement, but have so much love for each other. She was and continues to offer support and encouragement. I am able to talk to her about anything and be my complete self around her. It felt that way even before we started dating. We are there to nonjudgmentally listen to and help one another through the hard times.

Losing the house is still an incredibly difficult thing to deal with. Back in July, when the house officially went up for sale, I visited it one last time and walked through the yard. It was a very emotional experience to peer into an empty house and see a dumpster where a car used to be. The lawn chairs that were my favorite to sit outside in were piled into its colossal, metal frame. The basement was a wasteland, which was impossible to imagine. The entryway and kitchen upstairs contained nothing. The table, chairs, and couch had probably been carelessly tossed out the sliding door on the second floor, the door that led to nowhere, where a deck that was never built should have been. Whereupon my parents dragged the furniture to the fire pit to be burned, like the life they had created together. I thought maybe by coming back I could make peace with the situation, like the shattered remains might start to heal. But healing takes a lot of time, and even at that, some pieces of you are irreparably damaged.

My capstone deals with a lot of loss. I try to be as honest and straightforward as I can in writing about it. My work can sometimes be poetic in nature because I do enjoy writing poems as well. I like to include vivid details and evoke images, as well as come up with my own similes to describe things. I do my best to paint a picture of people and set scenes. What I have discovered

over the last couple of years is that I tend to focus on others in my writing and expose myself through them. I like to write about the people in my life and my relationships with them, even if they are in the past. Everyone who comes into your life has something to teach you and holds a purpose at some point. They have something to say, perhaps a different perspective and ideas you had never considered. Bringing their words to life through the use of dialogue in your work is something that takes a lot of skill, but it is something I work toward and have improved on. I think it is important to include these aspects in nonfiction as it makes an experience uniquely yours and allows a reader to get lost in a piece of writing.

Creating scenes is something I also find important. Through the use of sensory images, you can reveal aspects of yourself and others to the reader. This can be as simple as describing the environment or naming a song that's playing, the things you smell and the people you see. Humans are highly visual creatures, but that doesn't mean you have to only stick to sight. Add some olfactory (smell) or tactile (touch) images. Gustatory (taste) can be tricky to incorporate, but sometimes it can be used depending on what you're writing about. Getting the reader right in the moment with me is something I aim to accomplish. Of course, it is good to write about what happened, but this can be interwoven with actually illustrating it. It will definitely hold your reader's attention more if you describe specific experiences and provide details through the five senses. More so, you can avoid clichés because it is your original imagery. You can bring a lot more understanding to your reader about yourself and the people around you by including some scenes.

I think the reader can really get to know you if you take some steps out of your comfort zone. I don't restrict myself to writing only about safe, comfortable topics. It's good to take note



of the ordinary or happy experiences, but that's not what life is all about. We don't read to hear about perfect people. Personally, I am much more interested in books that have to offer some dysfunctional, troubling, or mysterious elements. But as writers we can't reach this level if we aren't open-minded to the vast amount of possibilities, if we only stick to what we know or what is appropriate. You have to take risks. If something is calling you, if an idea or image won't leave your head, then that's a clue that it is pretty important and demands to be written. A couple years ago, when I was a sophomore just getting into my writing classes, I was careful not to say anything too revealing in my work, such as things relating to sexuality, family life, or mental illness. I stayed away from anything emotional or serious so others wouldn't judge me. The first real risk I took was when I wrote a paper for my nonfiction II class that detailed what it was like to have claustrophobia and panic attacks. It was an open account of my struggles growing up and I was petrified to read it out loud to the class.

I feared being so vulnerable, that they would laugh at me. Instead what I got were understanding looks and comments. No one was there to judge me, just to listen. It was an enormous deal for me that acted as a turning point. I gradually started taking more and more chances, touching on being LGBT and my insecurities about finding a job. I grew to learn that the familiar faces I saw in my English classes wanted to offer constructive feedback on my work. They wanted to help, they wanted to hear. Through our shared experiences we grew into something much greater than a class: a unit, a team. That course shaped me in so many ways as a person, writer, audience member, student, and friend.

Stepping out of your comfort zone can really help you to grow as a person, but one of my biggest fears in putting this project together is that I would hurt others in the process. That was

never my goal. Though I emphasize telling the truth in spite of what other might think there was always a part of me that imagined how hurt my parents might be if they ever read the piece about the house. I was so scared of painting my parents in a negative way, of giving the wrong idea that they weren't good parents. I think like any other parents they tried their best and didn't give themselves enough credit. Like any good parent they probably blamed themselves for things they had no control over. But they were so much better than they thought and made a positive impact on my life. Yes, they hated each other, but they always loved me and my sister. So, by writing this I worried that I was being too harsh, maybe *too* honest. I came to realize though that this is my story. It is going to be different than someone else's in my family, and it's okay to have my own perspective and describe how I saw things as they happened around me. For far too long, I kept quiet and simply wrote in my journals how I felt. Sometimes no one would bother to ask. This is my finally speaking up about what happened in my house. It certainly isn't the whole story, and it doesn't always show the positive memories, but it offers a glimpse of what it was like for me.

On a similar note, I was very apprehensive about my second piece detailing a past relationship I had. I struggled with myself, if I was really doing the right thing by including it. Overall I was afraid of making my current girlfriend feel betrayed. I didn't want to give the impression that my ex was somehow more important than she was. That simply isn't true. The things I wrote about were in the past, and Lindsey is my future. I definitely agree that it is important to focus on the present and the people who matter now, but that doesn't mean you shouldn't reflect on who was a part of your life. In the piece I look back on how we met and our notable memories together, the adventures we took up north. Farther than I had ever been before: a half mile from Canada. But then I also go on to explain the things I never said and why it just

didn't work out in the end. I don't think I have anything to feel bad about for writing this, but I did before. I have made a lot of mistakes in my relationships. We all have. I can try to make up for them; I do believe that I am a good romantic partner. But somehow it feels like the things I say don't always come out the right way, or get lost before they even come.

I worry about hurting people, so I try to avoid saying things that might do so. I know that it is important to be honest even if the truth will hurt. It's something that I have been working on over the years, both as a writer and a person. Sometimes you only really get one opportunity; so it's best to let them know how you feel before it's too late. My writing seems to reflect this belief. It seems to be an underlying theme in my piece called "Starlight." I like to write uncensored about what's on my mind, what happened, what was said, what I experienced, what I thought. The fact that I tend to get a little nervous about how others will react goes to show who I am as a person. I care about how they feel.

Another reason might be the crippling self-doubt I have about my writing and future. I know I am a good writer, but there's always a voice telling me I'm not *good enough*. That maybe I am wasting my time in my major, even though I do enjoy my classes. More so, I know there are a lot of opportunities for writing jobs, but *is it something I want to do for the rest of my life?* If not, what is? Everything feels so rushed; I only have one semester left after this one and I wish I had more time. I wish I could let this capstone project sit for a while. I am rushing to get homework done since I work every weekend. In other words, time feels like it's running out, and I blinked and it was already the end of the semester. What will I go on to do after college? What will happen when my safety net is removed and they're forcing me to jump? I've been going to school for 18 years. That's nearly my whole life. It's all I know. I also know that writing and

literature have given me a place “to be,” to exist freely and discover myself and my abilities. It has given me new perspectives and knowledge about not only writing techniques, but the world around me. I wouldn’t be who I am today if not for the books I read, the teachers who shaped me. Writing is my outlet, my way to breathe and make sense of life. Maybe it was what I was meant to do, who I was meant to be. Who I am today will be different than who I am in May, when I graduate. And that person will be different in 21 more years. It’s impossible to have your entire life figured out when you have barely just started it. The pieces in my capstone will take on a new meaning for me. They will probably still be important, but maybe the problems that affected me won’t mean as much. But today, it matters. Here are the words I never said.

## Plan to Execute

Most of this project was done in Maureen Gibbon's Capstone class in fall 2017. I wrote the pieces *Life on 119<sup>th</sup> Street*, *Starlight*, and my artist statement based on the course schedule to fulfill my capstone requirement. I submitted this to Season Ellison to view on February 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2018, but it did not fulfill the honors thesis requirements. Over March I made revisions, which included the signature page, table of contents, abstract, etc. that were necessary components of a thesis. Around this time I also wrote the piece *Golden Days*. I resubmitted it to Season on April 10<sup>th</sup>, 2018 in the correct format. The defense took place on April 25<sup>th</sup>, 2018.

## Evidence of Process

I wrote these two pieces in Maureen Gibbon's capstone class in the fall of 2017, so it was completely new work. However, I knew I wanted to write it over the summer of 2017. I had ideas of what would be in my capstone. My plan was to include both old and new work. But since there was a thirty-page limit, I struggled with space and exactly what pieces I wanted in it. Since I tend to write in great detail and draw my work out, *Life on 119<sup>th</sup> Street* ended up being seventeen pages long. I had no plans for that to happen; it's just the way I write. That left me only thirteen pages for *Starlight*, which I also knew I wanted to include from the start.

Personally I was okay with these being the only pieces, but I still doubted myself as to whether or not they were the right ones. This is highly personal work detailing both family and a romantic relationship. They were bound to hurt other people. But being in Maureen Gibbon's classes has taught me that it is important to take risks and write what *you* want, not what others want. She helped me greatly in the editing and revision processes and giving me ideas for scenes, as well as encouraging me to pursue these topics. Last summer the words were bubbling inside me, and writing about these things (especially the house) allowed my thoughts and feelings to come free. There will always be someone who does not like what you have to say, but that does not mean you shouldn't say it. The people who matter most are the ones who will support you.

In addition, another issue I faced was that of genre. Initially, when I developed my honors proposal, I wanted to create part of a fiction story (something outside my comfort range). But as last summer continued to rush by, so did the increasing pressure to write something, anything. If it was going to be fiction I would need a lot of extra time to plan ahead and start writing. At the same time, it started becoming increasingly apparent that maybe I wanted to do non-fiction after

all. I battled with myself if I really wanted to change my thesis after writing that that twelve-page proposal, if I even could change it. In the end, I talked with Season Ellison and asked if it wasn't too late to switch my thesis (for the second time, actually). She approved of the change and I sent her a two-page revised proposal detailing the changes I was making and why. Both proposals can be found at the end of the work. As with any big project like this, there have been setbacks and doubts, days where its enormity and possibilities and deadlines loomed over my shoulder; but now that I am just about wrapping it up and preparing for graduation in less than two months, I can safely say I am proud of the writing I have accomplished in my classes and how far this has come.

## Life on 119<sup>th</sup> Street

I have variations of the same dream every night. I see the simple, brown two-story house I called home for 14 years. Sometimes I am inside the house and it is completely empty, or I am still living there with my family hearing my sister shouting. Most of the time though, I am locked out, peering through the windows into my old bedroom and the downstairs area that used to be stocked full of the stuff my dad sold on his website: books, antiques, board games, old toys, Hot Wheels. But now, impossibly, everything is gone (a state I never imagined that hoarder's basement to be in). These dreams are distressing, to say the least, but even more so because they are reality.

This summer, my mom gave away our beloved Great Dane Duke, packed up her stuff, sold my childhood home, and moved to California. That is the matter-of-fact, unsugar coated truth. This may paint my mom in an unflattering light, but if you knew her and everything that happened leading up to that, you would understand her decision. I can't give you my whole life story and the 20 years of marriage that ultimately ended in divorce, or what caused the house to be foreclosed (I still don't know). All I can give is all I have left: my memories, and to shed some light on why things ended the way they did.

We had 2.5 acres of yard to run free in. On our lush, well-manicured lawn was a pond with a willow tree beside it. Beyond the massive tree and its long, leafy branches were weeds where beautiful wildflowers of various colors would grow. We had two gardens in our backyard that were well-maintained at one point, long ago. We grew corn, rhubarb, strawberries, tomatoes, watermelon, pumpkins, carrots, cucumbers, more than I can remember. Besides the food in our garden we had annuals like apples, raspberries, plums, cherries, crabapples. Since we bought the



house brand new, my dad ended up building a lot of what we had. He made a perimeter for the gardens, as well a sandbox for my sister and me with a swing set. We had a bonfire pit and he assembled a trampoline for my 12<sup>th</sup> birthday. He even built me my own room! Brick after brick and day by day in the sweltering heat; he built two retaining walls on either side of our house, including a pathway and brick stairs leading into the backyard. Suffice it to say, my dad was and is a hard-working man. That is not even the end to what he did. He spent a lot of time with us growing up. Both of my parents did.

They read to us every day, took us on walks and to the park, helped us with homework, and just generally interacted with us and took us to fun places. I had a really good childhood, maybe better than most. My younger sister Syd and I had no end to the games we'd make up. We'd jump off the swings, soaring high above the ground and then landing in the sand, the impact shooting pain up our feet. We'd defy gravity on the trampoline and dodge the deflated basketball that hopped around our feet. We'd chase our dogs around the yard, them refusing to give up their balls. I grew up with Great Danes. Throughout the years, we had three: Cosmo was our first, and after he died we got Ari. A few years later Duke. Despite what you might think, they are really good with kids and gentle giants (most of the time, anyway). Inevitably you might accidentally get hurt playing with a 200 pound animal, especially as a child. But they were such sweethearts and we had so much fun together.

Cosmo (also known as "Moose") was a huge merle Great Dane. He was dark grey with black spots and an enlarged occipital bone sticking out of his head. He was fantastic with us when we were little, playful yet making sure not to be too rough. He'd go into a play bow as you approached him, then suddenly spring up and run off with his ball. You could spend hours

chasing Cosmo. He never chased you or let go of his ball. He was extremely protective and loving. When my parents would so much as dance with each other or playfully push each other around, there was Moose to intervene, grumbling and nipping at the instigator.

One time he ate a golf ball. We called the vet in a panic, but were told that because of his size it would likely pass through his digestive tract. Sure enough it eventually came out the other end. The day he died was one of the saddest days of my life. He lived a short four years (Great Danes generally don't live long) and had been afflicted by Wobbler's Disease, which made it very difficult for him to walk or run. Mere days before his death, he had also eaten a blue-tailed skink, which years later we realized were poisonous to dogs. It took multiple people to carry him out to the willow tree, which we buried him beneath. It was the first and last time I ever saw my dad cry.

Shortly after, we adopted Ari from Great Dane Rescue of Minnesota and Wisconsin. He had the goofiest smile on the adoption website and we knew we wanted him. After the papers went through and they approved the home inspection, he had found a forever family. Ari was a "small" black Great Dane mixed with a black lab. He was so playful and excitable and it didn't take long for us to become the best of friends. We would race through the yard, each holding an end of his big, blue Jolly Ball. My feet would fly over the ground, barely making contact with the grass. When he was a puppy we would run like this a lot. I would strap on my rollerblades and ask, "Wanna go for a 'rollerblade walk'?!" Ari would pull me on my rollerblades around the neighborhood and down the highway. I would reach catastrophic speeds, the wind hitting my face and the ground falling away behind me. I would crouch down and pretend I was being pulled by a sled dog team across the Alaskan wilderness. Sometimes though he would see a

squirrel and I would hurl after him into a neighbor's ditch as he went after it. Ari was a crazy puppy and loved to run everywhere. My mom would have to chase him down in the minivan. Upon catching him she would shout, "This is it! I'm done, we're giving him back! I hate that dog!" Of course we never did, and she grew to love him, at the expense of our neighbors hating us.

Luckily, he mellowed out a lot when he grew up. Now he is content to hunt for mice in the weeds and lie in the sun, happily panting. Back at the old house, he loved to go on slow, lazy walks to the stop sign and snooze on my queen-sized bed. Ari loves everyone and is easily the best dog I have ever had. We had a scare with him back in 2016, the last summer we had the house. Out of the blue, he started getting seizures and couldn't walk very well. It was a very frightening experience to let him outside and then see him collapse on the ground, seizing. We didn't know what to make of it and simply thought it was his time. We said our goodbyes and my mom took him to the vet, where we thought he wouldn't come back out. It turned out he had Lyme disease. At some point in the summer he had been bitten by a tick that had probably gone under our eyes and hung out on his coat for days. We always made a point to check for ticks but it is easy to miss them (that summer alone I had pulled 13 ticks off myself altogether!) As unsettling as this news was, Ari was given meds and told he would make a full recovery. At an astonishing nine years old, he now lives with my dad in his apartment in Saint Cloud, which is a relief. I am glad we didn't have to lose him too.

We got Duke as a puppy from a neighbor when I was 16. He was always a peculiar dog. From the start, he was generally anxious and hated my dad. He avoided him and quickly got up from his spot growling whenever he entered a room. Duke came around to my dad a little bit,

and after a few years allowed him to pet him and give him treats. If my dad was lying on the couch Duke sometimes came over for attention. But overall when he'd come home from work or even just stand up from the couch, Duke would communicate his displeasure with rumbles under his breath and thunderous barks. Everything he did was illegal in Duke's eyes. He looked like Cosmo in that he had grey hair with black spots, except he was lighter in color and unbelievably larger. Cosmo had been huge, but Duke was over 200 pounds. A very nervous dog with separation anxiety, Duke loved spending time with his family and was in particular attached to my mom and Syd. Overall they had a strong bond with him.

He would cuddle on the couch with my mom and sit with her outside, her lounging on two chairs at the outside table bellowing of laughter at Snapchat filters and Facebook videos; while Duke contentedly lay next to her on his tie-out leash, curiously eyeing the Pitbull at the house next to us. Syd and her boyfriend Jaye loved to take Duke on walks in town, stopping at Dairy Queen, while strangers probably gawked at Duke's size. I enjoyed playing ball with him outside. He could play pretty rough and would chase me around, nudging me with the ball and playfully growling. Sometimes I would randomly sit down on the ball while it was still in his mouth and he would struggle to remove it from under my legs. In the winter, when the pond would freeze, I would run back and forth on it and Duke would slide behind me, his legs splaying out in all directions and skidding to a stop as I changed directions. Seeing a Great Dane on ice was priceless. In the summer, both dogs liked to sit in the grass beside me at the table while I read. I would take them on walks at the same time, which in itself was a sight to behold. In all, Duke gave us nothing but love and cuddles. In turn, he was given up.

There was no warning, no heads-up from my mom. Logically, she did what she had to do. There was no keeping the house and therefore no place for Duke. She knew she was leaving at the end of the summer, so to save money she sold the house and stayed at my grandma's for a few months. That meant before anything else, Duke had to go to a new home. Unbeknownst to me and my sister, she gave Duke away to a work friend sometime last May. I don't really know why I was so surprised by this or what I was expecting. She was moving to California in September. Obviously she couldn't keep him. I guess it was just the way that she failed to tell us until it was already done. On the same note, logically I knew the house would have to be sold, but I didn't think that would come until later. It was the "secretive" way in which she did things that stung. I've been told time and time again that "change is a part of life" and that "everyone loses their childhood home eventually." Clichés like that don't help me feel better. In general, change is very hard for me, and frankly I don't know of many people my age who are going through this.

I first found out when my mom came to pick me up from Bemidji on the last day of my sophomore year. It was the start of that awful last summer at home, in 2016, but of course I didn't know what I was in for. I was still blissfully unaware of all the changes that would soon befall me. To my knowledge, everything was as it should have been. It was a long drive and she wanted to go straight home, but I was eager to show her our new apartment first. She finally relented and drove there. I showed her around the spacious, mostly empty three-bedroom apartment we'd officially move into next fall, and she loved it as much as we did. As we were leaving she dropped a bomb on me in the parking lot. Looking back, so many defining moments had happened at the old apartment. Just the parking lot alone held many memories, some simply lovely and unforgettable, while others disastrous.

On that warm May day, getting back into the car in front of my building, she blurted out of nowhere, “Dad and I are getting a divorce.”

I said nothing for a second, processing this huge reveal.

“Finally!” I declared, trying to sound relieved. “Took you long enough!”

I did feel rather comforted by this information. Finally it would end. My parents would be happy. But my reaction was also very defensive. I did not want her know how much it hurt. And then it really hit me...

“Who will stay at the house?” I asked tentatively.

“We’ll have to sell it,” Mom clarified. “I can’t afford to keep up that house and yard by myself. Unless dad wants to stay there himself, it will have to go up for sale.”

I was at a loss. I was angry, at her, my dad, the whole situation. That was my childhood home. They couldn’t do this. They couldn’t tear everything apart; rip everything I’d ever known away from me. I tried to talk some sense into her as we drove out of Bemidji. I knew the divorce was imminent. There was no avoiding it. But why couldn’t they keep the house? My feelings were all fucking mixed: on the one hand I was happy for her, but on the other I was indignant, depressed, scared, confused...I toggled between emotions all summer, all contained inside of me, consuming me like a virus.

And yet watching my mom, I realized she looked so genuinely content. With the windows down and sunroof open, her voice traveled on the wind as she sang “It’s Been Awhile”

by Staind. Her long blonde hair was tousled this way and that as we raced down Highway 95 to Princeton.

Despite my personal struggle with coming to terms with this, I am happy for my mom. I really am. It is not the divorce that I've had such a hard time with. She was brave enough to leave an abusive marriage and do what makes her happy. Being at that house was not it. I always remember them fighting, even when I was a kid. Back then I think their relationship was pretty strong though. Things got to their worst when I was in high school. My sister was going through a really rough time what with having depression and anger issues. She and my parents were always fighting: screaming, throwing objects, slamming doors, stomping around. I would hide in my downstairs bedroom and play loud music to drown them out, my knees drawn to my chest, swallowed in anxiety and rage.

Sometimes to illustrate my own frustrations, I would open the basement door and slam it. If it wasn't hard enough, I would do it twice, just in spite of myself. As a teenager, I just felt helplessly in the middle of the chaos. I wanted to get out but I couldn't. Usually I took a walk to escape, kicking at the soft snow surrounding the road and letting the frigid air fill my lungs. Sometimes I would stand at the end of the driveway, still hearing the faint roar of voices, and stare at the house in wonder. A pretty house could hold so many deadly secrets. Looking at the still, silent exterior, you could never really guess what went on inside.

I couldn't tell you the words that were said over the years, just that they were fueled by hate and rage and pain. I can tell you that 2013 was an especially hard year at home, but it is difficult to remember every fight. It was somehow louder and worse than it had ever been. My mom slept on the couch and cried every day. They fought through supper and sometimes very

early in the morning when my mom would get up to clean the house. At one point my dad outright left the house to stay at a motel for a couple of days. My mom and Syd bawled because they thought he would not come back. “Divorce” seemed to be a whispered word that permeated throughout the house whenever my mom was on the phone with my aunt, discussing the repercussions of it, such as child support, when she thought no one else could overhear. It was there during the time my dad considered moving in with his best friend’s brother in Fridley. “Divorce” was always there, a possibility that could create both freedom and devastation. My mom, however, having experienced it at a young age, was not favorable of the idea, of putting my sister and me through that pain. Back then, she would have rather stuck it out and endured the abuse just for our sakes.

I was in 11<sup>th</sup> grade at the start of 2013. My aunt Trish and my cousins had moved from Santa Clarita, California to Princeton, Minnesota (my hometown), due to tensions between my aunt and uncle. My aunt had also wanted to be physically closer to the rest of the family. My uncle was a CEO at his job and therefore could not leave the state. This was very nice for me and my family as it was our first year that they had lived close by in a very long time. For the first time, we could go see them whenever we wanted. Although it was short-lived and they moved back to California after a year (my cousins needed their dad in their life); for a time being my aunt’s house acted as my second home, a place I could go to unwind and get away from the stress.

One night we were planning on going to Trish’s house right after supper, but instead my parents decided to fight. I lay helplessly in bed with tears spilling down my face, suffering from a headache, my portable DVD player blasting Kesha’s “Dancing with Tears in My Eyes.” Ari



and my aunt's Chihuahua Snoop were cuddled up to me. We had had him over and were going to bring him back to her house that night. But of course that had gotten postponed due to my parents. Hearing the volatile shrieks upstairs made me feel physically and emotionally sick. At some point Snoop hid under the bed. When my mom finally decided it was time to go, we could not get him out. Snoop cowered under my bed and refused to come out to our soft, gentle calls.

“Snoop. C'mon, Snoop. It's time to go home. Do you wanna treat?” We coaxed, trying to entice him with ham. As time passed my mom's voice grew more insistent and impatient.

“Snoop! Come on! Get out of there! Ugh!”

Finally my dad stormed downstairs swearing at us, reached under my bed, and yanked Snoop out by the scruff of his neck. In effect he bit him hard on his fingers and tore through the skin. This further enraged him as he berated and scolded the dog. We left the house in a flurry, unhappy with Snoop and frustrated at the night's turn of events. When we got to Trish's house and told her about what happened, she reacted quite unusually. She praised Snoop for biting my dad. Right in front of me, she bashed my dad and was happy he'd gotten attacked.

This was an unwise decision that had bothered my mom. It was true that my dad had done and said a lot of awful things, but it was not okay for a kid to have to hear bad things being said about their parents. It made me feel uncomfortable and torn. I didn't know whose side to be on, my mom's or dad's. I loved them both but the way my mom constantly talked him down in front of me made me feel so confused. I felt myself against him at some points. It became difficult for me to respect someone who treated my mom like shit. But then again, she didn't treat him any better. The eternal question became “who was I to believe?”

When I was older in college not much had changed. Though it was always nice to come home and see my family (especially the dogs), there would be at least a few fights between my parents. It was a toxic, stressful environment to be in. My sister was doing a lot better compared to when I was in high school, but my mom and dad were always at each other about stupid shit. The last summer was arguably the worst, and longest. They were in the midst of getting divorced, and the tension hung over the house like carbon monoxide. To be fair, both of my parents worked. Except for nights, there weren't many opportunities for them to fight. But on dad's days off, chaos would ensue.

It was always anxiety-provoking for my mom to have him home. He was bound to dig something up (literally, he dug around in the closet for something to get upset over); and then proceed to call my mom while she was at work and interrogate her over the phone. It seemed like he was constantly trying to prove her "guilt." I remember one incident that summer when I happened to be sick when dad was home. Personally, I never really had much conflict with either of my parents. So, what followed when mom was at work was surprising.

I was planning to live in my first apartment that school year with my roommates Sam and Erin. Over the summer, we had all gone home and since we weren't living there yet, we were paying half-rent for June and July. As I didn't have an actual job at the time, it wasn't possible for me to pay. My parents were helping but my dad was less than thrilled about this arrangement. That day, I had casually reminded him that my rent was due soon.

To this he retorted, "How are you going to pay for the whole school year?! I don't have the money for that! What are you gonna do?"

He exploded, telling me they wouldn't be able to pay my rent, which was freaking me out. How *was* I going to do this?

He kept on raving about it and I felt the doubt and panic build inside me. I fled the house, the door crashing after me. I hurried to the willow tree in a daze, starting to feel myself losing touch. Once under the tree I pounded the book I had been reading into the ground, striking the grass with it over and over again. I didn't know how I'd afford my apartment on my own and the thought paralyzed me. I started to sob uncontrollably and couldn't seem to get enough air into my lungs. I was hyperventilating, having a panic attack. I breathed in and out rapidly and thought bad thoughts. Just then dad was there in front of me, looking very concerned, and I didn't know how I didn't hear him. He started to apologize but I didn't want to hear it. I took off to the front yard. I retreated back to the tree once he went inside.

Shortly after mom got home and wanted me to come inside so she could ask me about what happened. I let her know how dad was treating me and then she blew up at him. I did not want to hear them fight but I felt so bad, physically and emotionally, and just wanted to lie in bed. I was sick with a virus that made me cough and my throat hurt. So I went downstairs to my bed and try to endure the attack. Instead, it got larger and more vicious. Now they were arguing about the house and its impending foreclosure.

I'd seen the papers on the counter, warning that on August 1<sup>st</sup>, 2016 the house would be foreclosed if a certain amount of money wasn't paid. My mom had told me not to worry about it and that she would fight for the house. I was worried. I knew it would happen; it was just a matter of when. Turned out, my mom was able to save the house that summer, and again on

April 1<sup>st</sup>, 2017. But during that time with my parents living under the same roof money was at the heart of their conflicts and stress. Everything was uncertain and dark.

I decided I could take it no longer. My fight-or-flight response was kicking in, and I threw open the exterior door and bolted down the driveway and neighborhood road. The last thing I felt like doing was running when the air was as stiff and unforgiving as how I felt inside; but I needed to escape. My feet slapped the pavement as I raced alongside of the rural highway toward the park. I lived on the outskirts of town, and the surrounding area was quiet. Flat, desolate highway stretched on with expansive yards with weeds and ponds and sometimes horses. The park was about two miles away.

I was almost there when grandma called. Happy for the distraction and longing to talk to someone, I answered my phone. She was wondering what was going on and I told her about the crazy afternoon and that I left the house.

“What? Why did you leave? You should go back. Your mom’s not answering the phone and I’m really worried. I’m afraid something bad has happened.”

I stopped in my tracks. What if something did happen? I abruptly turned around just as soon as I get there. I raced home, fears capsizing my mind.

Things were surprisingly silent when I got back. As if nothing had happened, as if the onslaught had ripped through quickly and violently but had left no apparent devastation. Nothing had happened. Mom was alright. Grandma had just gotten me all worked up. Even so, that day was a disaster and sticks out to me from that stressful summer. I spent a lot of time under the willow tree. That had always been my “spot” to go to when I was upset. I would position myself

in a place where the long, draping branches concealed me, and look up sad alternative songs about divorce and weep, like the tree itself. “Stay Together For the Kids” by Blink 182, “What Happened to Perfect” by Lukas Graham, “Family Portrait” by Pink, and “Broken Home” by 5 Seconds of Summer were among songs that spoke to me and perfectly put into words what I felt inside. It was difficult for me to write my own.

At that time mom knew she was moving to California. She’d never liked it here and had wanted to make the move for years. I never really believed she’d actually do it. It seemed like a dream more than a reality.

I’d sit out in the sun at the outside table with her and laugh. “Yeah, right. You always say that but you never have.”

“Yes. I’m actually going to do it. Once Syd’s out of high school and settled in college...”

My expression would turn serious as I turned back to my book.

She is a happy, care-free soul who only needs her bike, the beach, and the people she loves. My mom is a cyclist. She wakes up at 4:30 to go to the gym. She is very routine-oriented. She is a free-spirited person with a big heart who loves to laugh. She cares a great deal about others and worked at Sterling Pointe, an assisted living place, for almost six years. Everybody, staff and residents, loved her there and hated to see her leave. But she longed for something so much greater than could be offered here. Something to match her larger-than-life attitude: Port Hueneme, California; the warm, salty ocean breeze; the roaring waves that clashed onto the shore; a Puerto Rican man named Julio who is her boyfriend; the constant sun a reminder that new beginnings were possible.

It was strange seeing him in photos, a wide, toothy grin and a bald front of his head with grey hair in the back, leaning close to my mom in the canyons they'd hiked. My mom looked completely in bliss with tan, sun-soaked skin and beach blond hair in braids, also with a smile that stretched across her face, displaying her teeth and laughter lines and dimples. Her eyes squinted from the sun as she held her phone up to take a picture. He seemed as loveable and funny as she was. They took hikes and long bike rides and sat at the beach and drank at the brewery. They first ran into each other in a completely coincidental way.

My mom had gone to California to visit my aunt in the beginning of 2016. She needed some distance from my dad and it was there she decided to get a divorce. While biking in the canyons she'd fallen off her bike. Julio happened to be biking too and saw her and helped her out. They got to talking and exchanged numbers. It all sort of fell into place then. It seemed like fate that they should meet like that. After that she tried to come out to California to visit him every month. Through it all, it was really weird at first to see my mom with this new person after being with my dad for twenty years. But overall I understood that it was just her time to move on.

It isn't to say that my dad is a "bad man," because he's not. He's made a lot of mistakes but so has she. They're imperfect people who just weren't a match. My dad has a quiet, hard-working demeanor, but at the same time has a dry sense of humor and is nice to be around. He is so smart and knows everything about fixing cars and building a website as well as a home. He always helped me with my dreaded math homework growing up. Even though he probably wasn't the best husband, he is and always has been a fantastic dad to me and my sister. Even so, he was naturally upset by all the changes my mom was making. I'm sure no one *wanted* the

house to be foreclosed. I'm still confused as to how and why it happened; but it's done now and I had to say goodbye.

Over spring break, there was a lot of packing as we prepared for the foreclosure on April first. Since it was March and I had to go back to Bemidji, I knew it would be my last time coming home. Although my mom was able to secure the house for another month or so, she eventually gave it up in May. So all alone sitting against the wall in my empty bedroom before I took off to go back to school, I did a walk-through of the house and said goodbye to all of it. I soaked it all up and reflected on the memories.

“Goodbye, room. Goodbye, carpet. Goodbye, lights. Goodbye, door trim. Goodbye, basement. Goodbye, amazing Jacuzzi bathtub...”

I left nothing untouched as I opened and closed doors for the last time and felt along walls and railings and chairs. Tears were shed. I can be a sentimental person but this was actually a very painful thing. I said goodbye to Duke, not knowing it would be the last time I ever saw him. Why would it? In my mind I'd be back, even if things wouldn't be the same. The dogs would be somewhere. Why wouldn't they? But of course I lost him too, and I think that is what's worst.

His fur was soft, his vertebrae sticking out along his back, which was normal for Great Danes. His head and paws were massive and he had brown eyes and large jowls. He loved cuddling and resting his head on your lap, and sitting beside you on the couch like a person. I held his face in my hands and kissed his head. I could not give him big hugs unless he was

outside as they made him nervous and urinate. I scratched behind his long, floppy ears and stared into his chocolatey eyes.

“Bye, Duke. I love you. You be a good boy. I’ll see you again, okay?”

I had taken both the dogs on one last walk before I left, but Syd and her boyfriend Jaye showed up to take Duke to town just as I was leaving. Syd had been living at Jaye’s house for a while now just to get away from my parents. I asked them how they were doing and what they’d been up to. She told me that she wanted to go to UMD in the fall.

“Jaye will rent a house in Duluth and he can keep Duke there. That’s where he’ll stay when mom moves,” she explained, then turned to Duke and reassured him, “We won’t give up on you, honey.”

They made it seem so simple, and I believed they wouldn’t give up on him. But I also knew how unfeasible this plan would be. They had not graduated high school yet. They did not understand how hard it would be, but I kept my mouth shut about it. I said one last goodbye to Duke as he excitedly clamored into Jaye’s car, my last memory of him.

*Everyone goes through this. No, they don’t. Not everyone does. Why are you taking it so hard? Because it’s real and it matters to me and it is a big deal. Because it was my home and those were my memories. Those are my parents. I drove away on that March day without looking back, but the house follows me everywhere, anyway.*



### Starlight

You showed me galaxies. Whole worlds I discovered just by gazing into your gleaming blue eyes. I tried to describe our relationship in the short time we were together with a single sentence, and that's how it felt. You invited me into new lands, expanded my mind with new songs, videogames, ideas, thoughts. The dreary, grey winter sky was splashed with color, overflowing with soft pinks and lavender and vibrant reds and yellows. Even soothing blues. Rose-tinted glasses covered my eyes. Maybe that's why I couldn't see the black hole until I was already pulled in, past the *event horizon*, the point of no return.

I watch the wind steal the leaves from the trees as they sail high overhead; a sea of brilliant colors that I follow with my eyes. The cool air stirs something inside me, nostalgia, a yearning. I remember you and think back to our long drives last fall. They were something special and personal that can't be replicated with anyone else. The songs I selected at a low volume so we could comfortably talk over them, or not. It was easy and nice to enjoy each other's company without words. You understood that being silent didn't necessarily mean that something was wrong.

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I met you on OkCupid, a free dating site for both straight and gay people. I guess that's just how our generation meets people. Besides, it's hard enough to be introverted *and* gay. You get that just as much as I do. I came across your profile and gave it a star, because you seemed pretty cool. It said your name was Emilie. You were a "gaymer" and a good cook. You liked the same bands as I did, anyway. I didn't really think anything of it. I certainly didn't expect you to message me. And because I didn't have the OkCupid app I didn't get a notification for it. I didn't even notice the message until the next time I logged on: July 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2016. That's when we started talking, and continued to every day for 7 months straight. However, I didn't actually meet you until I moved back up to Bemidji for school. It was the last summer I lived at home. "Home" for you was a miniscule town near Canada called Grygla (GRIG-LA). It was an hour and a half from Bemidji but nearly 5 hours from my hometown of Princeton. In other words, we couldn't see each other for a while. That was okay because we got to know a lot about each other through text first. In a way that felt safer and less overwhelming.

We talked every day and about everything: interests, favorite foods, songs, our hometowns and high schools, work, pets, videogames, and just our day-to-day experiences. You lived in a one-bedroom apartment that your mom land lorded. You had a cat named Kisa that showed up outside your building freezing and covered in oil, so you cleaned her up and adopted her. She was actually a male, but you didn't know that when you named her, so you kept her pronouns as female. You were lucky enough to have a job in town, working as a cashier at the co-op. Grygla had a population of a little over 200. Everyone had to drive at least an hour to work. You loved RPGs (role-playing games) and MMO (massive multiplayer online) games. You had to explain to me what these acronyms meant. I learned more about your videogames than I probably cared to know, but some of them were really interesting. Besides, I wanted to know everything. I learned a lot about you during that time and gained a sense of who you were.

I kept waiting and fearing for you to lose interest. When you'd take all day to message back I tended to take it personally, at least at first. Eventually I realized you genuinely liked me. You were just busy and didn't always have time to get back to me. But your messages were always long and thoughtful when you finally did. There was a definite effort in them. We exchanged numbers so we didn't have to keep talking through OkCupid. One day I went on the site and noticed you even disabled your account, which made me smile in knowing. I turned mine off too.

You told me the songs you liked and I always listened, even if wasn't something I was interested in. It gave me insight into your personality. As you shared with me, art and writing and songs, it was like you were giving me a piece of your soul. And your soul was really beautiful. It made me feel honored. You tended to like specific songs by a certain artist. You picked and

chose, didn't devour and love them all like I did. You appreciated the slow or sad songs too, ones others might have looked over. The underrated ones on an album. If it was your favorite, I really stopped and listened, heard and felt a song I would have otherwise glanced over. Some being "Future" by Paramore, "Impossible Year" by Panic! At the Disco, and "Cemetery Drive" by My Chemical Romance. We liked the "emo" music as it is called. Honestly I think there is really something special to bond with someone over music. It is like your psyches are connected—like they join to become one. I loved listening to music in your car with you.

On our first date, we drove around listening to music and talking for four hours. I hadn't been on many first dates, but I had to say that that one definitely topped the list. It was better than anything I could have imagined. It felt so natural, after we warmed up to each other that is. At first it felt a little shy and awkward. We decided to go to Big River Scoop to get ice cream. That was my idea anyway and it seemed like a pretty safe, low-key first meeting (although later I would kick myself when I remembered you were lactose intolerant!) I didn't have a car at the time but figured I would just run or bike there. I was so optimistic and excited by the prospect of you that I imagined myself actually *running* into town. You didn't just accept rides from someone you'd met online. I trusted you but that was just common sense. I'd read a lot of articles online in preparation about what to do and say when meeting someone online. I'd scoured topics of conversation for the first date and studied up on non-verbal cues to both project and avoid. I was nervous, yes. I always was when meeting new people and didn't quite know what to say. However, nowhere did it say to ride in the same car. Nowhere did it say to extend the date past an hour or so.

I guess what I'm saying is that it's good to be safe and do your research and have something to say, but some things just can't be predicted. People aren't a test you can study for. I couldn't have known you would have wanted to spend more time with me beyond getting ice cream, but I'm glad you did. Even after struggling through some polite conversation and awkward silences in the ice cream shop, "What now? What are you thinking now?" is what you said. You really wanted to know me. You really wanted to give me a shot. You didn't know how nice that was, how much that meant.

But in the beginning I was so nervous that the previous night I'd had a panic attack in my sleep because I dreamt I was late for the date. I woke up breathless as if it had actually happened. I couldn't decide on what to wear or if I should wear makeup. To relax, I turned on "The Funeral" by Band of Horses. To me the song represented a fresh beginning and the excitement of someone new. It had been featured on the show *How I Met Your Mother* the moment Ted finally sees who would become his future wife. It was just really pretty and held a lot of meaning and hope for me. I remember my heart just hammering as I waited for you to pull up to my apartment. I had decided to go with you after all. Then I tentatively walked across my parking lot, where I first saw you. You were bunched up inside your small red Ford Focus, and gave me a shy, kind smile as I greeted you and opened the door. You told me beforehand that you were self-conscious about your weight and warned me, thinking I would be surprised or change my mind. It had happened in the past, you said. I found this really sad. True, you were bigger than most but so what? You were beautiful and I told you so. It was superficial to not want to be with someone because of how much they weighed. I didn't care. Inside and out I admired you. You had wavy black hair that you liked to straighten. It was originally brown before you'd dyed it irrevocably black, not knowing it would be so hard to change back. Your makeup was amazing,

with your eyeliner perfectly sculpted above piercing blue eyes. *You* were amazing. Your arms rested casually across the steering wheel, which was a fuzzy purple.

“Hi,” I said, at a loss for words.

“Hi,” You replied as I situated myself in the car. And then silence. “How are you?”

“Good, you?”

“I’m good. Soo, where to?”

As I directed you into town and we chatted amiably, I realized how easy this would be, even if a bit awkward and scary at first. I pointed out the building I’d lived during my dreaded freshman year, and asked you about your anime show you’d told me about over text. We circled around a bit before making it to Big River Scoop. I kept taking for granted that you knew where you were going, but of course you didn’t live here. To you this was a big city. As we sat inside with our ice cream cones we struggled for words. At some point you told me the middle names of your siblings and how they had gotten them. You told me yours, too, and then seemed to feel silly for talking about it.

“Interesting stuff, I know. Because you really needed to know that...” But I did want to know. You could have talked about anything and I would have found it fascinating, hung on to every word.

“What’s Kass like?” I asked in a desperate attempt at conversation. She was your best friend who seemed very much like my best friend Sam.

“She’s fun, extroverted. She’s a sweetheart. Scatterbrained.” You smiled and told me some stories and asked what Sam was like.

Like Kass she was a huge Disney fan and talkative as well. It was funny how similar they were, and how important they each were in our lives. When I first met Kass I had to agree with you. She was so sweet and I loved her from the start.

Afterward we decided to walk around town a bit.

“Just to let you know I’m a notoriously slow walker,” you warned me.

“That’s okay, so am I,” I laughed.

It was a chilly late August day, and after eating that ice cream I was pretty cold. You were in a t-shirt but seemed unaffected by the weather. Seeing how cold I was though you suggested we drive around instead, if I wanted to and was comfortable doing that.

The farther we got the more intent you seemed on letting me know you weren’t planning on kidnapping me. We ended up going over the big hill on Irvine Avenue by the post office. You were so adorably excited by it, as there were no such hills anywhere in Grygla. We found ourselves out of Bemidji at one point.

“Are you comfortable with this? I don’t wanna like, make you feel like I’m kidnapping you or that I’m an axe murderer.”

I laughed. “I know you’re not kidnapping me. If I thought for even a second you were going to kill me I wouldn’t have gotten in your car,” I reassured you.

We turned around and headed back into town because neither of us really knew where we were. We circled around and around the streets: the south end of town, down Bemidji Avenue, and back toward Walgreens, where I lived. We passed my turn and I almost spoke up when I realized you wanted to drive more. We talked endlessly, much more easily than earlier. You told me about your mother and your siblings. You selected songs to play on your iPod Shuffle and we talked about our love for Brendon Urie, the singer in the band Panic! At the Disco. As we were driving down Birchmont “Be Alone” by Paramore came on, just exactly like how I imagined it when I would rollerblade down the streets of my neighborhood back home, energized and smiling at the thought of you as it blasted through my headphones. Now I was there with you, talking to you as it played. It couldn’t have been more perfect.

As you dropped me off you seemed reluctant for me to leave. Your eyes were gleaming and you looked after me like a lovesick puppy as I got out of the car. Even then I wanted to kiss you. But I was way too nervous to do anything like that. Fear always held me back around you. Unfortunately I had to learn the hard way to just take the chance before it was too late. There is so much I never said.

It was a long time between our first and second date. In fact, I became certain that I’d never see you again, though I knew you were still interested. I pleaded with an unknown force, a higher power, the universe, to let me see you again. Of course, I did eventually. Life had just gotten in the way for both of us. We went to the theater to see *Kubo and the Two Strings*. You bought the tickets and I provided the drinks and popcorn. It was nice to split the price or take turns paying. I snuck my Skittles in of course, and tried not to overindulge myself with them and



then feel sick. I skillfully waited for a lull in the movie before offering you some. You stared at me as if I had just pulled out a pizza instead.

“No, thank you,” you replied with an amused smile playing at your lips.

After the movie we decided to walk around Diamond Point Park. I could tell you wanted to hold my hand (no, I *knew* it. I’d definitely creeped on your blog) and I wanted to as well. But I had no idea how to initiate that. It seemed so frightening: I had never held hands with a girl. Did you want to be seen as an item? We walked around and around the paths, sometimes asking questions and other times not saying anything. During the quiet moments my mind raced for something to say, flying over words and images but landing on nothing. I really could not collect my thoughts around you. “What are you thinking?” You would ask. How would I even answer that? We stood by the lake facing each other and talking, watching a chipmunk scurry back and forth right in front of us. After a while we sat in the chairs by the lake, staring at the still water and small waves that peacefully lapped the shore. The air was calm and cool. Leaves tumbled from the trees and across the beach. You were content right next to me. I realized words weren’t even necessary.

It wasn’t until the third date at the end of September that you finally got up the nerve to hold my hand. Following your personal posts on your blog, I knew it was going to happen too. We were walking along the boardwalk at Itasca State Park through the woods when you finally asked.

“Ugh! Okay, Kass is going to kill me if I don’t ask this...do you want to hold hands?”

You asked this last part hopefully and with a little laugh in your voice, trying to get past the awkwardness of wanting physical contact.

“Sure,” I smiled, and as we walked around hand-in-hand we laughed about how nervous we’d both been, how we’d both wanted to for some time. It was a chilly, rainy day but your hand was large and warm. It fitted my smaller, always cold hands quite well. Though it was nerve-racking to be a girl displaying affection to another girl in public, it was also very important and empowering for me. We crossed the start of the Mississippi River. I didn’t want to let go.

We went on the Wilderness Drive around Itasca State Park and shared a bag of M&Ms. Around the many twists and turns and hilly roads you drove, the fall colors towering above us at their peak in vibrant oranges, reds, and yellows.

We went back to Bemidji after the drive and drove the streets there for a bit. I selected songs by the band Muse, “Supermassive Black Hole” and “Starlight.” I really wanted to hold your hand again, so even though it was drizzling out we went to Diamond Point.

I hadn’t brought a coat so you let me borrow your big, long pea coat. I felt like a detective in it. But more than that, it felt so nice and cozy to be wearing something of yours. Holding your hand felt so right, as we avoided puddles and braced the freezing wind. I felt warm inside, especially with our hands intertwined. It could be a blizzard out and it would still be worth every snowflake if it meant I got to hold your hand.

Slowly it became routine after every date to drive around and hold hands. In fact, that alone counted as a date to me. We had our little route on the south side of town where we’d circle around and then head back the other way. There were certain songs that characterized

those times in your car. “Nearly Witches” by Panic! At The Disco was one we both loved. The build-up in the verses and sudden drop and key change in the chorus had always really captured me, given me goosebumps and resonated deep within me. The whole song was a masterpiece in our eyes but the chorus in itself was the best part. Quickly it became one of our driving songs.

I also remember bonding with you over “When You Were Young” by The Killers. You were driving me home one night, turning onto 23<sup>rd</sup> Street from Birchmont. I realized I really did not want you to leave. It was always so long before I saw you again. You seemed to live so far. I played that song and we held hands. I was so happy and felt light inside, connected to you.

Around that time you began to take me to Grygla to get to know where you lived and meet Kass and her husband Donovan. I really liked them from the start, although I was terrified at first. What if your friends didn’t like me? I didn’t have anything to worry about though; your best friend Kass was really cool and sweet. She had a son Dominic who was a year old at the time. The first time I met her you guys picked me up and we went to Applebee’s before going to Grygla. I was nervous...what should I say to her? Would she question me? Luckily, she and Donovan were happy to just let me observe and listen to your conversations. I was good at that, especially when meeting new people. I asked questions when they came, about Dominic and your and Kass’s experiences together. It felt very low-key and Kass was more than willing to bombard me with photos. I didn’t mind at all.

It was a long drive back but there was never a moment of silence. You wanted to show me around your hometown. Everyone pointed out things to me as we drove along. Donovan drove Kass’s car and you gave me the grand tour, although there wasn’t much to see. It was small but adorable with its two bars, gas station, co-op, school, café, fire department, and post

office...the basics. I liked it but it definitely wasn't somewhere I'd want to live. Most people had to drive a long way to work because there were no jobs in town. You were lucky to have one. There was nowhere to shop or have fun, although you guys showed me some interesting places.

The day I met Kass and Donovan you guys took me to this secluded, old church in the woods. There were windy dirt roads that were easy to get lost on if you didn't know where you were going. It was a sketchy location and it took a long time to get there. Once again you promised you weren't trying to kill me. I don't remember much about the church itself other than that it was way back in the woods, away from any sign of civilization. It was a cute, interesting chapel that was over 75 years old. Alongside it was a small graveyard, the tombstones dated and commemorating lives from across centuries. There was also a well that continuously spilled ice cold, fresh spring water. It was so crisp and rejuvenating on my tongue. We walked through the woods by the church, Kass and Donovan up front embracing each other and holding hands lovingly. I stared at the ground awkwardly until you took my hand, naturally this time, as if we had done this many times before.

You stopped suddenly. "Listen," you said.

Complete silence. No rustling of leaves in the wind or birds. No people or dogs barking. It was peaceful, almost deafening in its soundlessness. I thought about how a person could go mad hearing absolutely nothing. Surely you would start to hear voices in your head after a while, like how you might hear songs whispering in the wind through an open car window. All four of us stood and enjoyed the quiet for a few seconds.

"I wish I could just come here when I'm stressed out from school," I confessed.

On the way back the stars were out, much more than I had ever seen in Bemidji. Kass somehow got onto the subject of her son's birth and left no details to the imagination. She talked about her C-Section and I wrung my hands and buried them in my lap, cringing, but laughing at the same time because she was so funny.

"Those are the Northern Lights," She said gesturing to the faded streaks of light in the darkness.

"You can see them from here?" I asked incredulously.

"Yeah, of course! Only a little tonight though."

I turned my head to the window, staring at the night sky in awe as Kass's old car rolled on. You grabbed my hand.

I got to know Kass and Donovan more over the months and had many adventures with you guys. We went to Grand Forks at the end of October to see *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* live. It was crazy and funny and unlike anything I'd ever seen. The audience was wild and conveyed their dislike to certain characters very strongly. We went to Canada (almost). We drove up a half mile from the Canadian border, just for the hell of it and because I had never been so far north before. We wanted to take pictures right by the border, but that would have required going to the border patrol and asking for permission. Still, it was exhilarating for me all the same.

The end of December when my dad bought me a car, I braved the journey from Princeton to Grygla to come see you over New Year's (a trip that was over six hours and very anxiety

inducing since it was the farthest I had driven alone). But somehow I managed and we all got slightly drunk on New Year's Eve and played poker in your sister's garage.

I gave a lot to you, drove miles even when my car plummeted into a snowbank in the middle of nowhere. I set aside my fears and gave you my full attention, even when you were too busy playing videogames to notice. It wasn't enough. Our relationship was not going anywhere. We were comfortable in the silences, but maybe to the point where we avoided the truth. We weren't physically at ease with each other. We hadn't even kissed until late October, when you brought me home the weekend I met Kass. But you had showed me so much, expanded my mind and showed me love. I loved you from the start, but I never told you.

I feared that I'd scare you away. If I had known that day in late January was the last time I'd see you, would I have told you? We embraced for a long time before I drove away. I gazed into your blue eyes as we gently swayed. I wanted so badly to tell you then, but I didn't. I got in my car and the chain that I wore around my neck that held your class ring snapped. I raised my head in wonder at your apartment building, as if even then I knew. It was symbolic of what was to come. I was heartbroken, but I understood why. I struggled for a while but I got back up on my feet in time. I stopped running my car into ditches. I found love in one of the most unexpected of places. I am happy and have moved on. Even so, I thought maybe we'd keep in touch. I haven't talked to you since, but I haven't forgotten. I still think about you, especially when that song plays.

## Golden Days

I remember the start of 2017 as both cringe worthy and hopeful. I was recovering from a lost relationship, but even before things were broken off I had caught the stomach flu the day right after New Year's Day. It was made worse by the fact that I was *at my ex-girlfriend's house when it happened* and it ended my six-year vomit-free streak (not that that's important or anything. Ew). But of course I was at her house because I had made that six-hour trip to spend New Year's Eve with her and her friends. Admittedly, we weren't too comfortable around each other because I felt mortified that I was spending the day in her bathroom.

Anyway, you started out 2017 by backing your car into a steep ditch while trying to get out of your friend's driveway. It was scary to think if there had not been a tree there to stop your vehicle from sliding down any further, the damage would have been much worse... Then, on my drive back to Princeton from Grygla, I was driving way too fast and took my turn in the ditch in the Red Lake Reservation. My car was stuck in the snow. It was absolutely terrifying. With no cell service I would have been trapped there had it not been for some good Samaritans and a plow truck to help me out. Suffice it to say, 2017 started out terribly for both of us, and that's not even the whole story.

After the breakup and our car troubles, we had become each other's best friends. We were leaning on each other's shoulders just trying to trudge through the rocky beginning of the year. You picked me up on the days my car refused to start. I helped you look for a new bumper

when you got in your first accident. I was also in your car when it happened, and offered emotional support afterward. We were both there for each other. Looking back, it was almost unfortunately hilarious how much we went through at once. But if things had not played out the way they had, we would not have gotten so close, and we certainly wouldn't be together today. Amidst the chaos, you were what made things hopeful.

It's been almost a year now since I said goodbye to Duke and the old house. The day that I drove back to Bemidji on March 19<sup>th</sup>, 2017, knowing that I wouldn't step foot in that house again, you were there to console me. That night, you came to my old apartment and we "cuddled" for the first time (though I was afraid to so much as put my arm around you). We just lay on my bed with our heads close together and listened to music. In the silence, I really did want to pull you closer, especially when we were facing each other. You really wanted to kiss me, but we were both too apprehensive to initiate anything. Still, it was nice to just have our sides touching. That night was when things felt like they were starting to change between us. Unacknowledged feelings were visible in the air around us.

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Light radiated off the fresh greens of trees and shined on the recently thawed lake as the sun made its golden, warm descent. You drove us on the winding road around Lake Bemidji while we listened to our favorite albums. We talked, sang, but mostly just basked in the presence of each other. I didn't know it at the time, but on those drives you always wanted to hold my hand. I would have let you, would have been happy to. I should have known because at that point you had already told me how you felt. The day after we first cuddled, you finally *soberly* admitted your feelings for me. That in itself was a huge step for you. Before me, you hadn't even



known you were gay. I was not quite sure how to react. On the one hand, I was flattered and proud of you for being honest. On the other hand I didn't think I felt the same, at least not at that point. What I wasn't feeling was surprised. In various ways you had made it pretty clear how you felt long before you formally told me. Even so, I enjoyed spending all this quality time with you and cuddling in my room. I really wanted to see where this went and if there was anything there after all.

“That shirt is really cute,” you told me as we drove around the lake in your car. It was the evening following my interview at Lueken's and I was wearing a dark blue long-sleeved shirt with a few buttons.

“Thanks!” I beamed, and then laughed. “My sister wore it for her Wal-Mart interview and ended up getting the job, so I hoped it would do the same for me. She wore it once and never again, because she thought it made her boobs look huge.”

We both laughed.

“My mom found it on the bottom of her closet floor after she moved out of the house, so she gave it to me,” I explained.

“That's funny,” you smiled.

I loved your smile. The way the corners of your mouth turned up with your lips pressed together, and the way your eyes gazed into mine with so much faith and love annihilated me.

“How did the interview go?” You asked.

“I think it went good! I was really nervous but I made eye contact and smiled, folded my hands on the table, and tried to answer questions confidently.”

“Good job, I’m so proud of you! I knew you could do it!” You praised me. You always encouraged and believed in me. You were there to reassure me when my anxiety acted up. I loved that about you too.

I smiled. “Thank you. You know what’s funny, though? When the interviewer asked, ‘Why do you want this job?’ I was really thinking *for the money*. I didn’t say that, of course.”

“Right?! I hate when interviewers ask that!” You agreed. “That’s what the real answer is...”

“Yeah!” I exclaimed, and then on second thought, as if the interviewer was still watching me, remarked, “But it does seem like a good place to work. The people there seem nice and laid back. It’s employee-owned, and they carry out groceries for you, unlike Wal-Mart. Wal-Mart is awful...”

Suddenly “Starlight” by Taylor Swift came on. We were listening to the *Red* CD in your car radio, but had the volume quiet so we could talk.

“Ooh, can I turn this up? I love this song,” I said.

“Of course, turn it up as loud as you want,” you replied. “I love this song, too!”

We sang along and I looked out the window as we moved quickly past homes and trees, the light dancing around and inside the car. The song reverberated inside my soul the way

something does when it means a lot to you. My heart skipped and danced for you as we neared our way back into town, feeling light and as though something was in bloom.

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“I’m so nervous for my head-to-toe.”

“You’ll be okay, we’ll practice a lot and you’ll get it down,” I promised.

As part of the nursing program, you had to memorize and perform a head-to-toe assessment on someone. The test wasn’t until April, but the end of the school year was already looming closer. We began buckling down on it and practicing multiple times a week in my apartment and the nursing lab. It didn’t take long before I started to memorize it. I may have been a Creative and Professional Writing major, but I could tell you the cranial nerves in order and how to assess them, as well as the cardiac landmarks of the heart. I was fascinated when you taught me nursing concepts and always wanted to learn more. We were comfortable around each other so it was fun to practice the head-to-toe and goof off as well. However, our favorite part was cuddling in my bed afterward.

That is what we had to look forward to on nights we practiced the head-to-toe. I couldn’t wait to run through the procedure a few times just so we could cuddle. We didn’t really say much when we cuddled, but I was comfortable touching you more and wrapping my arms around you. I held you in my arms and rubbed your back and you relaxed in my embrace. You sure loved back rubs. You rested your head on my chest and I felt content and at peace. Sometimes I would lie in your arms or on my side and you would sling your arm around me. It was difficult

for you to leave, and it was becoming increasingly later before you left. I didn't have a problem with that; I loved having you with me.

We listened to all sorts of music when we cuddled. Around that time was when I opened up your eyes to different alternative artists you had never really listened to. You mostly only listened to pop music that played on the radio. There was nothing wrong with that, but there was a lot you didn't even know you were missing. I tried to show you songs that would tailor to your music tastes. I liked a lot of rock, but you weren't as into that, so I introduced you to bands like Panic! At The Disco, Fall Out Boy, Twenty One Pilots, Coldplay, Matchbox Twenty, and Goo Goo Dolls, to name a few. We also listened to a lot of Taylor Swift's albums. Hearing songs today like "Jet Pack Blues" and "The Kids Aren't Alright" by Fall Out Boy really takes me back to the beginning with you: lying in bed, walks through the park and constant funny snaps throughout the day, the warmth and promise of spring, the excitement and adventure of discovering someone new.

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It was "Sunsplash" but there was no sun, so the event was moved indoors. It was April 27<sup>th</sup>, and Bemidji had gotten hit with a snowstorm on the day of the annual "Sunsplash" event that BSU hosted at the end of each school year. Figures. That's Minnesota for you. It was instead relocated to the John Glas Fieldhouse, where I headed after my evening class to check it out. There were inflatables, food, mocktails, activities, and prizes. You had to help for a few hours with the inflatable games as part of your job on staff. After your shift though, we went around playing the games, getting stamps for every booth we visited which could then be entered into a drawing. There were dogs there from Great River Rescue, which I appreciated more than

anything, and a tie-dye station. Afterward, we waited around for the prize drawing, which didn't happen until around 8:00. At that point, I was super hungry because I'd had a two-hour evening class and still hadn't eaten supper.

You offered to make me some food back at your dorm, the details of which I am a bit hazy on. Looking back it feels foggy, like the white of the storm last April, but glimpses of images remain in my head through the snow that I squinted through. At Sunsplash I remember drinking mocktails, petting dogs, creating our own pins, and beating you in a recycling race. We stayed at your dorm for a little bit while I ate mac and cheese from the microwave, and then we cuddled on the floor. You didn't have a futon last year and your bed was lofted, so when I would sleep over we would put the mattress on the floor. We listened to music and I held you in my arms for a while on the hard, thinly carpeted dorm room floor in Oak.

"I wanna walk you back to your car," you told me. I parked on 19<sup>th</sup> Street NE, between Wallys and the PE building. I wanted you to stay inside away from the snow and cold, but of course I let you come with. It was so nice of you.

It wasn't storming too badly but there was a moderate amount of snow, big, fluffy flakes that covered my car and the road. I hated driving in this shit. After my run off the road in the Red Lake Reservation, icy roads terrified me and I approached them with caution, going well below the speed limit.

"I'll dust off your car," you offered.

"No, no, it's my car. I'll dust it off. You don't have to do that," I said, reluctant to give you my two-foot long snow scraper.

“But I want to! I wanna dust off your car,” You insisted.

“Oh, okay,” I gave in with a smile, handing you the scraper.

You pushed off the snow and I stood there while my car warmed up in the snow that fell silently around us. The way it absorbed all the sound, making you feel like you were in a bubble, a globe, and the way it coated the pine trees and the outdoor lights sparkled off of it had an aesthetic appeal, if you were looking at it on a screen some place far away and warm. It was pretty, but truth be told I hated it. Luckily it was the last snow fall of the spring. It may have been cold but every day with you was golden.

After my car was cleared, we stood facing each other, uncertain how to say goodbye. We weren't officially together and still hadn't kissed much, and definitely not in public, but I thought what the hell. I couldn't lose my chance. You had to do things right then even if it was scary, so I kissed you. Your lips felt cold against mine, but I felt soft and warm inside under the dark sky. “The Calendar” by Panic! At The Disco was playing in my head because we had been listening to that album in your dorm. Suddenly you picked me up and spun me around, my legs flailing out behind me. I laughed and you put me back down, a playful, affectionate glint in your eyes. It drove me crazy, the way you looked at me as if I held the stars in my eyes and the secrets of the universe in my body. You gazed at me like I was your whole world. We embraced tightly.

I drove home at ten miles an hour, the whole time smiling and giggling goofily.

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As I am writing this, it is our one year anniversary. We have had so many special moments together. I could write a book on all the memories we have shared, and that wouldn't

even begin to cover it. We have been together for a year but our times together exceed that. I couldn't compile them all in a few pages, so it's interesting to focus on the beginning and see how far we have come. There was a lot I didn't know back then, such as what was in store for us. I was eager to find out, though. A lot of it was rough, and for all the happy times, there were countless fights, too. In fact, we probably fought more than an average healthy couple should, and about every little thing under the sun. It was frustrating, and there were days where I was more overwhelmed and anxious than I ever thought someone could make me feel. Yet at the same time, I experienced and gave more love than I ever thought possible. Yes, we have our stupid, petty fights, but we make up at the same rate with just as much emotion.

In the beginning you are oblivious, you are blind. You don't know what is to come. It always *looks* promising, but much less of the time does it actually turn out to be. Looking back though, I'm glad we took that chance. There is a risk for everything, but we blindly and proudly leapt into the shark-infested waters of homophobic assholes. In the end, we came out strong, waving our rainbow-colored flags. Here's to a journey and person that has and will always be worth it.

### Post Reflection and Analysis

From the start I knew the general topics I wanted to write about, it was just a matter of finding space for all of them. I was planning on including old pieces about my roommate and a best friend from childhood, but the capstone project had a thirty-page limit that I had already met with the first two pieces. I was fine with only including *Life on 119<sup>th</sup> Street* and *Starlight*, but I realized I also wanted to talk more about my current relationship, thereby ending the project on a positive, hopeful note. A spur-of-the-moment decision led me to write a new piece about my girlfriend over spring break to include in my honors thesis.

The last piece, *Golden Days*, was not included in the capstone project due to the page limit and the fact that it had not been originally planned; however the honors thesis did not have a limit, which allowed me to expand on the topic. I talked about the early days of our relationship, back before we were officially a couple. I incorporated different scenes split up by asterisks that included cuddling and listening to music, driving around the lake, and being with her during a snowfall. The beginning of a relationship may be easy and lighthearted, full of bliss and butterflies, but I also detailed the rough start of 2017 we both had, and how we leaned on



each other in times of stress. In the end, I remarked that though we had our fights and struggled to be accepted by others, she was worth every bad day. The good times far outnumbered the bad ones. Maybe I made it seem like the best days were earlier on, when we fought less, but in reality it is later that really matters, when the relationship is comfortable, honest, and solidified. It is how you communicate and get past the hardships that matters, and at the end of the day how much love and acceptance is there. What I really want to articulate is that every day spent with her is golden. No matter what challenges we face we can overcome them together.

Taken in all, these pieces mostly revolve around the experiences I faced my junior year of college, from dealing with my parents' divorce and the subsequent loss of my house and dog, to navigating my first relationship with a woman and experiencing new places and songs, and the beginning phases of my current relationship. As made apparent, music plays an integral role in this project as it sets the tone for certain scenes and pieces. It allows me to get back in the touch with the feelings I had experienced at some point in time, and helps me cope with loss. The majority of these pieces, and even the title of the project, are named after songs. Particular songs are associated with each experience. My music tastes extend beyond the songs listed, of course, but these albums and songs are the ones that really exemplify the time period and events that happened. With the help of music and literary devices like dialogue, I did my best to recreate each story to paint a clear picture for the reader and illustrate what each piece means to me.

## Original Thesis Proposal

### Artist's Statement

The aim of this project is to present thirty-five pages of my original writing. This is important to me because I have always loved to write and find it a comfortable way to convey my thoughts and feelings. Young adult books have been an influential source for me, and a study done on readers of these books found that “fully 55% of buyers of works that publishers designate for kids aged 12 to 17 -- known as YA books -- are 18 or older, with the largest segment aged 30 to 44, a group that alone accounted for 28% of YA sales” (Publisher’s Weekly). My goal is to create the start of a young adult LGBT story.

The fiction writers I have read over the course of my life have influenced me tremendously. This is both on an emotional and stylistic level. One such young adult author, Veronica Roth, writes dystopian novels like the *Divergent* series. Dystopian can be described as, “futuristic, nonexistent societal scenarios that are intended to be read as ‘considerably worse’ than the reader’s own” (Jonathan Alexander and Rebecca Black). The *Divergent* books take

place in a futuristic version of Chicago where society is divided into five factions: Dauntless, Erudite, Abnegation, Amity, and Candor. Each teenager, when they turn sixteen, must choose a faction that will define the rest of their life. The story follows Tris Prior as she enters into the world of the Dauntless, which includes a brutal initiation all initiates must pass in order to be accepted. In high school I loved these books for their unique, exciting characters and scenarios. Overall, I think these books are influential to teens and adults alike.

Even though we cannot relate to the post-apocalyptic circumstances, the characters and the relationships between them are very well-developed. For instance, Tris befriends two initiates Will and Christina, and takes a romantic interest in the mysterious and older “Four,” a Dauntless instructor. The situation of being in an unfamiliar environment, and the struggle to find one’s place within it, are situations we have all encountered at some point in our lives. The ever-shifting dynamics within these relationships, as with the action-filled plot, keeps the interest of the reader. Personally, the *Divergent* books have influenced my writing in that it encourages me to keep an open mind when it comes to plot. There are a lot of surprising twists within the series, and I think that that is an important element for a book to have. In addition, by reading in general I have unconsciously picked up stylistic elements such as vocabulary, character development, dialogue, and point of view. By reading others’ work I am able to take note of and incorporate it into my own. Veronica Roth’s books not only excited me but shaped me as a writer.

Although the majority of my favorite young adult (YA) books were read in my teens, I still do enjoy this genre as an adult. As the opening paragraph suggests, adults can and do choose to read YA literature. In some ways they may be more exciting and interesting than regular fiction. YA books depend on unique circumstances and characters to draw the reader in. More

so, an older reader is invited to remember their own high school experience and how they dealt with a certain situation. Whatever the reasons, readers of these books are not exclusively teenagers. Adults can be impacted as well. On a personal level, YA books have made me feel excited about reading and writing in general. I have always been an avid reader and have read genres ranging from YA to murder mystery to historical fiction. However, the colorfully painted characters and plots in YA books are what make me most enthusiastic to read. Even though the characters may be a few years younger than me and thereby facing different issues, I am still able to genuinely connect and care about them. As a teenager especially reading them made me feel safe, happy, and provided answers. For instance, common themes in YA literature may include bullying, mental illness, fitting in, or romance. A teen can read a book that deals with a similar issue they may be facing, such as anxiety or depression. By reading, it assures teens that they are not alone and may provide solutions that are applicable to their own life.

The reasons I am drawn to YA literature are also reasons that inspire me to write: I want to provide someone with those safe, positive feelings that I felt as a reader. It is so important for everyone to be able to find themselves in between the pages of a book, whether it takes the form of fiction or nonfiction. I have not written much fiction, however I used to write quite frequently as a child and young teenager. From the age of six I filled journals with stories, and drawings to accompany them. I had unlimited ideas and enjoyed the creative freedom that writing gave me. As I grew older I wrote a variety of short stories, though they were not serious and mostly for me to read and have a laugh at. When I was fifteen, however, I wrote a heart-warming children's story that was based on my own life.

It told the simple story of a llama who struggled to speak up and make friends, until she met a kind-hearted mouse who was new at school. In time they became best friends, and the llama was not lonely anymore. My grandpa, who is an artist, drew illustrations to go along with the story. When it was completed, I gave copies to my family and to my best friend, who had inspired the story. While perhaps silly and filled with grammatical and structural errors my fifteen-year-old self could not have been expected to know, it was very important to me. My family reacted positively and thought it had the potential to be published. But being as humble and young as I was, I never went through with it. I worried that it was “stupid” or “embarrassing.” Now looking on it with older eyes, I do not see it that way. It is worth going back to polish it, and maybe even try to get published. It may not be the best, but if I could impact even one shy, friendless child, the story would be successful.

In addition to short stories and children’s stories, I have done a lot of journaling throughout my life. I have been keeping a journal ever since I first learned how to write, and I still have most all of them from over the years. When I was in middle and high school, my journal entries centered on my day-to-day experiences. A single entry could take up multiple pages. It gave me a sense of satisfaction and inner peace to write down the details of my life. It was especially therapeutic when I had had a bad day. As I grew older, however, the content and amount of detail put into each entry changed. It became more focused on emotion than action. In other words, I wrote about my feelings, which was especially helpful when I would go through periods of depression and anxiety. During freshman year of college I was severely depressed, and my journal became a tool for me when I felt down. It was a confidential way for me to talk about what I was going through. By seeing my thoughts on paper, it also helped me to approach the situation from a different angle. Throughout college I continued to write, although now it has

become much less frequent. Unfortunately, I don't have much time what with my classes keeping me busy. I do most of my writing in the summer when I have more time and am generally feeling more creative. I still occasionally write about problems I'm facing, but lately my journal has become a place to devote my poetry.

I wrote a lot of poetry on and off throughout high school and college. However, looking back, my old poetry had a lot of flaws. The rhythm and structure were poorly developed, and the subject matter was almost laughable. Most of the poems had to do with crushes, and in general had a gloomy mood. But I am sure that is normal for a teenage writer; and the fact that I am now able to spot the imperfections shows that I have matured a lot. In sophomore year I took the classes Writing Poetry I and II, and I learned a lot of valuable skills that made a huge impact on my poetry. I discovered my voice as a poet and learned a lot of stylistic tricks. For instance, a lot of my poems are written in four stanzas with four lines each and four words per line. This is simply an odd personal preference of mine. This is not a standard by which I strive to write my poems; some of them are not like this. It is just what works best for me. In addition, I have expanded the topics of my poems. They are much more light-hearted now, though I did not intentionally make this change. I think that this came naturally as I matured as a writer and person. I do really enjoy writing about people in my poems, although the subject matter may go deeper than that. They are not always cheery and light. In other words, my writing shifts depending on my mood and current circumstances.

All of my past work is important as it has shaped me into the writer I am today. Some of it may be poorly developed or even cringe-worthy, but that is okay. I am able to look back and learn from it; that it is all part of the process. "Good writing" does not always come naturally.

Sometimes it does, but more often than not it is something that can only get better with time and practice. In other words, even my worst pieces have taught me something and helped me in becoming a better writer. Through journaling and writing poetry, I have become more in touch with my emotions and conveying them honestly. This may prove to be especially helpful when writing a story. For instance, my characters would be well-rounded, unique individuals with uncensored thoughts and emotions. Their experiences would be realistic, but not without some hopefulness, too. In general, I think it is important in a young adult novel to give a reader a sense of positivity about the future. A lot of things could go terribly wrong, but ending the story in a hopeful light can be inspiring to teens.

One such author who does just that is Julie Ann Peters. She writes LGBT young adult books, such as *Keeping You a Secret*, *Luna*, *She Loves You*, *She Loves You Not*, et cetera. These books are especially influential to teens that are LGBT or questioning their sexuality. They provide a sense of relatability and representation to know that there are others out there like them. Elizabeth Chapman, who did a study on the accessibility of LGBT books in U.K. public libraries, explains, “In the case of LGBT teenagers, the literature argues that fiction can contribute to the formation of a stable sense of personal identity by reassuring young people that they are not alone, promoting a positive self-image, and allowing them to explore what it means to be gay” (Elizabeth Chapman). It provides a sense of identity and peace of mind for teens that may be coming to terms with who they are. Even if a young person has already formed an identity or “come out,” YA literature can be helpful in learning how to navigate their attractions and relationships.

Julie Ann Peters recognizes this need and portrays it well in her characters that are of different sexualities. The situations they are put through are grounded in realism, such as being bullied, isolated, or even rejected from their families. At the same time, she reassures readers that they will eventually find the love and acceptance that they deserve. As a writer, Julie Ann Peters has inspired me to perhaps write an LGBT novel, or at the very least include LGBT characters in my writing. It is a topic that is very important to me, and I feel it should be addressed in literature more.

Ultimately I want my words to have an effect on children or teens. My concern is not with how successful the story is, but if it leaves an emotional impact on the reader. That I believe is the true mark of success for a writer. If a reader can identify and feel close to the characters and situations, that is what is most important. In particular, LGBT teens need a safe space to find others like them. My hope is to provide that place where real and fictional life comes together as one.

### Technical Proposal

My hope is to write thirty-five pages of a YA LGBT story centered on an introverted sixteen-year-old girl coming to terms with her sexuality. Perhaps she will struggle to accept herself and “come out” to her family and friends. This may be told in the form of personal journal entries from the main character. She has a boyfriend, but mostly due to societal pressure. Her feelings for him waver back and forth, and she does not actually feel “in love.” She toys with the idea that she could be bisexual, but does not want it to be true. Instead, she continues to date him and it puts her fears to rest. Until she meets a girl very unlike herself, and everything she thought she knew is put into question. I do want something startling and original to happen to the



main character—whether it will be an emotional or physical occurrence is not yet known. Even so, I want to make sure it is set apart from other LGBT books in some way. The audience of my work will be family, friends, and professors; however, I will be writing with the thought of young adult readers in mind. I want the story to appeal to them even though they will not be the actual audience who reads it. This is a very general plot outline and I have not yet decided on a title, but more details will come to me as I begin to write.

Writing LGBT books in general is very important due to the social and emotional issues they raise. We have as a society come a long way in understanding and accepting LGBT individuals. The media has played a large part in this. For instance, LGBT characters are becoming more heavily featured in TV shows, such as *The Fosters* or *Glee*. Besides allowing relatability and identity formation, it can lead to a better understanding and acceptance of LGBT people in general. While TV shows have and continue to become more inclusive concerning sexuality and gender, there are not that many LGBT characters when compared to the number of straight characters there are.

A study done in 2015 by the non-profit advocacy group GLAAD concludes, “Out of 881 regular characters on broadcast television primetime shows this year, only 35 identified as either gay, lesbian, or bisexual. That comes out to 4%, which is a very slight improvement over the 3.9% the group found on broadcast primetime shows last year” (Tom Huddleston, Jr.). Clearly, we have a long way to go when it comes to featuring sexual identity in TV shows. However, this is not the only medium for representing sexuality.

Now, more than ever, are there characters in videogames, movies, and literature who are LGBT. As for literature, the number of LGBT books has steadily grown over the years, but like

TV, there still remains a long way to go. An unfortunate truth is that there are far fewer books that focus on gender identity. For instance, those who are transgender or do not identify with their biological sex, are not getting as adequate representation as homosexual individuals do. Therefore, I think it is of importance to not only raise awareness of these issues, but to fix them by including more diversified characters. We have made much progress in this area over the years, but clearly there is still a lot of work to be done in representation and acceptance.

On a personal level, I can understand wanting to be accepted. In fact, the biggest influence for my thesis is my own life. In a way, the work overlaps with the struggles I felt as a teenager. The characters and events in this story may not be real, but they are associated with my own experiences. For instance, like the main character, I too kept a journal where I wrote down my thoughts and feelings I did not want anyone else to know. As a teenager, I struggled with my sexuality and for years kept it hidden. I was afraid of rejection and even harassment, as if it was something to be ashamed of rather than embraced. I kept it to myself out of fear and only mentioned it in my journal. This journal was very therapeutic to me, especially during the years when I was hiding and struggling with my identity. I did not start the coming out process until I was sixteen, with positive, encouraging results. I continued to write throughout this, as it gave me a sense of inner peace as well as clarity.

I have written in it a few times in college, but most of it was written between the ages of fifteen and seventeen. Even though I refer to it as a journal, it always felt more like an autobiography. It was divided into chapters that chronicled my life throughout most of high school. The fact that now the journal sits unattended without a definitive ending is bothersome to me. I have always felt the need to “do” something with it, as in turn it into a formal story with a plot and characters. That is where my thesis comes into play. My intention is not to copy

everything from my journal and turn it into a story; rather I want to use what I have written as a source of inspiration for my creative thesis. I may borrow from some of the experiences, feelings, and thoughts; but I want to incorporate new ones as well that are not based on my life. In other words, the journal will be in an influence in my writing, but it will not dominate it.

Other outside influences were touched on in my Artist's Statement, such as the authors Julie Ann Peters and Veronica Roth. To me, every book I love has shaped me as a person and even a writer in some way. One book that has been unforgettable to me since I read it when I was sixteen is *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* by Stephen Chbosky. It is a coming-of-age novel set in the 90s and centers on socially awkward teen Charlie as he navigates his freshman year of high school. It brings up issues concerning sexuality and introversion, as well as more disturbing events that happen within his family. The story is told in the form of letters written by Charlie addressing the reader. Unsurprisingly, I have always been fond of this style of writing. I really enjoy books that are divided by journal entries or letters rather than chapters. Not only does it make for a quicker read, but it can feel more personal and inclusive for the reader.

Some other coming-of-age books I have read and loved include all the books by John Green; *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson; *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* by Emily M. Danforth; *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak; *It's Kind of a Funny Story* by Ned Vizzini; *All the Bright Places* by Jennifer Niven; among hundreds more. A lot of these books deal with sexuality, mental illness, and adolescence. Growing up, young adult books shaped my feelings and knowledge about such issues, as well as helped me to know I was not alone. Today, I do not read as many young adult books as I used to, but I am still very fond and passionate about the characters and topics addressed.

Because of how much the genre means to me, I want to write the beginning of a YA story for this project. I have been writing my whole life, and young adult novels have been an influential source. LGBT books in particular are very important as they allow teens to relate to the characters, as well as provide answers and hope for acceptance. In the long run, I want to create stories that impact children or teens, and that will be as meaningful and worthwhile to them as it is for me.

#### Revised Thesis Proposal: Fiction to Non-Fiction

My honor's thesis was originally going to consist of thirty pages of an LGBT story. I had a few different ideas for it and gave it a lot of thought this summer. However, fiction is not my main form of writing and I struggled to start it. I kept alternating back and forth between keeping it and changing it. I was really interested in doing non-fiction as well. In the end I decided that since it is what I am most comfortable with and is more personally meaningful for me, I would rather write non-fiction for my thesis.

I really do believe fiction, especially young adult literature, is important and has made an impact on the person I am now. I definitely stand behind everything I wrote in my thesis proposal, and believe that teens can benefit greatly from reading LGBT literature. I think it is very necessary to have inclusive, diverse LGBT books so kids of all sexualities can identify and feel validated. However, I would rather write about my own personal experiences as an LGBT person instead of a fictional character's.

With that said, there will be overlapping themes between my original and new thesis. My old thesis was going to focus on a bisexual teenage girl living in a dysfunctional household who has a romantic interest in her best friend, but at the same time has a boyfriend. Some themes it would have centered on included LGBT relationships, family issues, life changes, and friendship. My new thesis would share similar ideas. For instance, I would like to have separate non-fiction pieces that told a basic story about a part of my life. Some of these pieces would be enjoyable and funny, while others being about heartbreak and loss. Their placement would not be random, but follow a certain timeline. The pieces would include adventures with friends, experiences in romantic relationships, and the aftermath of my parents' divorce. With that said, some of the events and people will be emotionally difficult to write about but are important all the same for how they have affected my life.

Expressive writing, or writing about one's circumstances and their thoughts and feelings surrounding it, can have some extraordinary benefits for a person (Schutte, Searle, Meade, and Dark, 144). For instance, writing about a situation can help one gain a different perspective and may even bring them some peace of mind. Solutions can be reached and burdens can be lifted by pouring one's deepest thoughts and fears onto paper. It may come as no surprise then that

expressive writing can have some therapeutic benefits for those dealing with trauma, oppression, and mental or physical illness.

There have been numerous studies done about the effects of writing on physical and mental health. Schutte et al. explains that “Expressive writing may enhance subjective well-being, which has been described as consisting of higher levels of positive affect, lower levels of negative affect and greater life satisfaction” (145). In their study, they divided participants into four writing groups and instructed some to write about their daily activities and their emotions concerning it (high meaningfulness); while others was simply told to write about their activities objectively (low meaningfulness). They wrote for three consecutive days for an average of twenty minutes. Afterward, they were asked to reflect on their activities (integrative processing). What they discovered was that the more meaning and integrative processing was given to their writing, the higher the positive affect was. Basically, the participants who focused more on their feelings and thoughts reported being happier overall (Schutte et al., 149).

This is not to say writing is a “cure all” for depression or other mental illnesses. In fact, writing in detail about a traumatic experience can cause more distress for some people, or simply not make a noticeable difference in mood. This can hold true for cancer patients, who may not benefit as much physically or psychologically from expressive writing. This may be due largely in part to cancer’s traumatic nature and long term effects on physical and mental health (Pok-Ja Oh and Soo Hyun Kim, 269). With that said, medical interventions like therapy or prescription drugs may leave the largest impact for patients in the long run. Overall, expressive writing may not be for everyone, but it is a tool that can be used alongside other remedies to help alleviate stress and negative affect across many populations and circumstances.

Expressive writing can be a beneficial process that relieves negative emotions and help people over troubling experiences. While it may not be all encompassing and should not necessarily be used as treatment alone, I think writing has many possibilities for what it can do for the writer and reader alike. I would like to have the opportunity to share my personal experiences not only to help cope with life circumstances, but to invite the reader into my world and meet the people who are the most important to me. I am not implying that my world is worth reading about or contains valuable knowledge and life experiences. Rather it is that I love expressive writing and feel the need to get certain memories onto paper, and hopefully the reader can take something away from it.

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