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Reflections on a Sixth-Grade Tragedy

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Reflections on a Sixth-Grade Tragedy

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Author Bio

Marilyn Springer is graduating from Gettysburg in one month as an English major with Writing and Studio Art minors, and hopefully by the time you're reading this, has a job lined up. She likes dancing, choreographing, writing, painting, lighter fluid, being inappropriate, sarcasm, and peanut butter. Hopefully all these things will continue to encompass her life as she embarks into the "real world." To her fellow seniors she would like to give a piece of advice-stay fierce.

Reflections on a Sixth-Grade Tragedy

How easily our pride is hurt.

Sometimes I look back on my last year and a half of elementary school and wonder if it's the reason for my chronic apathy toward friendship.

* * *

...I became the unwanted sock crumpled in a wad and left under the bed.

In fifth grade an April Fool's joke shattered my narcissistic pride. My friend Emily claimed to have broken up with her boyfriend, Josh, and a week later he asked me to be his girlfriend—not in so many words, of course, because his question and my answer were never actually directed to each other. Sitting in the cafeteria eating pepperoni pizza, Lunchables, or tater tots from the lunch line, my friends grilled me with questions and comments.

"Guess who has a crush on you...Josh!"

"Are you gonna go out with him?"

"Maybe that's why Emily broke up with him...she knew!"

Walking back to our homerooms in casual line formation Kate, Kristen, and Jenna prodded me with their incessant questioning:

"So...what are you gonna say?"

My casual response "sure" determined that Josh and I were officially a couple, and sitting in the computer lab that day we embarked on our Oregon Trail quest together. We tried to save *our* Conestoga wagon from any perils *we* might encounter on the long and dusty road headed west, but before we were ever able to purchase our goods at the general store, Josh and I were through. Our mutual friend, Doug, snuck up behind us with Emily at his side and simultaneously they squealed, "April Fool's!" at the back of my neck. *Duh, you've been writing 4/1 on your papers the whole day!* The joke was revealed, laughter ensued, and I wondered how I could possibly be at the heart of anyone's joke.

The retaliation for the joke and the final termination of our friendship finished out my sixth-grade year, leaving me hurt and bitter, a pathetic gray-scale version of my former vibrant self. But I'm not sorry about the tragic events of my latter years at General Nash Elementary. I deserved everything I got.

You just haven't heard that part yet.

The summer before sixth grade was the summer of the phone calls, the tape recorder, and Jenna, the new girl who moved into the house across the street from my best friend, Noelle. I don't know if I was subconsciously still angry about the April Fool's joke, my pride still not fully restored, or if I was just harboring a desire to rebel against pre-teen, adolescent angst. Either way, Noelle and I concocted

a scheme to record conversations with our friends to find out what they really thought of us.

Kate was easy. She was loyal to no one, yet each person thought she was her best friend. She grasped on firmly to our invisible fly and we reeled her in without trouble.

"Noelle is such a baby. I said I didn't want to come over to her house today and she got all mad and hung up."

"Yeah, she's always a baby like that."

"People only hang out with her because they know she'll cry if she's not included."

"I know. It's so annoying."

"I'm probably not even gonna talk to her next year."

"Yeah, me either."

However, this representation can't be fully accurate. My lines couldn't possibly have run that smoothly with sweat beading above my lip, some stutters, the occasional Freudian slip, and the struggle to read the questions exactly as they had been written on the notepad with Noelle's left-handed writing. At one point, on the phone with Emily, she caught me mid-sentence and asked if I was asking questions directly from a piece of paper.

Over the course of the summer, when Noelle and I weren't together, she was befriending the new girl, Jenna, from across the street. Jenna was tough; she was cool. Her parents were divorced and she had three older sisters. She wore clothing from Wet Seal, listened to rap music, and wore makeup to school. Naturally I wanted to be around her, hoping maybe the coolness would rub off by proximity.

We invited Jenna to a tape recording session to finally bring closure to the April Fool's joke. The three of us sat Indian-style on the tan carpeted bedroom floor with the phone and tape recorder in the center of us. Jenna was an immediate pro.

"Ya know what's really funny? Mar is *still* not over that April Fool's joke from last year. Come on, get over it, right?"

"Ugh, I bet that's 'cause she still likes him. Too bad!"

"Haha, did she before? I mean I guess she had to if she said 'yes.'"

"[Sigh.] She's been obsessed with him ever since we started dating. It was ridiculous. I had to put her in her place."

So that was that.

About four months into sixth grade, my last year at General Nash, the year where I was supposed to reign over the entire school—from the kindergarteners with perpetual yellow snot dripping from one nostril, crusted above the lip; to the annoying fifth graders who try as they might could not pull off the flare leg jean with rainbow stripe down the side like all the sixth-graders could—I became the unwanted sock crumpled in a wad and left under the bed.

Emily's twin brother, Dan, came over to Noelle and me during recess. He held in his stubby fingers some pictures that Noelle, Kate, Kristen, and I had taken at Kate's house one night. We were trying to be sexy models, I don't know, maybe we had recently seen a Victoria's Secret commercial on TV. The lights were

dim and we set up some candles in the room and posed individually with pouty lips and sultry eyes, on the bed and next to the closet door. They weren't sexy pictures. In fact, they were rather silly; concrete examples of adolescent girls trying to be something they clearly were not, trying to show off bodies that had not been given enough time to develop.

"Jenna, Kristen, Kate, and Emily don't want to be your friends anymore."

We had no responses, just dumb, embarrassed expressions on our faces.

"They know that you recorded their conversations. Jenna told them."

Backstabber.

Dan presented each Kodak and then released it from his fingers so it fluttered to the grass at our feet, repeating each time a new picture was revealed that they did not want to be friends with us, that we were annoying to be around and not nice. And, from these risqué photos we were also sluts—the other girls' pictures had been conveniently removed from the stack.

It hurt. It hurt really bad.

We were being rejected. Singled out and rejected for not being enough of something or being too much of something else, and either way we weren't wanted, weren't liked anymore. And the worst part was that I had encouraged them to do it just by being, well...a bitch.

I told my mom what had happened and I knew she hurt with me, but a bigger part of her was relieved. A few months previous she witnessed first-hand how mean these girls actually were, and when I say "these girls" I have to include myself. My mom had offered to take us all to see *Titanic*. None of my friends said a word to my mom as they got in or out of the car to be picked up or dropped off. No one said "hi," no one said "thank you," not one girl even acknowledged a question my mom asked with a response. We couldn't even show respect at the movie theatre. As the great boat tipped on its side and people plunged into the deathly cold water, we laughed and threw Sour Patch Kids at the screen.

I became an estranged alien of whoever I had been before. My face broke out in red rashes of eczema so I was afraid to even show up at school, feeling I would be harassed for the blotchy, inverted craters on my face. Not even social times like lunch or recess could take my mind off of my hideousness as Noelle and I became fused together, afraid of talking to anyone but each other. At recess we would walk circles along the yellow bike lines spray-painted on the macadam, spewing words of hatred about these girls who could get rid of us without a second thought.

"At least I'm not fat like Kate. She'll never get a boyfriend."

"And the only reason Emily has Josh is because of her brother. If she didn't have Dan she'd just be that weird freckly girl in the back corner of the room. Josh would never have even talked to her."

"I know! And did you notice that Kristen has a mustache? Ew!"

I wish I could pinpoint when exactly I decided I was so amazing that someone would cry if they ever lost my friendship, or would spend nights awake just wishing I would talk to them.

But no one cried.

No one lost any sleep, and when my best friends all deserted me, no one

came rushing over to my lunch table and put their stocking-covered knees on the dirty linoleum floor next to my chair and begged me to let them sit at my table and be their friend. And rightfully so, why would they?

I don't think it's an overwhelming vat of pessimism that poisons my thoughts and makes me apathetic about keeping a friendship alive through everything that can potentially destroy it. I think that maybe I learned at an early age that a friendship does not always withstand the weathering and aging that we put it through. Perhaps if we're meant to grow as people we can't keep holding onto the same friendships from our past because it will only bring us back to the person we *used* to be.

* * *

I briefly kept in contact with my former elementary school friends with the onset of junior high. Kristen and I were friendly if we had a class together, or would smile when we met eyes across the hall. Kate changed schools after sixth grade and went to a private Catholic school in Philadelphia so I haven't even seen her since the days of General Nash. I rode the bus to junior high and high school with Jenna and Noelle and we would stand together waiting for the bus, but our conversations would cut off as soon as we spotted a rectangular splotch of canary yellow come up past the bend in the road. I didn't even sit with them on the bus. I danced three nights a week through my senior year in high school and Noelle was in all of my classes. We were always friendly, just never friends anymore. Surprisingly, Emily was the only one I became friends with again and stayed friends with from middle school to high school. We were on the tennis team together and our friendship strengthened when we started hanging out at the same parties and became Co-Captains of the team our senior year.

Maybe if I had just learned to hold onto a friendship and had wanted to keep it going through distance and age then I would have been able to continue a relationship with my friends from high school—friends who were much different from the crowd I surrounded myself with in junior high, who were completely unlike the pack I clung to in elementary school.

After graduating high school, we would spend our summer nights in Kim's gray collapsible tent pitched in her backyard, fighting off mosquitoes with Off bug spray. Slurping from plastic bags of Franzia and wearing sombreros and ponchos, we would reminisce about "the good 'ol days of high school" because none of us had wanted to go to college when our acceptance letters and orientation packets came in the mail.

"Ew, college. I want to stay here with you guys instead. No one else will understand my Mexican tendencies."

"I'm not even packing my stuff up until the parental unit starts getting concerned. Maybe that way I won't have to leave at all."

"I already asked my dad if I could stick around here another year and work so I wouldn't have to go, but it's not looking promising. Boo."

But I had actually wanted to go.

In fact, I couldn't wait to get the hell out of Lansdale. To tear the pictures out of my Beatles calendar and start taping them to my dorm room wall. To experience living for the next nine months with a Turkish roommate. To meet people I never came across in high school.

To be vulnerable again.