

NOCCA: Riverfront

By EA BLEVINS

For

David, Bryon, Andrew, Vinyette, Erica, Piper,
Regina, Mary Jane, Ms. McNeill, and Mr. Travis.

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A. Pre-NOCCA

It wasn't that I liked him more than the others—he just knew how to make me feel better.

Andrew wasn't the handsomest boy—tall, gangly, with face and hair not easy to forget and not easy to remember. It was his self-possessed stride and the witty comment hiding just behind his lips that gave his slouching form some purpose, the glint of quick intelligence and wry humor in his eyes drawing gazes back to him for a second glance.

I'm not sure what about him reminded me of my brother—perhaps it was the way he questioned everything and always went a little bit further than the rest of us in his opinions. Perhaps it was the way he teased me—putting on my coat and tapping his index fingers together in an imitation of my nervous habits (“I am Beth-man!”).

I'm not sure what it was, exactly. All I know is that his presence made me feel better—his arm around my shoulders was like a healing balm to wounded feelings and his jokes made me laugh.

I suppose, in a way, I loved him. My friends at high school saw my feelings as romantic and my denials as . . . denial, but it is a peculiar and sacred beast, the love I had for Andrew, the love I had for all of my classmates. Romantic love can be grasping, unfulfilled, jealous, but my feelings sprang from somewhere purer and simpler. Aristotle calls it *philia*. The platonic love of friends.

But, then, it didn't start with Andrew. It all began in June, when I went to the summer session of the New Orleans Center for the Creative Arts. . . .

The first morning was cool and bright. Or maybe it was warm and wet, like most Louisiana days. All I remember for sure is it was grey. It was always grey that early in the morning, the damp, dusty color matted onto houses and cars and streets.

We always turned right on 90. Never left. I remember that, and the carved dark green-and-white sign that proclaimed a town I can't remember the name of as the “Gumbo Capitol of the World.”

I carpooled with a girl a year older than me—our moms took turns driving. Her family was Latino and her mother had a strong accent, but she was very American. She was quiet but not soft-spoken and had glorious, tight ringlets of black hair held with gel. She was one of those girls who somehow managed to be stunning and wholesome at the same time.

We met amiably before and after our respective classes—she to art and I to writing.

In that summer class I met a coffee-with-cream girl named Vinyette. She was full and round and pleasant, with a commanding, confident air. I found her easy to talk to; she, happily, seemed to like me, and even called me her “little buddy.” We stuck together during the summer session, and she is the only one who joined me in the year-long class.

1

First day of summer classes.

My mother had dropped me off and I was in the auditorium, hidden in the darkest row, by the wall, hand shaking as I scribbled a quick letter to my best friend in Texas. I kept expecting something to happen, but I can’t remember what. Perhaps I thought a ghost would wander out and start to play that dark, dusty piano on stage.

I know I stopped writing when the teachers spoke, and I missed who I was supposed to follow to my class because I was busy congratulating myself for doing something, finally, without my mother. I felt very independent and important, so that I was smiling when everyone began to shift and follow their teachers. I saw one of the men who had auditioned me, presented in greeting as a writing teacher, and turned to follow him—and stopped. My mother waved and chattered about how they had said she could come in to listen: I stood with all previous ideas of independence and self-sufficiency slumping down about my ears. Discouraged, I bumbled through a response and goodbye, blindly following the man I had seen and leaving my mother behind. I followed as if in a daze, up to a room next to the one I had been auditioned in. The man spoke to the small group, then saw me. He smiled, perplexed.

“Beth. Aren’t you supposed to be in creative writing?” He looked at me—everyone looked at me—and I nodded. “That’s in the next room.”

I blinked, then smiled slightly, eyes squinting so I couldn’t see anyone in the room. “Oh. Thank you.” And left to sit and wait in the next room, allowing the embarrassment to hit me as I added to the letter I had started in the auditorium. Finally, my proper class came in, along with Mr. Travis, who would be our teacher until Ms. Gisleson came back. He assumed I had not been in the auditorium and I was too embarrassed to correct him.

2

Mr. Travis was a creative writer. When I joined, he had just been given the position of Dean of Academics.

He was a man with that lovable aura of absent-mindedness that makes grandfathers so appealing and mothers so annoying—a sweet sincerity of nature that

carried through the faint grey in his dark hair and opened him to his students unabashedly.

He called us creative writers. For youths studying to become such, no other title gave such joy, contentment, or warm fuzziness of feeling. In calling us such, he gave us rank higher than I ever would. I saw students—bumbling, awkward, and young—but he saw . . . writers. And when he would say it, my heart swelled and I saw all of the promise, all of the burning potential in our class. It made me feel stronger and braver. Inspired.

3

Miss Gisleson (GIZ zel sun) took over about two weeks later. She was a young, slim, blonde woman—beautiful but rarely smiling. At least, when she smiled it was for something in the lesson she was excited about: never just to be friendly, unless it was to joke with Mr. Richard (REE shard), the small man I had followed that first day, but even their camaraderie was more as if they built their wit off each other than true friendship, while the students remained shut out altogether.

It was a common occurrence that, during the summer classes, Miss Gisleson would tell us that the real classes—those during the year—were much harder; she stressed that NOCCA was “not for everyone.” Every time she said this, though, I glowingly thought: “But it *is* for *me!*” since I had already auditioned and been accepted.

I did not realize, then, that there was more to the warning than just the difficult level of work.

4

During this time period, I had to meet periodically with the elite choir class at high school for summer practices. We met in the choir room—a spacious pale grey, blue, and purple area, freshly cleared of chairs and ready for our equipment.

It just so happened that the first rehearsal I could attend coincided with the third revision of a story I was proud of. It wasn’t the best I’d written, but it was one of the few I had finished, so I was bursting with bubbles of artistic pride.

It’s not as if the ensemble choir was dull. The room filled with laughter and chatter (occasionally to the annoyance of our teacher, a slim, blonde, energetic woman with the air of the classic, stereotypical cheerleader). And everyone had friends in the group.

So as I walked into the room, beaming, skipping, spiraling high on the warm currents of elation, I gazed immediately about for someone with whom to share my joy. I

was bursting to tell someone, to share the sparkle of my mood with anyone who would let me.

No one did.

It seemed as if the opening of my mouth or the increased brightness in my eyes stole some vital interest from my peers. As I flashed and glowed and attempted to gush, faces dulled and changed the subject, turning away to friends who would talk of other things, utterly blocking me out. I failed to find anyone whose interest held more than moments.

That was, perhaps, one of my bitterest days.

B. NOCCA

The first day of the NOCCA school year was in August, a little before high school began. I was calm as my mom drove, turning right, past the sign, left onto the overpass, and on until the Slidell exit. It was a bright day, full of an almost-sweet lingering freshness. It was a poet's day, one of those great, effervescent splashes of life where only the light is purer than the air and anything is possible—an idealist's day, an optimist's day.

My day.

When we had passed by the fringe of the French Quarter, only a few blocks and a curve away from the French Market, we climbed through intermittent stop signs in one of the lesser neighborhoods and pulled into the grounds of NOCCA.

It was a beautiful campus. The buildings stood tall and pale and deliciously new. High iron fences skirted everything with an almost artistic flair, blocking the dirty brown streets, dented Hondas, and molding houses from us; though we could still see it all, there was a distinct air of detachment and separation within the clean, pale grounds.

Only when I reached the shallow front steps, looking into the open pavilion—the guards' office on my left, the canteen on my right—did slivers of gleaming anxiety begin to rip into my stomach. I wondered if I was heading for the right room—perhaps they had changed it on me. I hoped that my new classmates would accept me more than the summer ones had, but continued to brace myself for educated disinterest. My main comfort was the familiarity with which I navigated the grounds and the sweet, calming air.

Black mesh bag hefty with binder, paper, and pens, I entered the room, admiring the dimness, the light cascading in from several tall windows, and the two tall, floor-to-ceiling wooden columns—structural remnants of the factory that this portion of the buildings used to be. The walls were smooth, the desks were new, arranged in a circle, and the room was empty but for me and the friendly sunlight.

I don't honestly remember if it was Vinyette or I there first, but she was the first that I saw. We met, settled into our hard plastic chairs, in front of those beautiful, flawless grey and black desks, and prattled about nothing until two brown heads popped in the door, one not long after the other.

It is nearly impossible, when first meeting David and Bryon, to tell them apart. They are of the same build, with similar hair length and color, and of perfectly matching skin—some light shade of tan. I don't know if they knew each other previous to NOCCA, but they quickly and instinctively latched together.

By the time the two hours and fifteen minutes of class were over, I could tell them apart. Bryon had blue eyes as opposed to David's brown, and was about two inches the

shorter. Often, as the year progressed, they would be two of the most outspoken in class and often seen with heads bent together in private deliberation—and always welcomed the rest of us into their conversation.

David had energy and high spirits. He moved constantly—in class, he balanced backwards in his chair (and fell more than once).

Bryon spoke more slowly, but though he lacked David's outgoing nature, he was none the less approachable: rather, a bit more refined. Bryon was the gentleman's gentleman, always holding doors, always patient. I believe his occasional reservation was aided and abetted by a tendency for quiet thought—one with which I can easily empathize.

The fifth to enter the room that day was Andrew—recognizable from the summer film studies class. I remembered that he had smiled kindly when I'd followed Richard and embarrassed myself, but I was surprised to see him in the first year class because I had thought he was a second year writer.

So it was that first day that I knew only these four. On that second day, Erica joined us—a much darker girl than Vinyette, slim but not quite short. She carried an air of amiable intelligence with the curly mass of black hair pulled up onto her head. Her pretty brown eyes sparkled with laughter and optimism—she carried responsibility and duty down about the curve of her mouth, or the set of her smooth, dark chin—and I've never seen such sweet wrists or ankles. She neither slouched nor drooped, and the white dress shirt and dark plaid skirt were always clean and perfectly placed.

And we were six.

I'm not sure what it was that made me connect with these five the most intimately. For some reason, they drew me out more than the others and affected me with every portion of what I considered good about NOCCA life. Perhaps it was because I had them from the beginning. Perhaps I was just more compatible with these, and they happened to come along before the others. I'm not sure, but it doesn't matter now, not anymore, and I digress.

About a week or so in, Regina joined us, dropping down from her attempted jump to the second level class. By the first Workshop I understood why she had been given that chance—she was an extraordinarily realistic writer. But despite her fabulous penmanship, I held her in a sort of terrified awe. She was neither cruel nor biting, and I don't believe she would have given great vent to such feelings if provoked, but there was some sharp, gloomy mist around her that made me shrink further into myself, afraid to face what opinions were made of me by that brisk, intelligent girl.

It was a bit further in, perhaps a few weeks later, when Piper joined us. She was a pretty girl, slim and proportioned in a way that most males, I am sure, would appreciate. I liked her hair—it was light brown, almost blonde, and smooth. She didn't speak much

in class, and though our teacher attempted the valiant experiment of putting us together for a project in hopes that we would talk, the two quietest girls, it didn't quite work.

The last to come, quite far along in the quarter, was Mary Jane. She was a dark-haired girl, stooped with her heavy backpack. She had an arresting face. I do not call her pretty, and I do not call her ugly. There are those people who shall not be either in the memory and only make of their looks by what they make of themselves, by who they are. Mary Jane was arresting. Admittedly, though, I was jealous. She was a fabulous writer and I felt pangs when Bryon would exclaim over her work, or David paid her welcoming attentions. I cannot claim I didn't like her, though. I did—which is why the jealousy bothered me, for jealousy is a gnawing, demented thing. It kept me from knowing her and I fear she might have felt a bit of my standoffishness: and I would not wish to hurt her for the world.

If I remember correctly, our teacher left before Mary Jane did. But, then, I'm not to that point yet. . . .

1

The shadows slid long and the sunlight glittered bright gold, slanting in and making the bush to the left of the driveway look greener than at any other time of the day.

Three 'o' clock.

It was a glowing harmony of life's green-gold—the absolute opposite of the accursed three in the morning which LM Montgomery denounces as the hour every haunting thought comes upon a person.

Perhaps the warm fuzz of kittens or the scent of freshly mowed grass in the sunlight could equal the great, clear mass of sky seen on the overpass. Perhaps they could rival the purple and white blinds on the old three-story house, and the fish sculptures marking the pristine front of Harrahs Casino as we passed, or the black man on the corner with baggy pants on a too-windy day.

But nothing could equal the mime outside of Café du Monde, the horse-drawn carriages waiting patiently for riders, the open-air jazz bands, or the daily tally of how many pedestrians we almost hit (top score: eleven, bike riders count).

But above all, above the mime and the count and the fantastic old stop lights, was the anticipation of NOCCA, of getting there and realizing, again, that I was not imagining my fellow students to be wonderful and warm and real—that I did not have to pretend that their smiles were genuine.

It was the first school I had been in from the start. I had been to seven different schools, always joining people who knew each other, trying to wiggle a little niche, quietly, into the back corner of their lives.

It didn't always work.

But this time we were all the new kids—we were all starting fresh, with no preexisting attachments or grudges.

Perhaps that's one of the reasons it worked so well.

2

It was on the first day of class that I knew I would love it there. No, it wasn't some mystical, all-pervading feeling. It was a nod.

I have already told you of when, during the summer, my illustrious choir class thoroughly ignored me. I related the story to my four classmates, expressing out loud the sorrow I had felt.

“. . . *so* excited about my new story . . . and they didn't *care*.” I spread my hands, staring at the top of my desk with two brown heads kneeling in front of it, peering over the grey surface attentively. Vinyette sat next to me, Andrew stood nearby, and the window behind me lighted everything with a sky boasting of the approaching sunset.

I glanced up carefully, bracing for disinterest, ready to be disappointed—and was shot through with wild, sobbing relief, as two heads bobbed lightly at me, eyes sympathetic.

“We know,” their eyes said.

For a long moment, my vision blurred around the edges and all I could see was the movement.

The sweetness of the shock, the heady delight, stayed with me throughout the rest of class and followed when we walked together to the front of the campus, bubbling up as my steps blended with those of my classmates near and around me. It rose like uncorked champagne on the car ride home.

I was drunk with my thoughts and had never felt more optimistic about anything in my life.

3

We were the Afternoon Class. Distinguishable from the Morning Class by forty-five minutes less time and several less students. If I might go by the tone during the summer, we were also a much tighter group. There were so few of us that each student held a place in the overall aura of class-time, like a pillar to the support of a free-standing roof. Remove one and everything slouches.

Andrew called it chemistry.

And it was true that when one was missing, everyone felt it. There was a palpable loss in the class, and whether that was from the physical removal of a body in a class so lacking in them or the more sensitive loss of voice and personality, I can only guess and know this: it was a tangible space.

4

Our teacher ran class exactly as I had always dreamed she would.

Ms. McNeill was only a part-time teacher under Miss Gisleson and Mr. Richard, but she took on the class with the full force of her personality and made creative, fascinating extras for us to use in our writing. Sometimes we would be in groups—other times we would work independently.

She once brought a grab-bag of odds and ends from around her home. We picked blindly from the sack and had to write a poem about whatever we drew out.

Had either of the other teachers tried the same experiment, it wouldn't have been half as fun. Ms. McNeill just knew how to make things interesting. She laughed with us, debated with us, cried with us. She was, in a way, one of us; a beloved position that Mr. Richard and Ms. Gisleson never, in their proud intelligence, achieved.

There was one exercise she brought to us the day we studied Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach" and Emily Dickinson's "341" (also known as: "After Great Pain"), wherein the latter became one of my favorite poems. "Toomsuba," she wrote on the board, explaining how she loved to collect new, interesting words. We asked what it meant, but she told us to get out paper and make up a definition for it in a poem. All of ours were different, but I, to this day, keep that poem because it is the one poem that best represents me at that point in life.

"I don't feel like a poet. / I'm a sixteen year old hack. / I write some words / and break them up, / like toomsbas on the track. / I'm working on another, now, / I'm sure it won't get done. / Since Arnold had to go and talk / about love when I had none. / Maybe I'm no writer, / And maybe I'm a hack, / But I'll do my best / and watch some more / toomsbas on the track."

From then on, it was one of those delicious tidbits that only those privy could possibly understand. An inside joke, if you will.

“Toomsuba,” she said at the end of class, “is a town in Alabama.” Andrew shoved back his chair in mock-disgust and we left, smiling.

5

Vinnette told us about the musicians. Someone had already said that writing was not considered a creative art by some of the other sections, so I was curious as to the general consensus on our writing class.

Vinnette had been in the canteen, a cool, relaxing, vending-machined area with a full row of windows overlooking the parking lot and glass doors directly opposite the guards’ office. It seems that she heard some musicians talking about our class—how we were probably a cult. Vinnette said that the boy talking then turned to her and asked if they had had any homework. She replied that she was not in his class, she was a creative writer.

As she stood to leave, she heard him whisper to one of his friends, “Maybe she didn’t hear us.”

At the door, she turned and informed him curtly: “And we are *not* a cult!”

She seemed annoyed over it—I was ecstatic. I thought it was wonderful that the other classes had noticed how close we all were—it made me feel rather important and proud to be a creative writer.

I smiled the rest of that day.

6

Ms. McNeill’s last two days were the best days of the year. I wish someone had had a camera, because we will never be assembled like that again.

It was Wednesday afternoon and we went out into the grass to read poetry. The beauty of the day made me restless, though, and we talked instead, Ms. McNeill taking Vinnette aside for the first conference about grades. She would have gotten to all of us, but when she walked back over, she spoke of something much more serious.

She wasn’t supposed to tell us yet, she said, but I had a feeling that, though she said nothing and made no motion to insult her colleagues, she put little by in the way they did things. I still believe that they were the reason she left. She told us that she would

not be returning the next week, that it was her own decision, and every one of us saw the sorrow in her eyes.

There was silence. It was a consuming silence, stealing the air and replacing the breath in our lungs with some horrible, tangible pain—a sharp thing, a cruel taste.

It was a silence I was all too familiar with.

It was the pause in time when I called my best friends to tell them I was leaving them after three years, the longest I had stayed anywhere—it was the knowledgeable dread that filled me when I saw my parents silently framed in the doorway of my very pink room in Texas, coming to tell me that we were moving again—a sliver of space filled with that horrible, pain-filled breath.

It is a sacred silence—one associated with tragedy and death. Whosoever breaks such a moment is forever accursed: it is not released, it releases, for it is the captor: it is the Master, it is the Pain.

I remember looking at them, at their reactions. There was a sharp, shocked sweep of expressions, brows furrowed in disbelief. The image is imprinted into my memory—a testament to one point, one period, in which we were completely united.

I think Andrew cursed. But I can't remember.

For the rest of the afternoon, we sat in a circle, in the grass and on the stones, talking. One of us would choose a question and we would go around the circle, answering.

Why did we write? Our greatest fear. Siblings. Most embarrassing moment. Around and around we went in a class period far too short. At one point, Mary Jane put her head in my lap and I enjoyed the breeze, the light, the grass under my fingers, and the feeling of camaraderie laced between us all.

Perhaps not everyone felt as I did, but, if they didn't, no one said anything.

The next day was just as pleasant. It was a Workshop—we were finishing with poetry that day—but it was very relaxed. I had gotten everyone to bring flowers, so there were bright bouquets on the table behind Ms. McNeill, and she had brought banana bread and raisin bread. She seemed to know the guest poet, a young woman with a warm smile, and we talked and laughed and discussed the poems we had turned in.

At the end of class, as they had told me they would, David and Bryon stood on their chairs and cried “Oh Captain, my Captain!” in mimicry of “The Dead Poet’s Society,” and saluted. They always seemed to do those things in perfect symmetry.

One of them, David or Bryon, motioned for me to join them, so I stood on my chair and saluted, giving an affectionate, wry smile.

They *were* wonders, those two.

And so we all went out and down, bittersweet music churning in our stomachs. Vinyette's mother had a card for Ms. McNeill and my mother had a present, so we two trotted back in the dimming light to give them to her, her arms already full of flowers. Our mothers met her in the parking lot and they talked; we spoke to the nice young poet—she was a sweet lady, and it seemed she had also enjoyed the day.

It was almost dark when we finally left, but my heart did not ache as much as I thought it would. We had loved Ms. McNeill thoroughly and there was little more we could do. We would keep in touch, I knew. So I settled back, the taste of raisin bread lingering on my tongue and “Oh Captain, my Captain!” ringing over in my ears, and watched as the darkening orange and pink sky grew ever closer to us, on our way home.

7

There are three people who kept me spellbound as they read. One was my eleventh grade English teacher—but more poignant than even her powers of oration were Mr. Richard and Bryon. (I might have included Erica, but she always paused in the most awkward places.)

Mr. Richard possessed the poet's lilt. My fellow students said he sounded just like Agent Smith from “The Matrix,” but all I heard was the dynamic bass.

Bryon was different—if he had been the same, I wouldn't have cared to listen to him—and his narrations were almost musical. While Mr. Richard loved and nodded and sweethearted each word and phrase, rising and falling like the swell of a breeze, Bryon lighted through the text with pleasant tenderness, eyes bright and as softly animated as his voice.

There was a gentleness to Bryon's reserve that made his orations none the less laced with soft excitement and cheer.

Yes. Bryon was cheerful. Thoughtful. Intelligent.

That was one thing everyone in class had in common—we were all intelligent. That is one of the reasons I was so surprised to find them so friendly. The stereotypical intellectual is cold and standoffish—and though I found those traits in a few of those I met during the summer, and saw it in some underlying way with the two main writing teachers, I found little in my classmates.

8

It was David who gave me the best compliment I have ever received.

I met him in the library before class and sat across from him; Bryon was typing up a story for class several feet away at the computers. It took me a minute to realize that David's eyes were glazed and unfocused, fixed on a spot somewhere above my head. I waved a hand in front of his face, but he only frowned slightly and shook his head, waving me off.

I was a little hurt, I'll admit it, but I shrugged my shoulders and pulled out a notebook, determined not to care. As I picked up my pen, he leaned forward and whispered: "I'm listening to them," and gestured to the table behind him.

It was loaded with girls.

I'm not sure what art they were in. Possibly dance, because they had their black gym bags spread about them, but I didn't look closely lest they notice my friend's eavesdropping. I wondered what they were talking about, but couldn't hear them.

As the girls rose and left, a short while later, David leaned forward and said in a serious voice too low for them to overhear. "Beth," he said, "I'm glad you're not like them." And smiled. David's smiles were nothing if not honest—he was one of the most tactful and encouraging people I'd ever met, and you always knew, through the smile or the sparkle in his eyes, that you could trust him.

And it meant a lot, knowing that he honestly liked me.

9

It was dark outside and we were taking our break—they gave us a five to ten minute break every class, and it was getting later in the year—almost to that laughable farce that the south calls winter. It was night even though it was, perhaps, around five when we wandered out onto the steps outside of the building, staying on the top landing. I could see over the length of the grassy area with my favorite sitting-stone, and past the back gates into the darkness of the shabby neighborhood.

But when I looked up, there was a moon and darkness so thick it could have swallowed me up. Looking at my classmates, I saw the shadows soften them, and Andrew spat over the edge of the stairs. I told him that spitting was disgusting and he bade me try it. I peered down, looking at the smooth sidewalk below. The sidewalk followed along the building, beside the grass, to a white door that looked normal from afar and dwarfed you up close.

So I spat over the edge and watched it fall.

It was a pathetic attempt, if I say so myself. A four-inch long string of saliva, it twirled a bit as it fell. David looked over when it was a third of the way down and exclaimed “Who did that?!” Utterly embarrassed, I told him. Andrew chuckled as David congratulated me.

10

I have the horrible quality of needing to be recognized in social situations. I do not require mass attention, but, rather, a little bit at all times. In choir this greed of mine was never filled—but at NOCCA it was rarely an issue. For even if I was left to myself, I felt part of everything. Even if I was only observing the others, I was still included.

There was one day in which I was unhappy, feeling quite left out and separate from the small huddle of my fellow students. It was a grey, dreary day—one of those that gets dark early and invades you, seeping in with its dull, sluggish depression through eyes and nose and skin. It might also have been a day close about to that eternal, terrible cycle among all women, when the stars stand still and my brother cowers in fear of all that is angry, irrational, and female.

Perhaps.

I remember that Andrew was rather grumpy that day—everything was affected by the dropping dusk. That might have been the day he was sick and suggested that our teachers could do something very lewd if they were unhappy with him. Bryon laughed—I was lightly shocked at both of them, but refrained from saying anything.

But it might not have been the same day and I’m not sure if it matters.

I wrote back and forth with Vinyette when we were supposed to be inspired by the art students’ gallery, telling her how unhappy I felt. I was very embarrassed when I let Andrew read it aloud and he stopped, not bothering to finish.

Never mind that we were almost back to class then, or that it was a very confusing conversation.

But when Vinyette related that I felt neglected, there was a small outburst of concern. I particularly remember Bryon’s face—he was always so sensitive, and seemed honestly upset that I felt bad.

I had to fight a smile as various arms were thrown around my shoulders and I was fussed over. I had to fight my pride to accept their concern—I would rather stay silent and hurting than openly admit when I am unhappy and upset my friends. But that little fervor of sympathy was exactly what I needed.

It ended, however, quickly after we entered the building and got to class, and I lapsed again into melancholy—though Hell would come to take me before I would admit it again.

It was after class that I was given the dimes. I think it was David who gave me the first one—it was all he had on him—and Bryon dug out a pocketful of change, from which I took only another dime. I kept both coins in my coat pocket and jingled them together in choir class when I felt bad. I even made up a song for them—a hobby I had taken to while waiting for my parents to come pick me up from school (there was a nice lady who checked the students leaving early and waved me goodbye every day, but she was never around when I gave my little recitals). It, like most of my songs, would be most appreciated by children of a non-literate age:

I have dimes. That makes me happy—not sad. I have dimes. That makes me perky and glad. I have dimes. That makes me happy—not sad! I have dimes, I have dimes, I have (doo doo doo) di-i-i-imes.

I only stopped carrying them when I lost one. It didn't matter, though, I couldn't tell which was which anyway and I put the remaining one in a little ceramic egg. It represents both of them now, and I plan to drill a hole through it and put it on a necklace or key chain to keep as a good luck charm.

11

It was Wednesday. We only had class three days a week: Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday, and I remember telling my brother (home for Christmas) that I didn't want to go to NOCCA the next day, Thursday, after it happened. He talked me into it, though. My brother could talk me into anything; through a short phone conversation he persuaded me to try my new contacts again, thereby succeeding where my mother's anger and frustration couldn't.

So it was Wednesday, the last week of NOCCA before Christmas vacation—I had just spent a quarter with Mr. Richard, Ms. Gisleson, and the new part-time teacher, Ms. Young. I'm not sure if it was Ms. Young's natural disposition to try and do things like the other two wanted or if they had decided to keep a sharper eye on our class after Ms. McNeill left, but I know she told them about what happened in our classes. I don't blame her for that, though. She was doing her job and, from a teacher's point of view, effectively not getting herself fired.

It was a double-teaming on the Wednesday student-teacher conferences. Vinyette, Erica, and I each had a private conference with Mr. Richard and Ms. Gisleson that day and the others would go the next day.

Vinnette came out crying because they had said some terrible things about her work. Erica came out crying because she wasn't making the grade she wanted (if there was more to it, she didn't tell us).

I cried because my world had been tumbled.

The office was small and almost cramped, but Mr. Richard sat behind the desk and Ms. Gisleson sat across from me, which gave me a comfortable space in front of the door.

I think my chair was light brown, but I can't remember.

They brought up a laundry list of incidents that could have been easily addressed as they happened. The most understandable was the week I missed for my mandatory choir rehearsals and concert. My mother had told Ms. Gisleson of it well in advance, though I was supposed to remind her before the actual absence.

My mother had planned that I would miss all of my NOCCA classes that week, and I resented the forceful take-over of my schedule. I told her the day she decided it that I refused to miss more than one or two classes.

So I was furious when the Tuesday of that week came and my dad refused to take me, as mom was at a meeting. He was angry with me for demanding that I go, and I only relented when he told me that he'd hurt his ankle and couldn't drive that far; I tried various numbers of my classmates, hoping one was home and had a cassette recorder to tape the class for me.

No luck.

So, annoyed and extremely ruffled, I had my dad call to tell them I wouldn't be in class that week and went to choir practice, resigned to being ignored for a few hours.

When I returned the Tuesday after my concert, I asked for what I had missed and followed Ms. Gisleson on her search for the papers. I can't remember if she chastised me or not; all I know is that Mr. Richard caught me and fussed heatedly about "missing a week without telling anyone," and that he gave me no chance to explain myself. I could have interrupted him, but I had learned long ago not to argue with someone that angry.

David went in as I left with my poor, pitiful stories, and I waited for him on a smooth, white metal bench in the hall, trying to read the stories through the indignant tears blurring my vision.

It didn't work, but the pretense kept the art students passing by from seeing my unhappiness.

When David came back, we walked outside and to the set of stones on the left side of the field—our usual spot. He smiled and told me not to let the Agents get me down, to rebel!

In the student-teacher conference, the week I missed was brought up and I told them my bare attempts to attend Tuesday and how they were thwarted. I think Ms. Gisleson got my dad's message, from her look when I mentioned it, but I can't be sure of anything but that Mr. Richard *didn't*.

They dropped that subject and turned purposefully to my next misdemeanor.

First off, I believe that as a young girl, it is not a bad thing to be uncomfortable with the subject of sex. I would be very worried if, at my present age, I was entirely comfortable with it.

We were required to read "The Babysitter" by Robert Coover for one class: its main theme was sex.

I stopped reading halfway through—it was not so much offending me as disgusting. I had come across a word I didn't like. Though Richard and Gisleson most likely took this for unreasonable pigheadedness, possibly brought on by my religion, my main reason for stopping was simply *mortification*; my mother had been driving me to class as I read, and even though she couldn't have known I had come across such a shocking word, it was somehow *worse* to read it with my mother right there beside me. And I couldn't continue because of *embarrassment* more than any moral stubbornness.

I suppose I was lucky we only had Ms. Young teaching us the day I didn't finish reading—Regina, during our break, told me of a girl who Ms. Gisleson kicked out of the introduction program because she refused to read a story about a black man being lynched.

Even then, I tried to ascribe a credible reason to their methods and decisions.

Ms. Young, instead of kicking me out, urged me to try and finish the story if I could. So, out of guilt because she'd been kind, I finished it the next day. Even though I saw why they had us read the story, I still did not feel comfortable with the content.

When I told them at the conference that I had finished the story "because Ms. Young had been so nice and I felt guilty," they looked taken aback and told me that had been very mature.

Their response implied that they considered my refusal to finish the story *immature*, and I think that they had come to that conclusion using a faulty perception of me. I think they had gathered negative assumptions from minor incidents, combined those assumptions with their brief knowledge of my faith, and thought me a closed-minded bigot without ever considering it worth their time to look deeper. This is

reinforced by the fact that they did not ask *why* I stopped reading the story—which implied they thought they knew.

At the time, their response only startled and frustrated me. I had tried to imply that Ms. Young's kindness was a better persuasive technique than their anger and that I wouldn't have finished it at all if they'd been teaching and had lectured me instead of trying to understand. Because they didn't even register that part of my statement, it gives further credence to the idea that they considered me no more than a willful moron spouting "bad words are bad" and refusing to try new things.

When I hesitantly told them they intimidated me, they laughed. Not maliciously, so I wasn't offended, at least not then. Instead, I was surprised that they took it so lightly when it affected my performance in class.

They ran through the stories I had turned in, though they had little to add to the feedback they'd given me in workshops.

My first story had been a vain attempt at something serious that ended in killing off a character, the "and they all got killed by a bus" way out. No ending, so kill a character. Mr. Richard called it a "gore fest" and I suppose it taught me what *not* to do, though I still felt embarrassed.

My second story had nothing shameful in it. There were, of course, problems, but I'd been working on it for longer than the class had been in session and felt confident about it. It was the first chapter of a fantasy novel I had plotted out and was burning to write.

In the workshop at the time, Ms. Gisleson spoke of how hard it was to write that genre because most of it was cliché, as all fantasy has the same basic foundation. This is a fine point, but I do not wish to write just to use the literary elements in as many ways as possible or to impress my teachers or literary critics. I wish to write because it fulfills something hungry in me. I want to entertain. If I can do something with that, then I am glad, but I don't want such literary aspirations as befits James Joyce, F. Scott Fitzgerald, or Ernest Hemingway. I would prefer the Emily Dickinson way about it—she wrote for herself and her family, not widespread public acclaim. (In this, I do not put myself on the same level as Ms. Dickinson, but rather make reference to the state of mind she had about her works.)

Before I left for NOCCA, my freshman and sophomore English teacher, Mrs. Winkler, the woman who encouraged me to write when I was still uncertain of my own abilities, gave me one piece of advice: not to let them change my style.

That kept coming back to me during the talk of genre writing: don't let them change your style, don't let them change your style, don't let them change your, don't let them change, don't let them change you. . . .

But they *were* changing me. You must understand that I am not the kind of person to flat out disregard things just because I disagree with them. If something makes sense, then I think and I ponder and I form my own opinions.

The Agents, my teachers, were masters of making sense. That is why they confused me—by my own nature, I could not deny most of the things they said were true. I tried to understand the way they thought, and in doing so, somehow, I felt myself becoming more like them. I was more confident at high school, but it was a confidence tinged in arrogance. As they taught us more and more, after Ms. McNeill's leaving, I found that I was gradually becoming someone that I did not like. I was thinking mean, unprovoked things about my fellow high school students and feeling no remorse. I thought, of course, that I should feel somewhat bad for my silent cruelty, and the fact that I didn't only served to worry me further.

I found later that some things can be true for one person and false for another. As a writer, philosophies about writing are subjective. And the things that Richard and Gisleson spouted as gospel, while based in fact, did not always apply or slanted far to one side of a matter, such as their preference for brutal honesty in critiques. Brutal honesty is not the only way to critique that works. Honesty is required in a good critique, but I knew that it couldn't be all I needed. I wanted something else, too. Kindness. And that's something they did not teach.

For example, in the conference Ms. Gisleson brought up a certain workshop where we had had a guest writer. We had been editing David's story and it was one I had mixed feelings about. The story could easily be taken as anti-religious, but I didn't believe that David would write something intentionally offensive. So I expressed my qualms on the back of my copy of his story, since I didn't want to bring them out to the whole group. I knew, even if our teachers told us repeatedly that we shouldn't let personal feelings enter into it, that misconstruing something on that level could be embarrassing, *especially* if the less tactful people in the room jumped on my thoughts and took off with them, or, worse, *praised* the story as an attack on religion.

I didn't know what anyone's response would be to my comments, but I did not wish to take a chance, for David's sake. So, when the guest asked for feedback and came to me, I replied that I did not know what to say—which was true. I was confused as to my own reaction to the story, I didn't know how to phrase my thoughts so that they were *tactful* as well as honest, and I didn't know what David had intended for the story to be. So I did not know what to say. I asked the guest writer as politely as I could if I could pass and speak when something occurred to me.

Ms. Gisleson was furious about this in the conference, and I now wonder if my refusal to contribute embarrassed her in front of the visitor. She asked what the guest must have thought of me. She made me answer and I replied, hesitant and hurt, that he probably thought I was stupid and hadn't read David's story very carefully.

Her silence, her glare, the way she shifted back in her chair as if I'd given the right answer, said more than words.

It was then that I started to cry.

She brought up my comment, which I considered passing, of how Andrew had used several “big” words in his first few paragraphs and none in the rest of his story. I wasn't quite sure what else to say, since we'd been going through page by page at that point and his writing was almost flawless. She had taken it, however, as an indication that I wished for him to dumb down his language.

I explained, however, after her long rant, that I hadn't meant it the way it sounded. I didn't mention that I had written the same on his paper: “I didn't mean it was a *bad* thing. . . .” I actually admired Andrew's vocabulary and intelligence—he was like a human dictionary and Grammatik.

Perhaps, through all that, I might still have stayed. But there was one thing, one comment, that sent me reeling like a hamster in a hollow ball in a room of rambunctious children.

“Your fellow students are frustrated with you.”

I stared, I blinked, and my mind whirled with terrified denial. She was speaking of my “shyness and reserve” in workshops, and how I did not always speak my mind. I considered it prudence, but they seemed to deem it weakness. I suppose they did not think that I wrote down most of my thoughts on the actual papers. But they didn't think much about what I might be doing to handle myself, instead of presenting everything in the open for their express approval. It was vaguely reminiscent of my father's old employer, the church elder who demanded knowledge of my father's every move—from bathroom breaks to middle-of-the-night hospital visits.

To this day I give Ms. Gisleson the benefit of the doubt. To this day, I insist on believing that she did not know how that comment would stab me, cut me, rend me. I refuse to acknowledge that she might have known the power of using my classmates against me. If she used the remark as a manipulative tool to change my performance, then she sorely underestimated its power—it didn't make me mildly unhappy so that I would speak up more in workshops. It tore at my gut and my soul and for a brief, wild moment I believed her—and then fell to utter denial.

After I left Richard and Gisleson, I examined and reexamined and tried to find some evidence that the others were unhappy with what part I played in class, but I found nothing. I believed that I was close enough to them that they might feel no qualms about coming to me if there was a problem, or at least ask me to be a bit more brutal with their work.

But there was nothing. They remained as friendly and congenial as ever, and seemed to have no problems with my presence or work. When I spoke to them, I saw only fondness and fun.

If they were frustrated, they hid it *very* well.

The whole conference sent me spiraling into myself, contemplating and readjusting my ideas, bending my will and reaffirming the one truth I took as all-important: I had to talk to my brother.

I don't remember if I prayed on the way back, but I should have. It was the week before Christmas and my mother wanted to stop at the mall to find gloves for Dad, since traffic was unusually congested and we would be waiting for a very long time. I remember it because we argued. I didn't want to go in. I didn't even want to go to McDonalds, but we stopped there anyhow, my mother having given up on persuading me to the mall. These were a bit related to my pensive, unhappy thoughts and a bit related to my instinctive nervousness of stopping somewhere at night in a big city. I have always had that problem, ever since I could understand that people were not all good and honest, and since my family is often on the road to visit aunts and uncles and grandparents.

I knew my mother would be hurt when she found out that I hadn't told her, but I *couldn't* tell her. Not right then. It wasn't that I didn't want to, but rather that once I let it all out I would not talk about it again. And, though I know my mother cares, she would only get angry and tell me not to listen to them and that they were stupid. I didn't need that, though. I needed my brother—the sweet, understanding intellectual who could allay my fears and give me reasons for *why* they were idiots, not just that they were. He could help me sort out the tumult of my thoughts and feelings, and I needed that more than my mother's protectiveness, however grateful for it I might be.

I didn't talk to him that night, though. I talked to him the next day, about the ideas they had put on me about writing genre. It wasn't until Christmas night at my aunt's house in Georgia that I let it all out to him, though, and not until the ride home that I, with his help, told our parents.

My mother was indeed hurt. But my brother talked sensibly and my mother called them stupid and my father called them bleeding-heart liberals and communists and whatever else he could come up with that was unpleasant and not a curse.

So I sat in the car on the way home after Christmas, listening to the protective hum of conversation, and fell asleep. Not happy, but better for it all.

It was Christmas or one of the days after Christmas, because I had already decided not to go back to NOCCA. I knew if my classmates asked me to stay that I would, which is why I couldn't see them again or I would feel worse.

The following is a letter I wrote to my fellow classmates but never sent. I was distraught that night after the gut-spilling and I thought it would only serve to upset them if they saw it, though now it seems a good example of my unhappiness and confusion:

“I'm in my aunt's bathroom, sitting on the tub-side, in Georgia, because this is the only place I can go without being suspicious . . . it's midnight . . . one in the morning here, though . . . my brother's on the three-cushion couch in the den, on the laptop, on the Internet. I'm supposed to be on the two-cushion loveseat, but I'm not and all that's there now are my rumpled blanket and pillow and the lint from my blue socks on the rough wall because I don't fit into the loveseat—I have to scrunch up in it and my neck hurts. So I couldn't sleep like Jon couldn't last night, so I'm writing you because it's better than crying all scrunched up on a loveseat, thinking about my decision not to go back to NOCCA—oh, I miss you already . . . I will not let the Agents get me down, David, no no no no no, but I'm so afraid if I stay they'll turn me, they'll make me like them and I can't let that happen—it's happening, don't you know that?—it's happening, I feel it, and I can't stay because I don't want to be an Agent, I want to be me. They got mad at me, in that terrible terrible terrible conference where they made me cry at the end finally, mad mad mad mad mad, I could see it in the blonde agent's eyes, mad because I couldn't say hardon and didn't like *The Babysitter*, so I was immature, they said, or at least I was more mature because I read it because I was guilty for not reading it, but I didn't believe them, still don't; mature has nothing to do with it—never did—I was feeling guilty, that's all, but you see I do believe them about all the things they said, all the horrible horrible terrible terrible things that made me cry and gave me nightmares—I believe them when I see the Agents, hear the Agents, and that's why I can't go back, never ever, because I can't believe them or I'll become them, don't you see, don't you see, don't you see? I'm rocking now, like Cousin Phil, who's insane, schizophrenic, he killed a lady, so rocking's bad bad bad but I won't kill anyone like Phil . . . no no . . . I'm just tired and watched anime—*Ranma ½*—you know what that is David, Bryon, anyone? The girl is a boy and the panda his father, but I like Akane best . . .

“Daddy took my bathroom and the clock is tick tick ticking but I'll be fine just as soon as I'm away from the Agents for good, the only thing I'll miss there is you, all of YOU, because I love you all and I'm sorry that sounds mushy but I do and we'll do something together sometime—Vinyette, Erica, you owe me a sleepover, my mom's a good cook, let's plan that, yes yes yes, call me . . .

“Beth, who drove by Toomsba this trip, Blevins”

13

When my mother came into my room to tell me that I did not have to go to NOCCA anymore, I thought that I should feel some triumph in winning that long drawn battle. But as I sat on my bed, leaning against the wall and staring blankly ahead of myself, logic rising coolly to the fore, all I could see was that one image of my classmates when Ms. McNeill told us she was leaving. And with that scene before me, surfacing with happier memories, I felt something break in me and I cried—face buried in my hands, all alone in my room, I let the wet, salty, bitter triumph soak into my blankets and smear my makeup.

Sometimes, of late, I will dwell on the cheer and joy of those old times at NOCCA and feel a horrible dread rising in me—as if just realizing what a mistake I made. At these times, I am struck with a gut-deep horror and the urge to cry out with the wild, irrational terror of a woman dying, “Oh God, my God, I *left!*”

And I must dredge up, again, those righteous, lucrative reasons for my removal.

It is a painful process—one I’m not sure I *want* to grow out of. For in the remembrance, I feel again the fresh breeze over the grass, the calm rock of my favorite sitting-stone, and the soft music of David and Bryon tumbling—almost like school-children—beside me.

These are memories, these are times, that I am wildly jealous of. I am allowing this recording of them only because I cannot stand the complacent assumptions that I dropped NOCCA because the work was too hard or stressful. Indeed, my grades had never been better but when I attended NOCCA. Those ideas are almost insulting in their ignorance of my pain—but only almost. Never a true insult, because they did not know. Not until now.

I also give this testimony for those who have heard from some mouth that I have been done terrible atrocities.

I do not—quite—believe this. I ascertain that my teachers acted within their nature and in accordance with their own philosophies. This does not mean that I approve of their behavior, or condone it, but that I understand it. Thus, if they faulted in God’s eye in their behavior with us, somewhere, then I forgave it before they even wronged.

**“So let us melt, and make no noise,
No tear-floods, nor sigh-tempests move;
Twere profanation of our joys
To tell the laity our love.”**

- John Donne