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TEACHER, WRITER, PERSON: HOW TEACHER IDENTITIES INFORM WRITING  
INSTRUCTION

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## ABSTRACT

Teachers and students' identities are not confined to their roles within the classroom. Each person who enters a school is made up of multiple identities—reader, writer, mathematician, daughter, brother, innovator, comedian. With these multitude of identities, it is important to consider how each one affects the learning of a child, especially as their life experiences in just one of these identity can effect they are as a student and all of their other identities. This also holds true for teachers. My interest in how my own different identities of teacher, writer, and person intersect is what drove me to explore how my experiences in life, in writing, and teaching effected one another. From this exploration, I have discovered writing as a therapeutic tool, meant to help people make sense of their lives. I have discovered how who I am helps me to relate to my students. I have discovered how to teach writing using three simple rules: you must write what is on your heart, you must write the truth, you must struggle in your writing.

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## Chapter 1

### Exposition

When I was little, I wanted to be a ballerina pilot. My parents tried explaining to me that being a ballerina and a pilot were two mutually exclusive jobs and that it would be pretty difficult to fly a plane and dance at the same time. Their argument was as useless as when they tried explaining that my favorite color could not be pink and white because pink and white were two different colors. My resistance to mutual exclusivity has not waned over time. I see the world as series of connections. Identifying the connections is knowledge; understanding the connections is wisdom. Our identities function in the same way. It is with this mindset that I came to college with the singular goal of becoming a teacher-writer. When I told people this, most mistakenly assumed that I meant to teach during the school year and churn out novels during the summer. They did not see, as I did, how the two professions work hand in hand. I meant to be fully a teacher and fully a writer; I could not segment the two identities in the same way I could not relegate being funny to the school year and stubborn to the summer. Both are parts of who I am, and they shape everything I do.

This idea that teachers can and should identify themselves as both teachers and writers is by no means a new one. According to Anne Whitney, "the notion of the teacher-as-writer along with questions about why teachers might write...has been with us at least since the late 1960s" (Whitney, 2009, p. 237). Over the course of time, the relationship between the writer-self and teacher-self has been examined and it has been shown through personal studies, such as one Whitney discusses, that personal writing can change a teacher's perspective on the classroom and

teaching of writing (Whitney, 2009, p. 253, 255). In fact, through writing, one teacher, Laura, "experienced growth in both [teaching and writing], domains she experienced as inextricably linked parts of a single life" (Whitney, 2009, p. 254).

It was my original goal for this thesis to contribute to this body of research. I hoped to explore how being a writer informed the way I teach, showing how that identity shaped how I see the world, understand people, and read books. I decided that over the course of a year, I would write a novel and then use that experience as the research for my eventual thesis paper. The idea was a good one. When I presented it to my thesis advisor, she seemed to be as excited as I was about my project, and she urged me to come up with a general schedule to follow to manage this undertaking. Within twenty-four hours, I came up with a course of action:

- **Daily Schedule**
  - Write for 1.5 hours or until done
    - If Stuck
      - Journal on it
      - Look up a suggestion, implement, & journal on success/failure
  - Journal at the end of each session
  - Ideas for Teaching Strategies at the end of each journal
- **Calendar**
  - JAN: Idea
  - FEB: World
  - MAR: Character & Outline
    - *Project, Origin, What will be in the document, Why I want to do it.*
    - + *Timeline*
    - *Character: Characterization & Tone*
  - APR: Scenes
    - *Paper 1<sup>st</sup>, Not sequential, Multiple ways to write one idea, Discard favorite lines.*
  - MAY: Fill In
  - JUN: Fill In
  - JUL: Edit for Cohesiveness. Then Word Choice.
  - AUG: Ideas for Teaching Strategies
    - Articles – Textbooks – Myself
  - SEP – OCT: Journal success/failure of teaching strategies
    - *Creative writing leading to better essays*
  - NOV: Potentially interview kids about experiences in learning this way vs. previously. Reflect on how kids have grown in their writing.
    - *Responses to dissembling myths*
    - *Freedom of responses*
  - NOV: Difference between America & New Zealand writing instruction. (potentially)
  - JAN: Peer Editing & Feedback of Novel
  - FEB: Outside sources and explanations on Teacher as Writer
  - MAR: Compile Thesis
  - APR: Edit Thesis
  - 
  - **OVERALL: Motivation**
  - **OVERALL: Myths**

Figure 1.1: Thesis Course of Action

I was under the impression that since I had a plan in place and a solid idea for the novel, everything would flow easily enough from there. I assumed that while I was working on characterization I would write down how I characterized, find a few ways that it connected to my views on teaching writing (and maybe even teaching reading), and then I would move on to working on plot development or something else. I did not anticipate any challenges other than my own motivation, but even then, I believed that after a week or two, I would fall into a rhythm,

and it would all work out. At the end of the year, I would have written a novel, developed a host of successful methods for teaching writing, and composed an excellent thesis paper that explained how I had found the most effective way to teach writing.

In all of this, I came to realize that I had forgotten a key component in the connection between writer and teacher—all of my other identities. As I conducted this project, I realized that there were different aspects of my life continued to interrupt the writing and teaching process. I learned that my naïve beliefs that I could focus on one connection and ignore all of the rest were destined for failure. But, as with any good story, it is helpful to start at the beginning of how I came to be aware of the interplay between person, writer, and teacher, in the realm of education, and not skip too much ahead.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Rising Action**

#### **Coffee-mate**

Without a doubt the hardest part about writing is starting.

This was the very first line of my very first blog post about the writing process. I do not believe that I could have introduced my thesis project and the lessons I was about to learn in a better way. My efforts to begin writing my novel, the backbone of my research for the project, began in the fall of 2015, even before my official timeline for my thesis began. I was taking an advanced level creative writing class, and I saw this as a perfect opportunity to get some serious work done. I had already come up with the idea and basic plotline for my story in a previous creative writing class: it would follow the story of a girl named Clare who was addicted to a drug that constantly erased her memory. She would then stumble across a large conspiracy theory that was too important to forget and unravel all of the negative effects that the drug had on the world. I thought that the assignments in this class would help me flush out the specifics of my story that had alluded me so far. Yet, every time I attempted to write something down, the product seemed destined for the recycling bin. The characters were too contrived. The world did not feel real. The sequence of events in the plot suddenly did not make any sense. With each attempt, I would take my story to my professor and ask him to revive it. He would patiently give suggestions on steps I could take, but there was a knowing look in his eyes that told me my story was dead.

It takes me a long time to come to terms with death. My grieving process is slow and mostly invisible, as I seem to camp out in the denial phase for as long as possible. I moved on to anger over my story not working seventy-two hours before it was due. I joined the rest of my class in bargaining for more time forty-eight hours before it was due. I moved into depression about eight hours later, and it was only eighteen hours before my story was due that I looked at my novel and came to accept my story's death. For the hours I spent attempting to figure out the story and write one chapter that could be turned in, were as well spent as if I had been attempting to train a dead parrot to talk. I could take all the right steps, do all of the right things, but it was dead, and I had nothing. The deadline ticked closer, and I had nothing to turn in. Unlike the shop owner, in *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, I could not sell my professor a dead parrot.

As I sat at my kitchen table, staring at the glaring white page on my computer screen, I began to feel defeated. The blinking cursor mocked me. I usually waited until it was uncomfortably close to the deadline to even begin starting my papers, but never had I struggled with words that had failed me or words that would not come. I decided, in a surge of defiance, to just type *something* so that I didn't have to stare at the demoralizing white. I began to type what was happening in my life.

The year before, in 2014, my grandfather was diagnosed with stage 4 prostate cancer. The doctor had caught it early, but as time worn on, it became clear that the cancer was more aggressive than anyone had initially thought. The family became frantic in our terror. Our relationship with one another was strained under the best of times, but the added pressure of cancer caused the cracks in our foundation to grow alarmingly fast. We hastily tried to cement them up with love and family picnics and positive affirmations that my grandfather could beat

this, that God was on our side. We weren't fast enough, though, and even as we were bound more tightly together, we began to fall apart.

I experienced this tangentially. I was at college, so there was not much I could do in the way of help. Still, all of my communications seemed to be afflicted with cancer. I received sporadic voicemails with updates about my grandfather's condition. People messaged me weekly with their sympathies, thoughts, and prayers. Every phone call home was an hour long exploration of how hard an individual's life was now that cancer was a part of it. These calls were rife with passive aggressive complaints and long-winded rants about other family members. The primary villain in these stories was my mother. My mother, who lived half an hour away from my grandparents but was their primary caretaker. My mother, who visited them for hours almost every day after school. My mother, did their laundry every Wednesday night on a mostly broken washer and dryer. My mother, who sacrificed her free-time and her sick-days to shuttle them to appointments. My mother was the bad guy because she had been raised to be the bad guy, the one who told it like it was.

In all of this, I felt as if the cancer was simultaneously my biggest problem and not my problem at all. This led to fluctuating feelings of helplessness and anger and an almost consistent feeling of guilt. I began to have crippling panic attacks over the fact that I could do nothing to save my grandfather or my mother. Rather than telling anyone, I began to throw myself into my friends' problems and my school work. Any time someone asked me to do something, I told them yes. To say no would be admitting that what was happening at home was still my reality three and a half hours away. I couldn't face that. I couldn't face that or the feeling that I was doing too much and not enough at the same time. I couldn't face that or the fact that I loved my family but did not like them.

But that night, sitting at my kitchen table, I had finally slipped from denial and into anger. The anger gave me topic of my story. I wrote a defense of my mother. The story was everything I wanted to say to my family members who didn't understand the fear and the pressure that she felt every day. In my anger, I felt strong enough to face my feelings, and when I went back to read the fifteen pages I had written, I saw that what I had written was raw and honest and *good*. My anger colored a lot of the nuances of the situation—none of my family members came out particularly saint-like within the pages—but it did not make my story any less true. I wrote what was true and absolute to me in that moment. Not in terms of plot—my grandfather is still alive and fighting—but in the way the characters talk to each other, in the ways they interact. I came to realize as the piece was being work-shopped that my story was never about a father dying of cancer; it's about a family falling apart.

#### Coffee-mate

I never really liked coffee.

I think that most of this has to do with my mother. It's not a negative association kind of thing, though. It's more the fact that the only kind of coffee she drank was one part Folgers and three parts Fat Free French Vanilla Coffee-mate. The saccharine concoction was her lifeblood, and as something so vital to her wellbeing, it had its own ritual. "Coffee Time" was always the best part of the day. It was right while Louie and I were finishing our breakfasts at the kitchen table, near the bay window. Louie always sat closest to the window, which also happened to be the seat closest to the door. He spent most of breakfast shoveling down whatever Mom made and staring out the window for the first sign of the neighbor boys being ready to leave. The minute

they came within sight, he would shove his plate forward, throw an "I love you!" over his shoulder and bolt out the door.

I, on the other hand, sat more towards the center of the sunny yellow kitchen, and would turn my chair around so I could watch my mother in her element. She would flit across the room, from the fridge to the counter space, simultaneously making our lunches and brewing coffee. The kitchen was large and airy, but her presence in it was large and tangible despite the fact that she was only a couple of inches over five feet. It was in the yellows of the kitchen and the sunlight that streamed in from the bay window and the window over the sink. It was in the water colored pictures of flowers that she painted and subsequently hung up around the room. It was in the smell of baking bread, and of course, coffee, that seemed to permanently hang in the air. She was everywhere in the room, and yet she maintained one path, back and forth from the fridge to the counter.

And while she never stopped moving, she also never stopped singing. She always started out with "Good Morning," her favorite song from *Singing in the Rain*. Even though it was her favorite song, she never knew all of the words—something I didn't discover until after I married David and he made me actually watch the musical. I think it took me until I was married and moved out to realize this because I never felt like anything was missing from those moments. Whenever she didn't know the words, she would make them up—different ones each time—or distract us by dancing around the kitchen with her coffee mug or a loaf of bread. After a while, she would switch to church songs so Louie and I could sing along, although it was really only ever me. Finally, with the lunches all packed, and it just about time to be ready to go, she would bring her mug over to the table, a quarter of the way full, and have Louie or me pour the Coffee-mate until it was just the right creamy shade of tan. I got so good that by the time I was seven I didn't even need supervision. Instead, I would taste it after pouring in the creamer to make sure

that it was just right, that I had poured in enough of the Coffee-mate that you couldn't even really taste the coffee anymore.

"It's perfect," I'd say, my nose wrinkled in disgust, as I pushed the mug over to her.

She would always laugh and take a sip. "You'll like it when you're older. It'll become your armor for the day."

I seemed to take this as a challenge and somehow, miraculously, passed through my college years on twelve awful ounces of 7-Eleven cinnamon flavored coffee. Twenty years into waking up at six in the morning to drive back into Lansdowne and to the high school that I thought I escaped after twelfth grade, I can still count the number of cups I've ever had on one hand.

The one I'm drinking right now makes five.

I curl my fingers around the mug that, like everything else in my parents' kitchen, has faded. The kitchen walls are no longer the sunshine hue I grew up with, but they have paled and chipped and smudged into a dirty wheat-like color. It's wheat after it's been tossed around by a storm, not the golden hues that I remember from our cross-country road trip in seventh grade. My mother's paintings have also faded along with her passion to draw. After she fell, all she was able to do while my father was off at work was sit around the house and paint. I think that, more than the arthritis, is what really killed her love for art, in the same way that fall stopped her from dancing, and when she couldn't dance, what was the use of singing? No, instead of flying around the kitchen, singing songs, she's sitting quietly at the kitchen table, idly stirring her coffee flavored creamer.

"Mom?" She doesn't look up. She just keeps stirring the coffee and staring down into it, so all I can see are her grey curls that have been cropped short for easy management. I wait a few minutes listening to the ticking of the cuckoo clocks that hang on every single wall on the rest of the first floor with the exception of the kitchen. "Do you want anything to eat?"

"I'll get something myself," she says, abandoning the spoon in the coffee and preparing to push herself up from the table.

"Just drink your coffee, I'll get it. What do you want?" I quickly interpose, standing up out of my chair and crossing to the fridge.

"I *want* you to stop telling me what to do," she starts again. I clench my teeth. I thought her meltdown in the hospital had been our last one today. I thought the coffee would help some, but like everything else, its potency seems to have faded as well. "I *want* you to stop telling me how to feel." Her face scrunches up and grows red. "I want you to *listen* to me because sometimes, just sometimes, I'm right. If you had listened to me, he'd be here. I told you he was getting worse." She breaks down into sobs that shake her whole body and cause me to tense up. I wish I wasn't so frustrated with my mother. I wish I was the kind of person who's warm and comforting and always knows what to say. I wish I was Ben, her baby boy whose mere presence makes everything right in her world. But I'm not. I'm Connie. I'm the one who fixes things and makes them work even if I can't always make them better. I'm the one who's not fair to her because I refuse to let her fall into self-pity. I'm the child she forgets to worry and care about because as she herself has said, I'm not her child anymore.

I'm her mother.

"You were both saying different things, and he's the one who actually has the cancer." I try to explain myself patiently, but either she doesn't hear or she doesn't want to hear.

"No one ever listens to me anymore. It's like I've lost my knee and my hands and my voice and now my husband."

I listen to her cry for a few minutes as I stare past her, looking at the basement door. I wish I could escape down there the way my father used to. The way he used to let me. But I can't. I walk back over and wrap an arm around her shoulders. "Let's go to bed," I whisper. She doesn't protest my help this time but abandons her half drunk coffee and shuffles along with me, past the

basement door, out of the kitchen, into the entrance hall, and up the stairs to the second floor. We climb slowly because it's hard going with her bad knee, and she can't even hold onto the railing that well.

It takes almost fifteen minutes to get her upstairs, changed into her pajamas, and tucked into her bed. I smooth the covers over her and fold them under the mattress, the same way she used to when I was little. "No more room for monsters," I say gently as she sniffles.

"I can't do this alone anymore," she whimpers up at me. I want to point out that she hasn't done it alone for years. I want to yell at her that Dad has always been there for her, helping her through everything, and now it's her turn, and she's dropping the ball. She has never had to do it alone; that's the problem.

"I know," I whisper.

"You don't understand how hard it is for me, Connie," my mother sniffs again.

"I'm losing Dad, too," I argue softly, my voice wavering.

"But I'm losing my husband. You don't know what that's like. You could never know what that's like. I need him for everything." I take a shaky breath in and then blow it back out.

"I'm so sorry." I'd be surprised if she could hear my voice. I sit with her for a while more until she's finally snoring and I can go home.

I check my phone in the car. David has already texted me that he's home and making Shepherd's Pie for dinner. Annie's tried to call twice from school. I hope she's doing ok, but I don't bother calling back; she'll call tomorrow. I only called my parents monthly when I was in college, but she calls everyday, sometimes more than once. Some people told me I should be worried that she's calling so much and what it means for her life up there. They don't really get Annie though. She calls because she's a good daughter, because she wants to hear about what my days are like and give me a chance to vent. Sometimes she talks about her time at school and the struggles she has with her roommates and with the boys out there, but most of the time she just

wants to hear me talk. I love it because it's exactly what I need. I hate it because it makes me feel exactly like my mother. Well, not exactly. I still listen to her problems and don't try to turn them into mine. And that's when it hits me that I need to call everybody. I try Heather first.

"What happened?" She doesn't bother answering with hello anymore, and I'm really ok with that.

"We went to visit Dad today, and—"

I hear a cry rise up from the background and a familiar whine of *Mooom!* "*Hunter!* Get off your brother. *Now,*" Heather snaps in the background, but she's so loud it sounds like she's still talking to me.

"I didn' do it!" the young boy protests and breaks into tears.

"Get!" Heather snaps, and I can hear the heavy footsteps that indicate her making a grab for her youngest son. I assume she gets a hold of him because in the next second he bursts into tears and I can hear the heavy footfalls as she marches him into his room and commands him to stay there and think about what he's done. As if that ever works. "I'm sorry; what were you saying?"

"We went to visit Dad and apparently he's—" There's banging on the other end of the phone, and I realize Hunter is banging to get out of his room. I stop, waiting for Heather to settle the issue.

"He's...?" she shouts over the ruckus. Hunter is now pleading her name, and crying. I hear giggling in the background and guess that it's coming from Ryder. "*Knock it off, I'm on the phone!*" Heather barks, and now both boys are crying. "Sorry, what?" she tries to get me to start again.

"It's not looking good, Heather," I cut my speech down to this sentence, knowing this is all she has the time for.

"What are we down to?" To her credit, my sister doesn't cry. Her voice doesn't even get watery. Heather's stronger than all of us. I think back to when she was a baby and Mom and I would take turns rocking her to sleep and making sure she was ok and breathing. She spent her first few months on this earth fighting for her life and is all the stronger for it.

I have to swallow a couple of times before I'm able to get out the words. "We don't think he'll be celebrating Thanksgiving with us." She's silent for a while, probably counting down the days—because that's what we're down to now, days—that we have left.

"Peter has off on Thursday. We'll come in."

"Thanks," I say. "I love you."

"Love you too," she hangs up quickly, leaving me to call Louis.

The phone rings to the point where I'm sure that I'm going to talk to his answering machine, but then, finally I get an answer.

"Hey, Connie? Can I call you back?" he asks and I can hear Leah in the background trying to bribe the boys into taking a bath.

"Louis!" Leah snaps in the background. "Put down the phone. I need your help."

"I just have a quick update about Dad," I say.

"Yeah, I—"

"*Louis!*" Leah shouts. "Now!"

"Can you call later or, actually, can you just leave a message on the answering machine?"

"Just thirty seconds," I plead. "Dad—"

"Look, I've got more pressing things right now," Louis negotiates.

"You would say that, wouldn't you? You've *never*—" He hangs up. For a second I consider making him call me back, but I know that wouldn't work. He wouldn't care enough to. He knows that I won't be able to keep myself from calling if it's really important, and so, I call

him back and leave a message about how they're stopping chemo, and how, if he's done being an asshole and feels so inclined, he should probably buy plane tickets to come up soon.

I'm in tears by the time I call Ben. At least he has the decency to not pick up. I leave the same message for him except without the part about being an asshole. I didn't expect Ben to actually care.

By the time I hang up the phone, I'm pulling into the driveway. Through the bay window, I can see David in the kitchen, finishing up dinner. He sticks the Shepherd's Pie back into the oven for a few more minutes, and I decided to take the opportunity to sit in the car for the little bit of extra time and cry.

The minute I realize that the sound is my ringtone and not my alarm, I know what's happened.

He's gone.

It's hard packing up the house. It's where I spent my entire childhood, and there are just so many remnants of Dad that surround us. The model train sets, the Baja racing photos, the abundance of cuckoo clocks that tick away each minute as I work to place things in boxes with David and Annie and Cole. I hadn't been able to stop myself from calling Annie the minute after I found out about Dad. She had immediately packed a bag and after a failed call to Cole, called his R.A. and gotten him to wake Cole up so he could get ready to leave. The two left in the middle of the night and were home by breakfast. These past couple days she's been great. She's gotten up early and made breakfast and coffee everyday for David and Cole and myself. She knows I don't like coffee, but after seeing how tired I am she forces it on me by telling me to just take a sip of hers.

I can hear her now on the other side of the house, pounding away on the peddles of the old player piano that has sat unused in the living room ever since my mother fell. Annie's working through "Good Morning" and singing it as best she can. It's weird to hear all of the right lyrics echo through the house when I'm used to the immediacy and mistakes of a live performance. I want my mother to come dancing in through the door to the kitchen, swinging around a mug, but she hasn't danced in years. She hasn't been allowed to.

Instead, Cole comes into the room holding an empty box. "When's Aunt Heather getting here?" I've already placed him on Ryder and Hunter duty, but for the time being, he's been working at taking down most of the cuckoo clocks with David since they're up too high and too heavy for me to take down. I hope we can get most of them down before Thing 1 and Thing 2 get here, I don't want them to break the clocks that my father spent so many hours fixing.

"Soon," I sigh. Heather and Peter will be the only help we get, and I know that David is going to be busy running Peter interference to make sure that my brother-in-law doesn't say anything insensitive to Mom. It's not that Peter's a jerk, not like Louis, he just doesn't really think before he speaks. Or if he does, his filter's a lot more liberal than the any normal person's. Last Thanksgiving he showed us videos of whales exploding during most of the meal, and at Christmas, he talked about how, if you think about it, Jesus is Arabic, so wouldn't that make him a terrorist? Heather usually screams at him for these things, but she's also laughing, so he hasn't made much improvement over the years on determining what's appropriate.

*At least he's coming*, I think to myself. Louis won't be here for another couple of days, until just before the funeral. Ben had been unable to afford the soonest plane ticket in, so he'll be coming in two weeks, which means that in two weeks, I'll have to deal with Ben putting on the act of being the "good son" and hearing Mom rave about him and how if he was in the right situation, he would have let her move in with him.

Heather had offered to let Mom come and live with her and Peter, but Mom didn't want to deal with Ryder and Hunter. I knew Mom wanted me to offer, but I just couldn't. I couldn't be there to help her up and down the stairs. I couldn't watch her every moment of the day and make sure that she was ok. I couldn't be her hands and her cane. She needed a professional for that, and so, as much as she hated me, we had to put her in the home without Dad. We had to.

Out of the corner of my eye, I can see Cole reaching for the door to go down to the basement. "Cole!" I burst, stopping him.

"What?" He's clearly confused, and I wince a little bit, feeling bad for shouting at him. To him, it's just a basement. It's not the same forbidden wonderland it was to me and my siblings. Growing up, my mom kept the upper three levels of the house "company ready." She was built for being a Disney-level homemaker in her younger days, before she fell and shattered her knee. Her small frame was always sprightly and full of song. She even had the golden blonde locks and crystal blue eyes.

The basement, on the other hand, was my father's domain.

From the top of the stairs you could see it all laid out before you: just piles and piles of *stuff*. Abandoned woodworking projects, old motorcycle parts, toys that my parents and my siblings and I had outgrown, as well as things that my father picked up from the weekly yard sale shopping. Neither of my children would see any value to the broken rocking horse, or the old pink plastic tea set, but I had spent hours with my father in order to earn those gifts. Every Saturday he would wake up at 7:00 and then rouse us kids with a clear sharp whistle. The five of us would all load into the car and then cruise around the neighborhood looking for yard sales. Eventually Louie dropped out to watch cartoons, and after a few months of teasing from Louie, Ben did too. Heather and I, though, we went for hours with Dad, looking for stuff that maybe one day could be of use to somebody.

Amidst all of the piles of things were narrow, winding passageways that led to a couple of little clearings: one in the laundry area, and the other my father's work bench, out of which came new kitchen cabinets and wardrobes and things from yard sales made new and dozens and dozens of cuckoo clocks. My mom had always encouraged him to start a clock repair shop, but he'd never gotten around to it. He was so busy working on elevators that he could never find a good time to leave and start up his passion. "They have a new big job that they need old hands for," he would excuse. Or there was always his favorite comment, "This new helper is probably more broken than any clock I've ever prepared. They really need me to train him." It wasn't until they found the cancer that he was able to step away from the elevators, but then life happened and there just wasn't enough time then either.

I just shake my head at Cole. "I'll take care of it later." I don't want anyone touching the basement. I don't want anyone touching the yard sale memories or the memories of me being the only child allowed to repair clocks with my father. The door opens and I hear a scream of "*I'm a T-Rex!*". Heather has arrived.

We're halfway home before I get a call from Mom. She's almost unintelligible. Heather and Peter are too busy with the boys to help her go downstairs, and she just wants a cup of coffee since she won't be able to sleep anyway. "It's bad enough that I'm going to be ignored for the rest of my life. I just want someone to care about me now, a little bit, before you send me away." The whole car hears this and I can hear Annie mutter something. She's tired of dealing with my mother. We all are. But that doesn't change a thing when you're a parent.

"David," I plead softly as my mother resumes her sobs. I can hear Heather's voice calling out for my mother on the other end of the phone, but Mom doesn't listen. She's too focused on sending me on a first-class guilt trip. I look over at David as he heaves a sigh. His eyes are red

and his jaw is tight, but he flips on the turn signal and turns around. We're back at the house in fifteen minutes.

By the time I walk in, Heather has Mom sitting at the kitchen table with a cup of coffee. "I'm sorry," Mom begins to tear up again, her whole face growing red. "I'm sorry, David. I'm sorry, Annie. I'm sorry, Cole." Annie brushes in and hugs Mom, sending my mother into a fresh wave of tears. Heather takes the opportunity to stand up and whisper to me.

"I *told* her I'd take her downstairs as soon as I finished putting the boys in the bath." I hold up a hand to stop her and shake my head.

"Don't even worry about it," I sigh. "Why don't you go back upstairs and help Peter?" Heather looks uncertainly between me and Mom, and then she leaves. David and Cole are in the living room already. I can hear *Family Guy* in the other room.

"How's your coffee?" Annie asks, sliding into the chair next to my mother.

"She made it wrong," my mother pushes the coffee away from her, sloshing some over the side. Annie's immediately up and crossing over to the sink to get paper towels. Meanwhile, I take the mug and dump the remainder of its contents out into the sink. There's still a little bit of coffee left in the pot from when Heather brewed some, so I pour what's left into the mug and then take the Coffee-mate out of the fridge, setting them both in front of my mother.

"Just pour it in until it's the right color," I instruct gently, overseeing the progress as she gets closer to the familiar shade of tan that indicates the perfect combination of sickly sweet and caffeine. I stop my mother once I see it's getting close, which is good because she goes for a few seconds longer before she stops. I lift the mug to my lips and take a taste. It's the same now as it was when I was a child, but I don't feel nauseous after this sip. Probably because I could use some armor now. I place the mug down in front of my mother, and immediately she lifts it up and takes a sip. "It's perfect," she whispers.

When I was fourteen, my grandfather died, and before we could find a good home for her, my grandmother stayed with us for a few months. I remember coming downstairs hearing the crying. My mother was sitting at the kitchen table with her head in her arms, sobbing as my father rubbed her back. "I'm doing my best," she cried as I crept in, heading towards the coffeepot and the tin of Folgers.

"I know," my father soothed, stroking her hair. I turned on the sink to fill up the coffeemaker, and his head whipped, but my mother didn't seem to notice. He shot me a smile before turning back to her.

"I'm not trying to send her away. I just can't take care of her here. I just can't," my mother flew back in her seat, her hair wild and face completely red and swollen. "I mean look at it," she bawled, gesturing to her mangled knee. "How am I supposed to keep up with her and care for her when I can hardly even walk up the stairs by myself. She just doesn't see that no matter what I do it's never enough." It was the first time I ever heard my mother position herself as a victim because of her knee. It wasn't the last.

It wasn't until I opened the fridge that she realized I was in the room.

"Oh, Connie," she whimpered as I set the mug and Coffee-mate in front of her. "Don't let me get like this. Please, just don't let me." Her fingers wrapped around the mug and she shot me a watery smile.

Only the basement is left to pack by the time Louis gets here, which is good because the house has dissolved into complete chaos. Leah stalks around the house complaining about how there's nothing to feed the boys because everything has Red Dye #40 or Yellow Dye #6 or gluten in it. Heather hovers around Mom, trying to be extra helpful, but leaving Mom frustrated with the fact that she can never be alone with her own thoughts. David babysits Louis and Peter by entertaining them with ESPN and feigning interest in Peter's YouTube videos. Annie and Cole are

on full-time kid duty, which mostly entails Cole allowing all five boys to chase him around the house while Annie sits in front of the basement door to keep them from bothering me. I'm sitting on the basement steps with an empty box next to me, trying not to cry. Trying, and utterly, miserably failing. I can hear the boys outside the door asking Annie what that noise is and why they can't go downstairs.

"It's a ghost," she tells them in a hushed voice. "And you don't want to walk in on a crying ghost because when they cry they get very hungry, and they might swallow you whole." The boys scream with delight and run away to find Cole.

I know I need to stop. I need to actually go into the basement and start sorting through our treasures and placing them into the boxes, but I can't stand up. It's like I'm five years old again, staring down the waves of the Ocean City, New Jersey beach as my parents try to coax me into the water. It was just the three of us at the time. Well, Louie was there, but he was two years old and attached to my mother's hip at all times.

"It's just water," my father prodded, extending his hand out to where I stood, a good four feet away from the edge of the water, arms crossed against my red and white striped one-piece. I scrunched my nose and shook my head.

"Just like the bath," my mother said with a smile, adjusting Louis so he sat on her other hip and she could reach out for me. "Take our hands, and we can do it together." I was able to hold out for a few seconds more before the smile got to me. Slowly, hesitantly, I walked forward and took both of my parents hands, and we made halting progress towards the water. I stopped once I reached the hard sand, still cool from where the last wave washed over it. The next wave came in, the water rushing up towards my feet and working its ways between my toes, causing me to jump up and down and squeal.

"Doesn't it tickle a little?" my mother asked laughing, and I nodded. "Do you want to go in further?" I nodded again and my parents walked me out further, until the water was up to my

knees. I could see a wave building ahead of us, this one closer than the rest, growing taller and taller until it was clear, that this one wouldn't just lap at my knees. My parents seemed to see it coming too because their grips on my hand tightened. "This is a big one," my mother said. "You ready? On the count of three, we'll jump. One." The wave rushed forward, picking up speed.

"Two," my father said on my other side as it started to crest and fall.

"Three!" I jumped, and they lifted me up further into the air.

The door to the basement opens, and Annie finds me still sitting on the stairs. I see she's holding a mug. "You don't have to drink it if you don't want to, but I just thought you needed something," she explains as she scoots down next to me on the stairs. She hands over the faded mug, and I look down at it, tracing the words on the side with my thumb. It was the same mug I always gave my mother whenever she let me pick: *I ♥ Mom*.

"Thank you," I mumble looking up at my daughter's face. She gives a tightlipped smile and reaches over to taking my free hand in hers.

"We can do it together," she suggests. "On the count of three we'll get up and go down and pack it all. Alright?" I nod and tighten my grip around the mug. "One."

"Two," I follow, my heart pounding.

"Three."

## Lesson 1: The Formidable Starting Line

I did not realize the greater lessons that came with writing "Coffee-mate" until much later. At the time, I only recognized that Blank Page Syndrome, the paralyzing fear and apathy that sinks in when staring at a blank page, is a very real enemy of writers everywhere. This lesson on Blank Page Syndrome carried over as I eventually tried to exhume and resurrect my story. I could share potential story ideas with friends, call my mother to work through some plot holes, and write snippets of conversations in the margins of my notes, and that was all fine. But when it came down to actually putting words down onto the paper, I could not start. The conditions were never right. It was too late in the day; I did my best work at morning. I needed to see outside in order to write creatively; there were no windows around me. It was too overcast; I needed the sun. My room was too messy; I needed it to be clean so I could focus. The room was too quiet; my mind was wandering. The room was too loud; I couldn't concentrate. The stars had not aligned.

These are just a few of my many, empty excuses that prevented me from starting. It's true that I do my best work around eight o'clock in the morning, listening to music that reminds me of whatever I am writing about, as the sun shines through my window and into my clean room, but I have written excellent pieces in sub-par conditions before. My justifications could not adequately explain why I could not write one satisfactory sentence on a page.

The truth of the matter was that I was terrified of failure. Crafting a story complete with a developed world, realistic characters, and interesting (if not exciting) plot from nothing but one's own imagination is, to put it lightly, daunting. Wrestling a story down to clear, concise, and evocative writing is perhaps even more intimidating, especially when one sees the connections

between all of the components of the story. How could I possibly unravel a plot when I don't even know what the characters, who are acting it out, are going to be like? How can I create a character if I don't even know what the world that they have grown up in and been shaped in looks like? How can I create the world when I don't even know what I need it to do yet for the purpose of my plot?

I sought to answer these questions within my blog post, trying to give myself the advice that I would give a student.

The “easy” answer here (emphasis on the quotes because very little about writing is truly easy) is to pick a line of thought and go with it. That is, start writing about the plot and then create the characters that go in it and the world that they are in later; then, come back around and clean everything up so that it all fits nicely. (Norton, 2015a)

Of course, I quickly acknowledged thereafter, that nothing ever works quite so easily. Oftentimes, I began working on the plot, got distracted by a character, had a revelation about the world, then remembered I was supposed to be working through the plot and went back to that. There was nothing inherently wrong with this writing process—when I spoke about this method and my frustrations with it to my friends, quite a few confessed that their writing process generally follows that pattern. The problem lay in the fact that this method did not work for me. I felt as if I was spiraling down—going in circles without ever truly getting anywhere. I felt the desperate need for some sort of strategy or method to organize and work out my ideas.

This desire for a plan remained at the forefront of my mind while planning any lesson that involved writing. Each time I assigned a paper, I thought back to my many (failed) attempts to start a novel and my paralysis at the sight of the blank page. I thought back to my academic writing which I often waited to start until the last possible moment in the desperate hope that

anxiety would break the barrier and help me get words onto the page. I did not want my students to go through this, so I started to develop strategies and aides to prevent them from following in my missteps. Part of this came out of a desire to save them from Blank Page Syndrome. Part of this came out of a lack of interest in reading the writing of someone who waited until the last minute to complete an essay.

The first aide I provided them with was a prompt. As students progress through the school system the generation of a prompt often becomes more and more their responsibility. This begins with learning how to write a thesis in middle school and ends with students writing their own thesis papers as the culmination of their studies in the undergraduate or graduate education. For students to get to this point, though, they must have a model of what a good prompt is and be provided with a kick-start to their writing. Often, this kick-start comes in the form of organizational tools.

For the first writing prompt in my class, I instructed students to compare and contrast one of the short stories they read ("Hills Like White Elephants" or "The Story of an Hour") to their lives, using a feminist lens. All of our in-class discussions about the stories had revolved around the feminist concepts within, and I gave them a chart (see Figures 2.1 and 2.2) in which to organize their ideas about each story. Students then received a guided outline (see Figures 2.3, 2.4, 2.5) they could use as a checklist to ensure they made all of the necessary points within their essay.

*Past to Present. Feminism* COMPARISON CHART

*If you need more room, you may use your notebooks or write directly on your story.*

<i>Hills Like White Elephants</i>		<i>Story of an Hour</i>	
WHAT ARE THE BELIEFS?	SUPPORT PAGE, PARAGRAPH, LINE	WHAT ARE THE BELIEFS?	SUPPORT PAGE, PARAGRAPH, LINE
<p><b>Body Rights</b> <i>Whose choice is it for the abortion?</i></p>		<p><b>Gender Roles</b> <i>Who's in control of the relationship?</i></p>	
<p><b>Gender Roles</b> <i>Who's in control of the relationship?</i></p>		<p><i>Can women live any life they choose?</i></p>	
<p><b>Women's Opinions</b> <i>Are women's opinions valuable?</i></p>		<p><i>How do women relate to men?</i></p>	
<p><b>Describing Women</b> <i>Are women more unreasonable?</i></p>		<p><b>Describing Women</b> <i>Are women more delicate/weak?</i></p>	

Figure 2.1: Comparison Chart, Front

*Past to Present. Feminism* COMPARISON CHART

<i>Today</i>		<i>Combined (What's the same in multiple columns?)</i>	
WHAT ARE THE BELIEFS?	SUPPORT GIVE AN EXAMPLE	WHAT ARE THE BELIEFS?	SUPPORT HILLS, HOUR, TODAY?
<p><b>Body Rights</b> <i>Think abortion and birth control.</i></p> <p>Women are more sexualized than men.</p>	<p>Women are denied free birth control whereas men can have free Viagra.</p>	<p>Abortion is a man's decision</p>	<p>Hills, Today</p>
<p><b>Gender Roles</b> <i>Can women live any life they choose? How are they treated in the job world?</i></p>			
<p><b>Women's Opinions</b> <i>Are women's opinions valuable?</i></p> <p>Men do not consider women to have a valuable opinion when it comes to sports.</p>	<p>Once my cousin told me that I didn't know what I was talking about when we were watching a football game because I'm a woman.</p>		
<p><b>Describing Women</b> <i>Are women more unreasonable? Are they delicate/weak?</i></p>			

Figure 2.2: Comparison Chart, Back

**Introduction****What is the purpose of this response? What are you talking about?**


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**Thesis Statement**

As shown by \_\_\_\_\_,  
 "HILLS LIKE WHITE ELEPHANTS" OR "THE STORY OF AN HOUR"  
 \_\_\_\_\_ was treated \_\_\_\_\_  
 THIS ISSUE IN FEMINISM SIMILARLY/DIFFERENTLY  
 in the past to how it is today.

**Body One:****Topic Sentence** (*What is the belief about this issue in "Hills" or "Hour"?*)

---



---

**What is your support?** (*Check the lines you referred to in your Comparison Chart.*)

1. \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

Figure 2.3: Guided Outline, Page 1

**Body Two:**

**Topic Sentence** *(What is the belief about this issue today? Is it relevant or not? Why? What has been your experience with this issue? What are your beliefs? You may draw from what we talked about in class or your own life.)*

---

---

**What is your support?** *(Check what you have written in your Comparison Chart)*

1. 

---

---

2. 

---

---

3. 

---

---

**Body Three:**

**Topic Sentence** *(How are these two beliefs similar or dissimilar?)*

---

---

**What is your support?** *(Check the lines you referred to in your Comparison Chart)*

1. 

---

---

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Figure 2.4: Guided Outline, Page 2

*Past to Present: Feminism*

## OUTLINE

2. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Conclusion***What have you just compared?*

---

---

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*Why is the message of your response important?*

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Figure 2.5: Guided Outline, Page 3

The purpose and practical use of outlines is something that I discovered early within my thesis process.

Maybe I'm wrong, but I feel as if there's some mistaken belief that real writers can just pour all of their thoughts from their head onto the page and that outlining detracts from some of the magic of writing. Or maybe there's an idea that outlining isn't necessary if you're going to edit it for continuity later. As someone who continuously states that science is taking the magic out of the world...I want to lay these misconceptions to rest. When you're writing a piece that you want to get published—be

it as a novel, an article, or an essay your teacher will read—you have to outline. Well, not have to, but you really should. (Norton, 2015b).

This, along with other tools that I later came to use, such as not only proved to be a useful starting point for the student, but the materials were also a point of intervention for me. If I noticed that something was lacking in a student's outline, then I could point it out and have the student fix it before submitting their paper. If a student had a question about a re-write (e.g. "How can I add more support?" or "How does this not follow the prompt?"), I was able to have them go back to their comparison charts and outlines in order to formulate the answer for themselves. Coming up with these different graphic organizers helped my students learn how to think about writing better. This is something I addressed early within my blogging days, specifically in regards to outlining, but that I noticed as a truth in my classroom:

Coming up with an outline means that you always have a place for your story to go and you're able to smooth out the kinks before you hit a wall in your writing (not to say that outlining helps you avoid all walls) but it does help a lot with the idea of "Where do I go next? What does this character do?" Outlining sort of helps writers approach their work as actors approach the scene. It helps us look at the characters and figure out what their objectives are so that all of the little things can come more naturally when we have to perform. Outlining makes the story fit together as the writer determines what information must be told and what can be left out? Whose perspective is this from? Is there any way that I can reach the next scene in a more interesting way? Outlining gets the writer *thinking* which is just as important to feeling in writing.

If you are more of a feeling person and like the freedom of figuring out how to connect events in the moment, that's ok. Outlines are not binding and don't have to be

incredibly detailed so you know what color a character's shoes are when they walk to that convenience store that's three and a half blocks down from their house on the left. Some of my outlines are more detailed than others just because sometimes I have ideas that I want to save and not write about yet. A lot of times these ideas change and they get discarded from the outline. (Norton, 2015b)

Yet, while these tools provided students with a starting point and improved students' thought process and the flow and depth of ideas once they were started, the tools did little to help students actually begin to write. This conundrum was something I was all too familiar with. In my own academic writing, I frequently have an idea and an outline for what I want to write, but turning that outline into a paper often proves to be more difficult than I originally suspect it will be. To help students with this, I turned to a strategy that had helped me find the piece of an idea that I needed for my novel: the freewrite.

## **Lesson 2: Following String**

As someone who relies heavily on plans and organizers to get any writing done, it wasn't until college that I saw the value of the freewrite. Even then, when my classes asked me to freewrite, I often jotted down one or two ideas and then spoke as if I had written more. I functioned this way until one class had us sit and freewrite for close to half an hour. I struggled initially, attempting to find some good starting point, until I realized that the beauty of the freewrite was that there doesn't need to be a good starting point. All a writer needs to do is start on one idea and go without worrying if the idea you are following is good or bad. So, I started to write.

## The Sieve

There are some things that a seventeen-year-old girl should never have done.

And, no, this isn't about sex.

This isn't even about drugs.

And let's be real, every seventeen-year-old should have at least a sip of alcohol—just to know what the devil's water tastes like. Subsequently they can either run to or from him from there.

And maybe you're thinking, well if we're going to let them get hammered (in all sorts of ways) then what *shouldn't* they do? What's the point of society? Why do we bother trying to instill our children with morals?

I can't really answer that other than it gives you something to do and creates a bunch of mini-you's, or if you do it right, you's 2.0s, the newer and better and brighter version. But I can tell you that there are most certainly things that a seventeen-year-old girl should never be able to say she has done.

The first, is that she should never be able to say that she saw the half-blasted away remains of her father at the age of six and a half.

She should also never be able to say that she found her mother in the bathtub when she came home from school in second grade.

And the final thing that she should never have done was hear her twenty-two-year-old sister die over the phone.

A seventeen-year-old girl should not have buried every single member of her family before she's even graduated high school.

But I have.

I think when I tell people this, it makes them uncomfortable, and I feel bad for that because the truth is that while I do *care* that it all happened, it doesn't really bother me.

I have Obliviscor to thank for that I guess.

It turned out that my freewrite was good enough. This bit of the story gave me the push I needed to work through the circles that I had found myself trapped in, and it continued to push me through the walls of thinking about my story so I was able to get *something* on the page.

Soon after this freewrite I began to think about some of the characters within the plot, and as I started working through my questions (Under what conditions would it be possible to have an eighteen-year-old be a police officer? What would cause a society to collectively want to forget?) I soon found myself not only working through the character, but the plot as I followed the string of answers. It was this revelation that led me to begin to equate writing with unwinding a knotted string. It feels like no progress is being made, but the longer one follows the string, the more sense everything will make—or it will eventually end and new string must be found.

This realization led me to incorporate freewriting as an integral part of my classroom. Each class began with a freewrite about a topic related to what we were learning that day. Students were given five minutes to put their pen (or pencil) to paper and write continuously until the time was up. Over the course of a month, I began to see the changes in my students' writing. Not only were they starting to write more, but I was also able to see different sides of students. Students who would goof off or slack in class had vibrant journal entries, telling me about who they were outside of the classroom, in their other identities. It helped me see the best of my students and it helped my students see that even if they didn't like writing or want to do it, they could still be writers. It provided them with the same kind of hope that I needed, the kind that pushed me to continue following the string of my novel.

## Chapter 3

### Peripeteia

#### Lesson 3: Writing With Toothaches

Somewhere during the year, the hope died. Something changed within me. I stopped feeling like myself. Instead, I felt like an imposter within my own body. I felt like I was a fake for even getting up out of bed and speaking three words to people. I felt like I was the ghost of someone who didn't realize she was dead.

Yet, while I "felt" all of these things, I did not *feel* them. There were times when I suddenly began uncontrollably sobbing without knowing why. This happened once during a meeting for my campus ministry group. We were singing a song that I do not remember, and halfway through, I started crying. I could not explain my tears when they first started sliding down my face. I felt nothing at the words, and I felt nothing inside. By the end of the song, I had to leave the room because the people next to me were starting to notice my louder and louder sobs. I realized as I sat in the bathroom stall, trying to pull myself together, that I was failing at keeping face and pretending like I was doing ok. This caused more tears.

Moments like these fluctuated with moments of uncontrollable rage. When a friend cancelled on our lunch plans, I could not get over it for the rest of the day. I *hated* them, ranting about them to myself in my room. When my roommates started baking together in the kitchen, I went up into my room and called my mother to tell her how unfair it was that they were excluding me and how awful they were. When we hung up, I would cry into my pillow until I

fell asleep. I blamed myself for being worthless. I could see in the eyes of my friends that they did not want to spend time with me. I was uncomfortable to be around. I was hard to talk to.

I eventually stopped showing up to things. I followed the basic routine of getting up, going to class, coming home, doing homework, and going to bed. I did not feel like getting together with people or doing any of the things that I once enjoyed. I stopped writing. I felt like a failure for not writing. I did not talk to anyone. I did not talk to God.

Things grew worse, and I blamed myself for being such a weak person. I did not think I was depressed because that seemed to be too legitimate of a condition. I began to think about killing myself. I used to tell my mother or friends that I could never kill myself because I was afraid of the pain. I found ways in my head to do it without pain. I thought of jumping off roofs. I thought of taking a lot of pills. I thought of a variety of other ways to do it, and every time that I came close, I stopped because I knew logically that what I was thinking was wrong. It didn't feel wrong, though. It didn't even feel scary.

During all of this time, few people reached out to me. The general consensus amongst my friends seemed to be that I needed space. I was a moody introvert at the best of times before this episode, so I can't really blame them. I did get angry (and still do) when people attempted to guilt me over the fact that I had disappeared instead of asking me what was happening.

This frustration greatly impacted how I related to my students. During my student teaching experience, I recognized some of the signs of depression within my students. Students who had previously been enthusiastic and excited to participate began to stop turning in work and slowly pull out of class. Rather than blame them for being lazy about their education, I chose to speak with them. It turned out that most were receiving help for their depression, but had never considered confiding this within the teachers because they did not think it would matter.

Many were surprised that I cared enough to make accommodations for their work. I explained that mental health deserved as much attention and support as students who have alternative learning needs. They were facing an obstacle that prevented them from learning the same way a good number of their classmates could, so they needed the tools and support to help them overcome the obstacle. I then shared my own struggles with depression with each of my students, and I saw something within them click. They began to communicate with me more about their needs and they also began to open up more in class. That is not to say there was a complete turn around, but there was a desire to improve, and that is all I could ask for.

Just one person caring enough to check in can be enough to help somebody begin to come out of depression. That is what happened in my life. I had friend who I hadn't seen in a long while who updated me on her new marriage and soon after another friend came over and lay on my bed with me in silence, begging me to not give up. Between the two, they caused something within me to click and realize that I could not bear these feelings alone.

I began to tell people how I was feeling. Most of the people I told seemed to handle it really well and come out of the woodworks to try to help me. People checked in on me. They told me to text them if I ever felt like I just needed a prayer. They gave me the numbers of people who had been through the darkness before and came out on the other side. I slowly began to come back to life the more I talked about it, and during the time that I was on the upswing I began to write about the darkness. Depression is so often misunderstood. It is often equated with deep sadness or with someone just being "out of it". It is not talked about or acknowledged because it is uncomfortable and only in your head, but, to paraphrase Albus Dumbledore, just because it's only in your head, it doesn't make it any less real or any less dangerous (Rowling, 2007, p. 723). I felt that if people knew more about depression, maybe they would have seen it in

me. I made it a mission to let people know what it was like, starting with a blog that came five days after my confession.

### Writing With Toothaches

There are some times when it's hard to write. Not for a lack of ideas or time or will to, but simply because it's hard to do anything that could be considered functioning normally when there's something big going on in your personal life. I am not one to broadcast my personal hardships to anyone. Not my friends, and especially not the Internet, but over the past month I've suffered with dealing with, we'll call it, "a toothache." If anyone has ever suffered from a toothache before (a real, physical one) then you know that the pain is almost crippling. It radiates from your mouth but spreads all over your body so that it's hard to move, it's hard to think, it's hard to eat, and it's even hard to sleep. You don't want to talk to people, you don't want to go do fun things, you just want the pain to go away because it's so overwhelming.

There are so many figurative toothaches that we can face in our life: grief over a loved one dying or leaving or otherwise attempting to do so; hunger because there isn't enough food on the table; stress because you have to take care of your family; an abusive relationship; depression, anxiety, or another mental illness; physical trauma. Each one functions as its own toothache with pain so broad and so targeted on what hurts the most for each individual. As with real toothaches, or perhaps even more so, it can become hard to do the simple things, let alone something like writing a complex task that draws from your inner self and forces introspection. While writing can help us work through our variable toothaches, it's not a complete panacea, nor is it a spoonful of sugar. It's a messy, painful process and it's hard to force yourself to go through it, even if you know that it's for the best. As a highly personal thing, your writing will suffer when you are suffering.

Struggling to write through my toothache and suffering from the inability to pull myself together in order to do it, I realized something pretty important about my future as a teacher and how I want my writing instruction to be: kids will come into my class with toothaches, and it won't all be the same tooth. More concretely, every student who comes into my room is bringing some sort of pain with them. They are going to have personal obstacles that hinder their writing, and I'm going to need to help them as they are forced to go through the process of dealing with them. While I wish I could give everyone a month to take off to deal with their personal issues, it's not feasible, and in the end, it's not healthy for them. What I can do is be understanding, encouraging, patient, and tailor writing to students' abilities and needs. As Ian MacLaren (not Plato or Philo) says,

“Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle.”

My goal as a teacher of writing is to help students with kindness translate their physical struggles into written experiences as they process what they're going through. After suffering from my own toothache I was able to write a poem about it, and while it wasn't a cure-all, it definitely helped me feel better as if maybe when someone read this, they could understand. I am all for showing students who are struggling understanding and support rather than getting indignant when they have a hard time focusing on writing a literary analysis on *The Hobbit* or even a poem about the hardest thing they've ever faced. After all, trying write with bandages you've hastily applied by yourself is tricky.

## **Tales of the Dark Days**

After I wrote the blog post, I began to write poetry. I tried writing sestinas, but all I could get out was their titles, "The Fool Lost His Laugh" and "A Polar Bear Has Moved In." I realized

quickly that I was attempting to fit my depression into a box. It was the same mistake that kept me from recognizing that I had depression. Freedom came when I stopped trying to fit myself into forms and rules and I just wrote. I wrote what I eventually considered a slam, although I have never performed it.

### Grave Dweller

I used to walk around the land of the sun.

I used to beam. I used to shine. I used to light up.

I used to feel the sun burning my face, coloring cheeks, my nose, the back of my neck  
pink, dark pink, red, bright red, tan.

I used to feel the air burn in my lungs and I knew it was good to be burned sometimes.

Because to be burned is to feel pain

and to feel pain is to be alive.

Because when you're dead and stiff and cold in the dark,

you feel no pain.

You feel nothing.

I would know.

I'm a grave dweller.

I live in a small, dark, damp, deep, hole that I dug myself into.

Or maybe I fell in.

Or maybe I was pushed.

It doesn't really matter how I got here, though, because I'm in here now.

I'm in here now, and I have claimed it as my grave.

The dark is *my* dark.

The cold is *my* cold.

The loneliness is *my* loneliness.

And yes, I am lonely. Very lonely.

But you won't hear me complain.

You won't even hear me scream.

It doesn't matter how loud I scream, you won't hear. You can't hear.

You can't hear me beg you to LET ME OUT OF HERE. HELP ME. I DON'T WANT TO BE  
HERE. SAVE ME FROM DYING ALONE IN THE DARK AND COLD. DIG ME OUT. PLEASE.  
PLEASE. I'M NOT DEAD YET.

I'm not dead yet.

Not yet.

Not.

Yet.

But no one comes. I am left to claw my way out of the hole when I can.

To tunnel through mountains of discarded memories and feelings that have been heaped upon me.

And each time I emerge I am less and less corporeal.

Less and less real.

Less and less visible.

I lose my colors,

my ability to touch,

my abilities to feel.

This is what it is to be a grave dweller.

Because when you are a grave dweller, you carry your grave inside of you

even when you think you managed to escape.

You are tied to your grave.

You cannot leave it.

Ever.

You love it.

You need it.

You hate it.

You *hate* it.

Or at least, you would. If you could. But you can't.

Because when you are a grave dweller you are nothing.

You are hollow

a faint outline of the person you used to be.

A memory, a dream, a reminder that floats around the land of the sun, passing through people you once warmly embraced and leaving them cold, haunting the places you used to love back when you could run and laugh and feel.

Back when you could talk, when you could pretend to scream, when you could say more than

*Boo!*

Which does nothing but drive people away.

Yes, I am a grave dweller.

I am a grave dweller, and a grave dweller I will stay until I can find some Medium  
or small piece of faith to save me.

Please.

After the poetry, I began to write scenes describing moments from it. I combined integral players within my story and fictionalized aspects to blur out culpability and avoid letting those

who read about it feel any sense of shame. I looked at myself from the perspectives of different people who loved me. I looked at myself from someone in a different world, as if I was only a character.

### Georgia and Asher

“Georgia?” Asher asked, opening the door further.

He had never seen her like this. He thought he had seen her at worst—it was something he almost took pride in. He had seen her with her face red and puffy and tears streaming down, making broken and helpless sobs that sounded like they were breaking her as they came out. He had seen her screaming at him, her eyes wild as she drew herself up to her full height, cutting at him with razor sharp words. But this...this was new.

She lay with her back straight on the bed. She was wearing her normal clothes, but the way they pooled around her body seemed wrong. She was staring up at the ceiling, and for a second he thought she was asleep with her eyes open.

“Hey.” She drew the word out, as if once she had started it would take too much effort to stop it. “Sorry, I forgot to hit send.” She punctuated the sentence with a sigh.

He scanned the room and found her phone on the bedside table next to her, face down. That was the “I can’t deal with this shit” position. He had seen her place her phone in this position many times after he had texted her, but never when he simply asked how she was. Never when he announced that he was coming over.

“I haven’t seen you in a while,” he remarked.

“You haven’t tried.”

He flinched. Her words had lost their edge but the flatness bludgeoned nonetheless. Maybe she wouldn't stab him in the back or rip out his heart, but dying of blunt force trauma was no better.

“What’s up?” he asked, taking a few steps further into the room and closing the door behind him.

She shrugged. He wished that she would just look at him. “Nothing—everything. I don’t know. It doesn’t matter.”

He walked further into the room, and grabbed the chair that sat at her desk, pulling it up to her bed. “C’mon. Tell me,” he gestured towards himself as if able to take on her burdens just from the motion.

“You wouldn’t want to know,” she mumbled, turning over and facing the wall. Her hands reached up and held onto the pillow.

“If I didn’t want to know, I wouldn’t have broken into your house,” he pointed out.

“If you did want to know you would have asked before it got to this point—back when something could have been done,” she snapped. Her voice trembled like the grooves of a steak knife.

“Yeah, I kind of fucked up.”

“It’s fine.” The words came out as a sigh, as if the one outburst—if it could even be classified as a Georgia outburst—had been too much for her.

“Talk to me, please,” Asher reached forward and then thought better of it and retracted his hand. Georgia looked over her shoulder and then with a sigh, pushed herself up and turned to face him, leaning her back against the wall.

“I’m broken,” she shrugged again. “I—I don’t even know what’s wrong anymore. Chelsea and Sadie are all buddy-buddy and haven’t even noticed the fact that I’m gone or if they have, they’re glad; they definitely don’t miss me.”

“That’s not—”

“Teresa has been MIA. Like, whenever I text her, she either doesn’t respond or cancels. Like she said she’d be here, but I haven’t seen or heard from her in a week and I know next time I see her she’ll be all ‘I am so so so sorry. What do you need? I can’t believe it. I’m the worst. I’m literally the worst. I’m so sorry.’ And I’m starting to get it why you hate it when I say sorry because sorry is the most meaningless word in the history of the English language.”

He stayed silent, looking at her as she began to cry, yet even under the tears her face remained oddly passive as she started again, “You’ve been mad at me and won’t talk to me for who knows why this time. I spend all day feeling lonely but then when I’m invited to things, the absolute last thing I want to do is go. I am so good at making excuses so I can just sit here and stare at my ceiling, and I’m really, *really* scared that I like feeling this way.”

She was never one to hold back anything. She always said everything she felt the moment she felt it. He always knew exactly what she was thinking even if he couldn’t make sense of it.

“Have you tried talking to anyone else about this? That you feel this way?”

“As if anyone had the time for me. No one cares. It’d just be annoying.”

“Georgia, people honestly love you. I think if they knew you felt this way, you’d be surprised.”

“It’d make them feel awkward. You probably feel awkward.”

“No,” he paused. “I feel worried. And helpless. I want to do something but there’s nothing I can do. I could invite you to things and force you to go, but I don’t think that’d help. And I don’t think it’s my place to tell other people and make sure they knew to help. All I can say is please don’t give up.”

“I don’t want to.” she shook her head. “But it’s so easy when it hurts this much.”

“What hurts?” his chest constricted.

“Everything. Having to live here with everyone and feeling so alone and angry and sad and hollow all of the time. I either don’t feel anything or I’m angry or I’m crying and I don’t know why.” She looked over his head at the inspirational quotes she had pinned up above her desk. “I used to think I was too afraid of pain to take my own life, but recently the only thing stopping me is that I know it's wrong.”

He didn’t say anything. He didn’t know what to say. How could he tell her without scaring her further that if she killed himself, his world would stop. That he didn’t think he’d be able to be here anymore if he didn’t know she was somewhere nearby. Even when he was mad at her, he wanted to know that she was there to make up with if he ever wanted to.

He must have showed it on his face.

“I don’t think I’m going to kill myself,” she seemed to try to be consoling him; she said it so softly.

“I want you to want to live.”

“Me too.”

I began to write down more and more moments, exploring the causes of my depression and the feelings I had while I was going through it. The scenes ranged from mostly fictionalized to almost a diary entry. As I read over what I wrote, I slowly began to work the various pieces into a single story describing a time I decided not to commit suicide. The story sat at about the middle of the spectrum from story truth to objective truth, but through it I came to terms with much of what I had gone through and the narrow escape I made

## Riding the Bus

It has taken me close to eleven years, but I have finally perfected the art of sitting alone on the bus. There are three steps.

First, you must choose a seat within four rows of the middle of the bus. This is the neutral zone—the one populated by a variety of bus characters but not designated as the specific territory of the front-of-the-bus people or back-of-the-bus people. The front-of-the-bus people are the weird passengers who make your skin crawl with their intense eye contact as they discuss the specifics of all of the events in their life leading up to them taking the bus or the ones who make uncomfortable jokes about video games and sex. The back-of-the-bus people are the passengers who want nothing more but to make the bus ride a living hell for everyone. They set fires, they throw things, they tear down anyone who sits past the invisible and ambiguous row of seats which marks their territory from that under the driver's protection. The middle is where you go for safety—not happiness—but safety. In the middle you find the people who think that they are too good for the bus' rules and sneak on the food with a smell so pungent it tries to choke you—or worse, cigarettes. You find the people completely zoned out and binge watching shows that are dripping with melodramatic dialogue and contrived drama. If you are really unlucky, there are also couples. There are couples who are doing well, whispering together and laughing at the rest of the world. Then there are the couples who are not doing well, who silence all of the surrounding rows because no one wants to be pulled in to mediate their argument. You do not want to be any of these people, so you take the second step.

The second step is to place your bag on the seat next to you, plug in your headphones, and curl up into the corner. Just one of these isn't enough; you need the trifecta. People generally feel uncomfortable asking you to do three things: pause music, move bag, sit normally. But, to be safe, you need to take the last step.

The most important step is how you configure your face. There are two solid options. Number one, fall asleep, or at least pretend convincingly enough so that people you have completely blocked out the horrors around you. Number two, let the people know how much you absolutely detest the institution of busses and that there is nothing you want to do less than be here.

Follow these steps and you can become a silent rider like me, one who does not talk, who does not do anything but sits and leans her head on the window, aware of the truth about being a bus rider: you take the bus when you want to punish yourself for being alive.

That's the reason I'm on this Megabus on Easter Sunday, hurdling back to the ironically named Happy Valley from my visit home. I want to be dead. I want to be dead as much as I hate the bus. But I'm still alive, and I'm on the bus, and that's pretty much on par with how well my life is going right now.

I did not always hate the bus. The change happened somewhere eleven years ago, when I was in fourth grade. I'm not sure exactly what it was. It's not like my dog was run over by a bus or that my mother packed her bags and ran away to become a cross-country bus driver or even that my childhood bus driver had targeted me as problem passenger number one and rallied the other passengers to make my life miserable. In fact, when I was in elementary school, riding Bus 37, I used to really like my bus driver. Or maybe I just felt really bad for him.

He rarely if ever checked on what was happening in the back of the bus, no matter how loud it got. Instead he turned up the music and stared ahead. He always stared ahead as he weaved in and out of traffic and honked at the cars that chose to ignore the stop sign and closing his eyes briefly. The only times he ever broke his eye contact with the horizon is when someone would inevitably misjudge their aim and hit him in the back of the head with a piece of paper instead of their friends. He would close his eyes for half a second and lift a finger to the mirror as a warning.

It was all he needed to elicit the dissonant harmonies of "Sorry!" and "It was Hamid!" and "Nice going, dumb-butt" and laughter.

I gave him a hug and thanked him, every time I got off the bus. I had no real awareness of affection being inappropriate. He never said anything though. He always just looked ahead. I don't know if he could look back. I think if he did, he wouldn't be able to stand riding the bus. No, instead he stared ahead, and the corner of his lips twitched as if attempting to remember how to smile. I can't blame him for never quite remembering.

The bus driver wasn't my only friend. I had a host of imaginary friends I cycled sitting next to, all invisible anthropomorphized versions of my American Girl dolls. Kirsten and Kit were my closest friends. Felicity was slightly too cool for me, but she was warming up. I had taken Kaya under my wing.

So, the bus was good. And then, it wasn't.

I guess, that kind of describes how I feel about wanting to be dead too.

For the most part, I wanted to be alive for twenty years. Now, I don't.

This wasn't the result of a huge epiphany that dying would solve all of my problems, and it's not like I just woke up one morning and knew deep within me that my life was pretty much over, and I was just a dead man walking. It's more like I was led here by a series of small revelations, of sentences that I collected and carried with me over the years, that I adopted as mine. After so many years of carrying them, I finally looked back and realized my arms were full and I wanted to put them down.

The first revelation came from April.

That was her name. She was my first friend at the new (and according to my parents, "Way better!") school. She let me sit next to her my second time on the new bus: Bus 8. My first time on the bus had been nothing short of a complete disaster. The difference between my Bus 37 and Bus 8 was evident from the get-go. I no longer rode the bus with Hamid, Charisma, Jamil,

and Diamond. Instead, we had Logan, Caitlin, Cole, and April. The kids didn't talk about the man who ran, "high as a kite," through their backyard followed by the police. They talked about their violin lessons. I still wore my standard edition, navy blue twill skirt and white polo shirt. They wore the height of elementary school fashion— Limited Too and GAP. I had been so overwhelmed by the differences that I ended up just sitting next to my brother—a second grader, which I later learned from April was something that fourth graders just did not do.

April knew because she was a fourth grader, like me. We had the same teacher. That was how she knew my name when she called me over to sit next to her on the ride home. It was one of the reasons that I went and made the biggest mistake of that day—I sat down next to her.

April had the tendency to take on "projects." I was one. It took about five minutes of conversation for her to determine that I needed her help. I had no idea of the bus' seating hierarchy or what colors looked good on my skin. I had never listened to Eminem or watched any Cartoon Network shows. To top it all off, I liked school. April assured me that she would help me get used to things and by the time we walked off the bus, she had inducted me into the her circle. The popular girls circle.

She was nice. She protected me from the other kids' teasings when I decided to wear my earrings backwards because I thought the backs of earrings were underappreciated. She attempted to teach me that wearing adult medium sweatshirts did not really work on an eight year old's body. She made me a friendship bracelet and hung out with me and my dog on the weekends. She introduced me to boys, and asked me questions about my life in my hometown. She pointed out the unique ways I ate things like eating the chocolate off of Kit-Kats before the wafers, or taking separating the school's frozen pizza's its separate components and eating them one by one. She encouraged me to tell more jokes. When I told a joke, she led everyone else into laughter.

And then she decided to spring a revelation on me.

It was a Friday in January, which meant that it was the most hallowed of all days within the school week—pizza day. I had gotten my piece of pepperoni pizza, carton of chocolate milk, and the fruit cup for April. The cafeteria seemed louder than it normally did, which I was somewhat thankful for because it meant that my Minnie-Mouse sneakers wouldn't be as noticeable when they squeaked on the linoleum of the cafetorium. I had made it past the pairs of lunch tables assigned to Mrs. Strehle and Mr. Dudrick's classes, and I had only Mrs. Penjoke's class between me and my group of friends when April met me in the middle of the aisle. "Hey, can I talk to you for a second?" she asked.

"Of course," I nodded, fixing my grip on the lunch tray between us. "Oh, yeah, I got you the peaches."

"Thanks," she said, lifting the fruit cup off of the tray. It fell along with the rest of her hand to her side as she looked at me. Her face seemed oddly blank, as if she were waiting for me to say something despite the fact that she had called me over. The kids at the table next to us looked up, but one glare from April and they dropped their gaze.

"Look," she started. If I had known then the way sentences end when they start with "look," maybe I could have done something to stop what was coming. I would have seen the revelation and been able to reject it. But it came. "No offense, but we really don't want you to sit with us anymore."

I stopped breathing.

Unfortunately, I also started back up again.

"Why?" My voice cracked on the word.

"We're just talking about things and people, and we don't want you to hear. Nobody's really comfortable talking in front of you."

My stomach churned, and if anything my breathing started to get faster. "But I don't really know anybody here. I'm new, so I don't even know who you're talking about. It's not like I

can tell them. I wouldn't even if I knew who they were." I protested, readjusting the tray again in my now sweaty palms. I glanced across the cafeteria. At the other kids eating and laughing with their lunches. Some happened to be looking at me and they quickly averted their gaze when they noticed the tears in my eyes. I turned to look to the other girls I had been friends with. They continued to stare at me and April. Anna said something, and everyone laughed.

"We just don't feel comfortable with you there," April said, with a shrug. "Sorry." She turned around and started to saunter back to our—her friends.

"Where should I sit?" I asked her back.

She did not turn around. She did not stop. She shrugged and kept moving, staring ahead.

I stood there, picked up the pieces of the conversation, and held them in my arms along with my lunch tray. I sat alone at lunch.

I sat alone on the bus ride home that day.

This was before I had perfected the art of sitting alone. It was before I realized that when you sit alone on the bus with your eyes closed, you don't have to watch people pass you by to sit with the cute brunette wearing the floral dress you recognize from the window of Urban Outfitters. When you have your headphones in, you don't hear friends calling to each other over your head.

My phone buzzes. It's my roommate. Hey, do you mind if I have the room to Skype for like the next hour? For all of her faults, she's very considerate. I guess I got lucky in the random roommate lottery in that department. Still, she is constantly Skyping whenever she's in the room, which is not often; she's pretty much always out with friends.

No problem! I'm still about two hours away. Have fun! I'm not sure if that's weird to say or not. It's too late because the text is sent. It reaches State College in seconds, no bus needed.

State College is the town of busses. It has Fullington. It has Greyhound. It has Megabus and Catabus. It even has that weird blue school bus. In fact, State College has been the town of busses for so long, I think it's more accurate to call it the bus of towns.

People who call the place Happy Valley are the same people who try to convince me that I should appreciate the bus. They are the ones who believe in the lie all residents have been told—that the grey sheet of clouds that perpetually hangs over State College is a sky. They don't realize that it's no more than a silver metal roof that blocks out the blue and anything celestial body worth looking at. They are the people who play in the year-round snow, who don't mind the fact that their senses have been dulled by the constant cold and copious amounts of alcohol. They are the ones who claim to "like the feel of wind in their hair" and ignore the fact that it scratches their face like fingernails—it is no ordinary slap.

These are the people who lied to me and told me that college would be the best years of my life, that it is magical and golden and that I will miss this time. It has taken me three years to perfect my response. I now know how to reach down into myself and gathered up any bits of laughter I can muster from the far corners of my body and chase them out. Afterwards, I tell them to go fuck themselves because when it comes down to it, State College is a bus. It's a disappointment you paid for. From the tours you took on the three days it was sunny in State College, to the classes with exciting descriptions taught by professors who simply read PowerPoints, to the friends who promised to be your roommate until they got a better offer.

I can't blame the girl who didn't want to room with me for changing her mind. Not entirely. It's hard to convince yourself that you can spend a year with a person who admits to finding it difficult to get out of bed every morning. It's hard to deal with someone who finds it almost impossible to smile. It's hard to live with someone who hates the bus as much as I do and who forces her friends to tramp through the snow and the ice with her. So despite what she said, I don't think that she is "the worst person ever." I think that I also would have told myself: "I don't

know if I can live with you for a year and we'll still come out of it as friends." If I wouldn't have said it, then I never would have had the most important revelation of all: I cannot live with myself for a year.

When I get off the bus, I'm going to kill myself.

Admittedly, this is not the first time I have said this to myself. But, when I said it earlier I was a different person. I did not have all of the revelations that I have now. When I said it the first time, I could only think of one sentence: "Maybe this happened because you are fickle."

The boy who said this to me could have been any of the boys I've "talked to" since I came to college. It could have been, but it wasn't. It was Brant.

I met Brant on a hike with a mutual friend, Ben. Ben, was a freshman in college like me. We had met in church and then discovered that I lived two floors above him. After that, he helped to convince me that what would make my college experience better would be to join the Christian organization he was in. I did. To give him credit, my experience was marginally improved. It gave me something to do and he gave me someone to win over. The two of us began to spend a lot of time together—studying the Bible in small group, gorging ourselves on pancakes at late night buffets at the dining halls, debating over trivial topics like which Harry Potter director was the worst, watching movies with some of his friends in his dorm room. When Ben invited me to go on a hike with him and Brant, a junior who apparently was also in our Christian group. I had never seen him before.

I saw him for the first time when he pulled up in a small red sports car behind our dorm. He didn't say anything when we got into the car. "Dude, your hair," Ben commented.

"Like it?" Brant asked, looking at himself in the rearview mirror. His hair was shaved into a mohawk. It would have looked pathetic on anyone else. His hair was not long enough for him to spike, nor was it curly enough for it to stand up on its own. It wasn't floppy or anything, it just looked like he had gotten a buzzcut and the barber had missed a strip. Despite that, he made it

work. I could not see much of him since I had chosen to sit directly behind him, but from what I could tell in the mirror, his aviators and tanned, Abercrombie and Fitch model face made up for what his hair lacked.

“I mean, it’s pretty sweet, but isn’t your brother’s wedding next month?” Ben laughed.

“It’ll grow back,” Brant shrugged, swinging the car out of the parking spot and tearing up the 15 mph road. “Besides, he’s too uptight about that kind of stuff; he needs to loosen up.”

Ben laughed again as I clawed at the door’s handle, holding it so tight that my knuckles were white the entire way to Rothrock. After pulling into an alarmingly narrow parking spot, Brant threw the door of the car open and moved around to the trunk. Ben took the opportunity to check in on me.

“You ok?”

“Now that we’re here.”

Ben laughed in response; he spent most of his time laughing. “Yeah, he’s kind of crazy. That’s why I love him.”

“Is my water bottle in the backseat?” Brant’s voice came through from behind. They were the first words he ever spoke to me. I looked down at the floor that was covered in trash.

“Uh, no.”

“Shit.”

Brant continued to rummage around behind me, and I continued to sit there, strapped into the car. It was a few more moments until Ben let himself out, and I followed suit.

“The water bottle’s gone, but look at this—” Brant held a neon green shirt up with the word ONLY DO IT WITH CONSENT plastered across the front.

“What is that?” Ben asked.

"I got it at the HUB. They were just giving them out for free," Brant replied, putting the shirt so it lay half in and half out of the trunk. He reached into his back pocket and drew out a large utility knife.

Ben asked no questions. I also kept my mouth shut and instead watched as he ripped into the shirt with his knife, cutting off a strip from the bottom. Brant pushed the rest of the shirt back into the trunk and then put his knife away. Ben continued to not ask any of the obvious questions that popped into my mind and instead gazed on, snickering as Brant tied the strip of cloth around his head. He then swaggered off and ahead, leading me and Ben to the pathway into the woods.

I cannot remember much of the hike. Aside from what happened at the car, Brant seemed to be more thoughtful than he appeared. He appeared to be a douche. I soon learned that this outfit—the Timberlands, baggy jeans, and bright orange pinnie was his everyday attire. But in conversation, he was different. He was introspective and vulnerable. I remember the surprise I felt at his responses to Ben's philosophical musings about the meaning of life, the validity of the Bible, and Myers-Briggs personality types. I had settled into the assumption that my first impression of Brant was entirely misguided until we reached the creek.

Neither of the boys were fans of well-blazed paths. After following one for all of ten minutes, Brant decided it would be a good idea to take a detour, and Ben instantly agreed.

"I'm pretty sure they have paths for a reason," I had objected, standing still as they pushed on ahead, moving tree branches away from their faces on their way deeper and deeper into the forest.

"Yeah, because they're lame!" Ben called back as he moved ahead. "Fuck the paths!"

I took a tentative step forward, my eyes on the ground, scanning for tracks or snakes. "I just don't want to get eaten by a bear," I complained loudly.

"You won't. They only have Nittany lions up here," Ben joked. He had turned around, and I could see him smiling. I chose to believe he was smiling at me and hurried forward. We

made good progress for twenty minutes until we reached the creek. It was at that point that Ben and I decided we should turn around. Brant, however, had different plans.

"It's just water, and it's not even that deep," Brant scoffed, pulling off his pinnie. "We can just wade through." And then he took off his jeans, and started across in his boxers and—for some unknown reason—his Timberlands.

The sight made me smile.

At that moment, I decided that I wanted him instead. I pulled away from Ben slowly. I stopped showing up to movie nights, and I began eating real dinners instead of devoting my time to late night. My texts became fewer and fewer until ultimately we only saw each other at small group on Wednesday nights and on Sunday mornings for church.

Brant and I were dating by the end of the month. His bravado faded six weeks after that when I was at home for the summer and he was still in State College. In place of the guy who had stripped down in front of a girl he didn't know to cross a creek, I was met with a series of texts I did not like.

Brant: *Haven't heard from you in a while. I hope you're doing ok.*

Me: *I'm ok. I've just been doing some work around the house and stuff.*

Brant: *Okay. Just curious why you never talk to me..but whatever.*

Me: *Last time we talked you said that you were unsure of your feelings and I figured we both needed time to think about things.*

Brant: *The perceived snappiness is real petty.*

We had this conversation more times than I can count. This conversation and long talks about his problems and how hard his life was. About how he hated his family and hated who he was. About how he didn't know what life would be like without me. About how he needed to know that I was 100% sure I wanted to date him and that I wouldn't back out on him—not like I had on our mutual friend the one I liked and had agreed to go out with, only to turn around on the next day

because I found out that Brant liked me back. The more we talked, the more I pulled away. I was already struggling with keeping myself on the bus, I didn't know how to convince him that he wanted to be here too.

When he broke up with me, I was relieved. I was thankful that he realized that we were becoming each other's revelations. I didn't realize that he still had one in store for me.

He texted me four days after we broke up.

Brant: *I'm still excited for this fall*

Me: *Ready for everyone to be back?*

Brant: *No you. I never wanted to rule anything out, I just can't give you more than friendship now.*

Me: *That's the way I feel.*

Brant: *I mean, I don't expect us to jump into anything but we will be able to hang out a lot I mean, I still have feelings for you, you know that.*

Me: *Oh. Ok.*

Brant: *Sorry if things are complicated or you feel different.*

Me: *You don't ever have to apologize for your feelings.*

Brant: *Ok. I still don't know how you feel.*

Me: *Right now I know that I just want to be friends.*

Brant: *At least hopeful for the fall. Idk maybe I'm an idiot.*

Me: *I wouldn't say you're an idiot.*

Brant: *That's so typically vague. I really regret coming to visit and anything that happened.*

Me: *I don't know what you want me to say. You're trying to guilt me into having feelings I don't have, and there's nothing I can say to that.*

Brant: *You asked me to visit and introduced me as your boyfriend and now you don't even like me like that. I should have known this would happen. It's not like you haven't done this before.*

Me: *That's really low.*

Brant: *I'm just stating facts if your feelings are hurt maybe its because you know you did something wrong. Don't tell a guy you're sure you want to be with him when you're going to go back on it in two days. Just a lesson for the next guy.*

Me: *You broke up with me.*

Brant: *I was confused because two other people liked me at the time and I had to deal with that. I never lost feelings for you until right now.*

Me: *Maybe this happened so you can pursue one of them*

Brant: *Maybe this happened because you're fickle. Oh wait, it did.*

Me: *That's hateful.*

Brant: *Saying you're fickle is obvious. Everyone I've talked to thinks so too. It's obvious. Not hateful at all.*

I threw my phone across the room after I got the last text. I thought that I could keep the words away. That they wouldn't ingrain themselves into my very being. That I could stop them from coming between me and every boy that I have loved since Brant. I can see the distinctive spiky, dirty blonde hair of one of the boys that I hurt sitting further ahead of me on the bus. He was one of the ones that I texted every day for a month, and then after he finally asked me out on a date, I stopped talking to altogether. He is the one who was punched in the face by another boy that I had loved and then let the words push away. I had told the aggressor that I had a crush on the blonde boy and had ruined their friendship. The worst part was that at that point, I didn't like the blonde. I liked the aggressor. But after carrying Brant's words around with me for so long, I had kept them as my truth.

No one wants to sit with me. I always mistreat the ones who do. I lean my head against the glass of the window. Part of me wants to apologize to the blonde haired boy. I want to tell him that I knew that my self-destructiveness tended to take out everyone in the vicinity too, and I am planning on taking care of that. I want to text the aggressor and tell him the truth—that I still have feelings for him, that I haven't stopped having feelings for him, even in the times where he has ignored me for months. But these are warning signs, and I cannot give warning signs if I want to succeed.

It takes some time before I notice that everyone around me is standing up and that the bus has stopped. I look out the window and realize that this is not the Pattee-Paterno library. In fact, we aren't even anywhere close to State College. We're pulled over in a Sheetz because the bus happened to get the most conveniently timed flat tire ever.

"You might want to get off the bus and get some food inside," the bus driver recommends as he bends down to observe the tire. "This could be a while."

I mutter under my breath a few lines from my favorite rants about the bus, ending with: "And of course, out of all of the places this could have happened, I now get to wait in a Sheetz. So, that's just wonderful."

A Sheetz is the me of convenience stores. Nobody really wants to find themselves stuck with a Sheetz and it always tends to disappoint people's expectations. For example, when you order a turkey hoagie, generally it's expected that you will get more than a single slice of turkey on the hoagie.

I have typed out a text to my mother specifically detailing how much I simultaneously hate both Sheetz and the bus and am about to hit send before I realize what I'm doing. I don't want my last words to my mother to be about the bus. She likes the bus. She didn't learn how to drive until she was twenty-three, so the bus was her lifeline. It's what kept her connected to my father when they were dating and he had to spend his summer taking care of his grandmother, thirteen

hours away. She bought bus tickets to travel down to Alabama to meet his family and to surprise him with Braves tickets. He would bus tickets up to have an important conversation with her father and then surprise her with a ring. I could not let her associate her daughter's death with the bus. I was the keeper of the secret of how much the bus sucked. She did not need to know.

Deleting my rant is harder than it was to hug my mother close and tell her that I loved her more than I loved anything else on this earth except for maybe my father.

I swipe around my phone, playing a few games of Temple Run and Scrabble before the notification pops up. *One new e-mail*. I don't recognize the email address of the sender, but I figure that it's ok if it's a virus that wipes out my phone since I'm about to die anyway.

*Dear Ms. Newton,*

*We hope that you had a good spring break and that you had some fun with your family.*

*Our group for the lit mag had a few questions about some of the submissions, and when we asked Ms. Waters about them, she wasn't really helpful. We were wondering if you could read these three stories and let us know which one you think is best and that we should keep. Also, we really liked the story you wrote about the couple at the diner and wanted to use it.*

*See you tomorrow!*

*Sincerely,*

*Liz*

I can feel the sob in my chest, pushing at my rib cage, trying to make room for itself inside of me so I don't have to let it out. My throat closes at the prospect of making such a noise in the middle of a Sheetz on the side of some highway. *See you tomorrow!* It's the exclamation point that gets me. I read the e-mail a second time, and although I've managed to repress the loud sounds, I can't stop the tears, nor can I wipe them away fast enough without looking like I'm trying to wipe off my face. *See you tomorrow!* I had been certain that they had all hated me. That they thought I was a dumb wannabe who heard conversations about race and gender and their

experiences that they didn't want me to hear about. I thought that they were tired of how fickle I was with my lesson planning and the fact that I would scrap one idea in favor of the other in the middle of class. I had assumed I was annoying and imposing and that I hurt them more than I could ever help them. *See you tomorrow!*

I opened the attachments of the e-mail and cried harder.

The first was a letter a student wrote to a girl in the school who had committed suicide. She had not known her, and they hadn't been friends, but she missed her anyway. The feeling didn't make any sense to her, but she couldn't help it. *I cry because you're gone and because I don't know you, and I'll never get to.*

The second was a story about a boy who became an astronaut since he was tired of living on the earth. He assumed that living in space would be much more exciting and that it would lead to intergalactic adventures and fights and friendships between aliens and himself. Of course, once he got there, things were pretty much the same except he didn't speak the same language and they didn't have any of the things he actually enjoyed about earth. So, he went home and learned to appreciate all he had. *He didn't miss vacationing with Pylothons at Venus or raiding the Bypractal Galaxy with them. Here on earth, he was able to run around the bases and slide into home, even if it was only to be tagged out at the plate.*

The third story was about a bus driver who decided to become a bus driver because she liked the freedom of traveling around the country and meeting different people. The story followed her journey from New York City to Atlanta, Georgia. The people on the bus were hilarious, kind, miserable, annoying. The bus driver had an engine failure and once someone tried to hijack the bus, but she overpowered the criminal and managed to get everyone safely to Atlanta. At the end of the story, the bus driver prepared for her journey home. *She didn't know what was ahead, but it didn't really matter. She loved the bus.*

My response did not take long to type.

*Dear Liz,*

*I had a lovely break with my family, thank you so much for asking.*

*I can see why Ms. Waters had trouble helping you pick between these stories. They are all excellent pieces, and they would probably all fit in excellently with the magazine. If I had to pick one, though, I, personally, would pick the story about the bus driver.*

*I am currently not at my computer right now, but once I get to it, I will pass along a copy of my story about the couple at the diner.*

*I will see you tomorrow in school.*

*Sincerely,*

*Ms. Newton*

I came to realize writing as a source of therapy. Writing each of the stories down, even in short bursts helped me take apart all of my experiences and all of the feelings that I had in response to my experiences. Through this, I was able to continue healing from my depression and moving on to living a mentally healthier life. I am not the only one to have benefited from the therapeutic benefits of expressive writing. In their analysis of James Pennebaker's 1997 study, Colette Daiute and Ellie Buteau (2002) discuss, stating that when someone engages in "uncensored written expression repeatedly over short periods of time" the "measures of emotion words, causal connectors, and other linguistic indicators of affective expression have been established and related systematically to a range of health outcomes in autonomic and social processes" (p. 55). Looking at my own bursts of writing and its incorporation "causal connectors" and incorporated "emotion words," I could see their argument at work. I not only felt more in control of my life, and I also felt able to talk about it since I had given myself the words in writing.

#### **Lesson 4: I Get By With a Little Help**

Coming out of depression was like surfacing out of the deep end of a pool. It took a long time of wading through different thoughts, emotions, memories, and stories before I could finally break the surface. Things on the surface, though, were not quite the way that I had left them. This was true in almost every aspect of my life including, of course, my story. My story, that I had finally felt excited about just a few weeks before my downward spiral began, was a completely broken. It had needed my love and care, but like everything else, it had been left alone to wither and die during my dark days. After reading my outline over a couple of times, I realized that my story was missing something. While I loved the plot and the world and the characters, there was no drive behind the greater story. I had another dead parrot on my hands.

I handled this tragedy in the best way that I knew how. I wrote about it. After my depression I had become well-equipped to write my way through failure. There was no story this time. No poem or song or script. Instead, I wrote a series of blog posts chronicling where I went wrong and what I was learning from it. The overall message of the posts was very simple: sometimes things don't work. This realization should not have come as a shock to me; there is no reason it should have taken me multiple posts to come to terms with this fact. At some point, everyone becomes acquainted with failure whether it's their own fault or someone else's. This could be an odd tasting recipe, a lost softball game, a frozen web page, or a dead parrot story.

Writing my way through the failure only got me so far, though. It helped me come to terms with my situation, but it did nothing to fix it. For this, I took another lesson out of my depression—I asked for help.

I have one go-to friend that I take all of my stories to whenever I need them edited or feedback, and she's amazing at it. She is very well read and as such has a true talent at pinpointing the strengths and weaknesses of a piece of writing both quickly and accurately. She does not pull punches, but in most cases, she also does not aim to knock anyone out of the ring. Despite the fact that she was in England studying abroad, she responded to my call for help almost immediately and had the outline marked up in a few days.

In addition to the several gaping plot holes I had somehow failed to see, she was able to cut to the heart of my problem with deadly precision in a single question: "Who is this for?"

I had no idea.

The problem is that everything composition should be sort of like a letter. The purpose of writing is to share a message, and as such, one must consider who the message is meant for. A letter can be written and reach multiple audiences, but it's still vital to know which aspects of the letter addresses which audience.

Knowing who the audience of a work is helps a writer decide how to portray the themes that they want to come across and how to make the story more accessible. For instance, if you're writing a book for the scholarly community, there are certain assumptions you can make about their prior knowledge so different tropes and clichés won't be needed to ease them into the writing. If you're writing for children, you're going to need to include certain archetypes even if you end up twisting them and in general the language isn't going to be as abstract and flowery.

My original work on the novel had been more on the general science fiction/dystopian spectrum of story telling, but overtime the idea of writing a young adult novel had grown on me since I was going to be teaching young adults. In light of this, I tried simply changing the ages of my characters so that they were teenagers. This did not work. My characters ended up acting like

adults trapped in teenage bodies. They did not grapple with the issues of growing up or determining one's place in the world. They did not struggle to determine a moral code that was distinctly theirs. The piece had no ambiguity or hardness, and it soon became clear why it was boring to me and the readers. I could not decide if I wanted to continue editing my piece until it was written for young adults or if I wanted to go back and clarify that it was a general science fiction piece.

I was left with the four choices that everyone is faced with when they come into contact with a broken thing.

1. Ignore it as much as possible and keep doing what I'm doing assuming it'll work out or I'll get used to it.
2. Scrap it because it's not worth the hassle of trying to fix.
3. Try to jury-rig, modge-podge, or fix minor pieces to get it working.
4. Take it apart, remove the pieces that aren't working, and replace them with good pieces so that it works.

I couldn't ignore it, no matter how much I wanted to, nor could I scrap it and start a new novel because I didn't have the time. I tried for a good part of the day to jury-rig it again. I had tried the first time and failed, but I was sure that part of that was simply because I hadn't really tried, and that if I just looked at this story the right way or had someone give me the right idea, I could keep all of the components and somehow make it work. It was a frustrating six hours going through this mindset. I kept going over and over again in my head what I should do because I didn't want to take the story apart. I was afraid of finding more holes. I was afraid I wouldn't be able to put it back together. While those were definite possibilities, though, I had no more options left. I had to write this novel, and since nothing else was working, I had to strip it apart.

It is hard to scrap ideas that you care about.

It is hard for me to strip a piece of writing down. There's always the chance that one of the ideas that I really love is actually one of the broken pieces. Having to scrap a character or a scene that one I'm proud of or that I genuinely care about is a terrible feeling. It makes me feel the weight of my failures—even my best is not good enough, my judgment is not sound, my hard work was pointless. When it comes down to it, stripping down a piece of writing is essentially looking at what you have and asking, "So what?" This is the question that drives a reader to keep reading, that makes a book matter. The point is to give the work meaning and a goal to reach towards. A story without an answer to the "So what?" is a story that needs intensive open-heart surgery.

My story had no answer.

This discovery, perhaps more than anything else, shaped my instruction of students. Up until this point, I had never truly felt failure within writing. Sure, some pieces that I did not care about ended up being flops, and my timeline was often pushed back on some of the pieces I did care about, but I had never been able to not write anything down and not like anything I did manage to write. As a result, I had never developed strategies beyond the oppositional ideas of "Wait it out" or "If you start writing, it will come."

Additionally, I always considered myself as a creative writer above the lessons taught in an English classroom. I cited e. e. cummings and Cormac McCarthy as justifications for why I was allowed to not only break the rules but never consider them in the first place. The problem is that while there are some aspects of English education that could stand to change—emphasizing the "classics" or arbitrary vocab lists, for example—some of the duller aspects of English

education are there for a reason. Grammar is not so much a set of constraints but a safety net for writers to fall back on to make sure their story is communicating its "So what?" effectively.

This episode of failure also changed the way that I read student papers and the way I viewed peer editing. In the same way I felt myself above grammar and conventional writing instruction, I never felt as if I benefited from peer editing. Most of my peers offered little constructive criticism, and what they did give me, I frequently discarded because "they just didn't get what I was trying to do." Perhaps some of this feeling was justified, but largely this stemmed from arrogance. The only reason I let my friend diagnose my story was because I had learned how astute a reader she was from my experiences in class *and* I considered her a good friend. She was safe. She knew how important the story was to me, so she wouldn't lie and let it die, but she would not be cruel about it either. The same reasoning is what drove me to seek out another friend, my neighbor who was a fellow education major and book lover, when I was attempting to build my story back up. Having these positive experiences with peer editors led me to believe in the idea of "Readvisors."

Readvisors (taken from Revision + Advisor) are good readers and good friends. They are excellent sounding boards for writers' initial ideas, they can help figure out from an outline if a story or piece makes sense, they have a keen eye for what the writer is trying to do and whether or not they are succeeding, and they can help to edit and revise a piece at the end. The most important part of a Readvisor's job is that they assess but they do not judge. They don't shy away from the truth, but they don't tear the piece to shreds. They are in dialogue with the writer and are not the final call. Readvisors handle writing—personal expressions of a writer's thoughts and feelings, and as such must be trusted in order to do their job. As they are such important resources and supports to writers, they are paramount to the writing process.

I would argue that Readvisors are absent from most classrooms. In my experience, many teachers believe that peer editing can serve as a substitute for Readvisors, and while sometimes a student can find their Readvisor in peer editing, a lot of times there is a lack of trust or a lack of knowledge of reading/writing and the author that is a prerequisite to becoming a Readvisor.

As such, it would be difficult to force students to become Readvisors, but teachers can simulate them as much as possible. Pair students up with people whom they ask to be paired with, and then teach them how to be Readvisors. Show them how to read deeply, providing them with a guide on what questions to ask when reading a piece of writing. Teach them how to revise ideas and edit mechanics. Even if the students doesn't become each other's permanent Readvisors, it may make the writing experience a bit better for the student and less stressful than the culminating peer editing workshop that never seems to work out quite the way one expects.

Additionally, I have learned how important it is to be a Readvisor for my students. This realization has made my job much harder as Readvisors are active within the entirety of the writing process, checking in with students during all stages, not just the end. Instead of marking off what students are doing wrong and telling them how to fix the mistakes, I must engage in an open dialogue so students know *why* their mistakes are mistakes and *they* fix them—not me.

This has already begun to shape my writing instruction. Instead of providing my students with completed essays littered with comments, I hand back essays where in place of comments, there are the initials of a rubric category and a plus sign (+) or minus sign (-). Each symbol marks whether they did something on the rubric particularly well or if they need to revise an aspect of their writing. Students then must use the guide I provide them with to determine why the marking is there, and then they must fix it.

### Rubric for *The Crucible's* Final Paper

OUTSTANDING | MEETS EXPECTATIONS | DEVELOPING | POOR | NOT DONE

<b>100 - 90</b>	<b>89 - 80</b>	<b>79 - 70</b>	<b>69 - 1</b>	<b>0</b>
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CATEGORY	Outstanding	Meets Expectations	Developing	Poor	N/A
<b>MEETS CRITERIA (20)</b> <b>"MC"</b> Uses 3 quotes as directed. Clearly and completely answers all of the questions. Gives three examples of how the message is apparent in <i>The Crucible</i> .	20 - 17 pts.	15 - 12 pts.	10 - 7 pts.	5-1 pts.	0.
<b>CONVENTIONS &amp; MLA (15)</b> <b>"C&amp;M"</b> Follows MLA formatting There are in-text citations for quotes The spelling, punctuation, and grammar are mostly accurate	15 - 13 pts.	11 - 9 pts.	7 - 5 pts.	3-1 pts.	0.
<b>IDEA DEVELOPMENT (25)</b> <b>"ID"</b> Ideas are clear, insightful, thought-provoking, and focused so that they consistently support the topic, thesis and audience for the paper.	25 - 21 pts.	19 - 13 pts.	11 - 6 pts.	4-1 pts.	0.
<b>BOOKENDS (15 pts.)</b> <b>"B"</b> Introduction hooks the reader and clearly introduces the topic. Conclusion sums up the argument and explains why the author's message is relevant/important.	15 - 13 pts.	11 - 9 pts.	7 - 5 pts.	3-1 pts.	0.
<b>TRANSITIONS (25 pts.)</b> <b>"T"</b> A variety of thoughtful transitions are used. They clearly show how ideas between paragraphs are connected.	25 - 21 pts.	19 - 13 pts.	11 - 6 pts.	4-1 pts.	0.

MY POINTS \_\_\_\_\_

MS. NORTON'S POINTS \_\_\_\_\_

Ms. Norton's Goal for Me: \_\_\_\_\_

My Own Goal for Me: \_\_\_\_\_

Figure 3.1: Rubric

### What Do The Comments Mean?

Rubric Category	+	~
<b>MC</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Uses 3 quotes.</li> <li>2. <b>One from exposition</b></li> <li>3. All from different acts</li> <li>4. <b>Clearly and completely answers: What is the message of the theme?</b></li> <li>5. <b>Clearly and completely answers: How is this message apparent in <i>The Crucible</i>?</b></li> <li>6. <b>Clearly and completely answers: How is this message applicable in real life?</b></li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <b>The author does not use three quotes</b></li> <li>2. <b>None of the quotes are from the exposition.</b></li> <li>3. <b>Only 1/3 or 2/3 quotes are from different acts.</b></li> <li>4. <b>The author does not clearly state the message of the theme.</b></li> <li>5. <b>The author does not explain how the message is apparent in <i>The Crucible</i></b></li> <li>6. <b>The theme is not about fear, power, or conformity.</b></li> </ol>
<b>C&amp;M</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Follows MLA formatting</li> <li>2. There are in-text citations for quotes</li> <li>3. <b>The spelling, punctuation, and grammar are mostly accurate</b></li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <b>The author improperly cites a quote or does not cite a quote at all.</b></li> <li>2. <b>Missing MLA bibliography citation</b></li> <li>3. <b>The formatting (heading, font, spacing) of the essay is not in MLA.</b></li> <li>4. <b>There is a punctuation, spelling, or capitalization error.</b></li> <li>5. <b>There is a grammar error.</b></li> <li>6. <b>The play is not put in <i>italics</i>.</b></li> </ol>
<b>ID</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <b>There is one clear, well-focused topic.</b></li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <b>The author goes on a tangent/makes a point that does not have to do with thesis.</b></li> <li>2. <b>The author contradicts him/herself.</b></li> <li>3. <b>The author is not following the writing assignment's prompt.</b></li> <li>4. <b>More content is needed.</b></li> <li>5. <b>Stronger or more specific support is needed for ideas</b></li> </ol>
<b>B</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <b>Introduction hooks the reader.</b></li> <li>2. <b>Introduction clearly introduces the topic.</b></li> <li>3. <b>Thesis statement is clear and on topic.</b></li> <li>4. <b>Conclusion sums up the argument</b></li> <li>5. <b>Conclusion explains why the author's message is relevant/important.</b></li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <b>There is no introduction / conclusion.</b></li> <li>2. <b>The hook is missing or needs to be strengthened.</b></li> <li>3. <b>Thesis statement missing or needs to be strengthened.</b></li> <li>4. <b>Conclusion does not sum up the argument.</b></li> <li>5. <b>Conclusion does not explain why the author's message is relevant/important.</b></li> </ol>
<b>T</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. A variety of thoughtful transitions are used.</li> <li>2. They clearly show how ideas between paragraphs are connected.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <b>There is no transition</b></li> <li>2. <b>The transition does not connect ideas between paragraphs.</b></li> <li>3. <b>The transition does not state what the next paragraph will be about.</b></li> </ol>

Figure 3.2: Comments Guide

While I would like to continue to improve this method and incorporate more strategies of becoming a good Readvisor within my classroom, I have already noticed the difference between my students' writings as they continued to improve and make new mistakes. Perhaps most

importantly, I have learned that rather than being frustrated with a lack of progress, I must continue to be supportive and understanding and honest. I must become a better reader so that my students can become better writers.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Anagnorisis**

#### **Lesson 5: Crossing the Stormy Sea**

After the break through, I began to invest heavily in my writing. I met often with my neighbor, handing her snip bits of writing and pages of questions. We slowly began to rebuild what I had envisioned for myself, but it was by no means easy. This was odd. I still was not used to writing being hard for me. It had always been something that I could turn off and on, flowing out of my soul and through my fingertips as easily as water flows out of a faucet. Sometimes there would be a few sputters at the initial turn of the tap, but eventually a steady stream of well-phrased thoughts always found their way from my heart, mind, and soul onto the page.

But, through trying to write a novel, I came to realize that writing is less turning on a faucet and more singlehandedly navigating a sailboat through shark infested waters in the middle of a thunderstorm.

I later pointed out in a blog post that writing is "one of the most socially acceptable brands of masochism there is, and it's unique in its ability to wage psychological and emotional warfare on the writer at every stage of the writing process" (Norton, 2015c). From the beginning there are the fears that the idea is overdone or boring. Then, once an idea is deemed acceptable enough to settle on, the task of putting it into writing is similar to trying to transfer a beautiful, precious saltwater fish into a freshwater aquarium: it goes belly up within minutes. Somehow the idea seems to fail as soon as it's put into words, all of the metaphors and intricate phrases that

seemed like they might possibly convey some hint of what you're trying to say sounding dull and flat.

The more I wrote, the more I felt like a poser. It wasn't until I took a procrastination break and stumbled across a couple of statements from writers that I started to feel like maybe, just maybe, I was not a complete failure.

The first was J.K. Rowling's twitter. *Harry Potter* has always been my favorite book series. It's the series that inspired me to become a writer as opposed to simply a reader. To me, J.K. Rowling was, in many ways, the shining example of a writer tuned in to the secrets of the writing craft. So, it came as a bit of a shock to read a conversation between her and her fellow writer on her twitter feed. In discussing their drafts, J.K. Rowling (2015a) asked Val McDermid, "Is yours looking better or worse the more you reread it?" McDermid (2015) answered, "It always looks worse. The more I look at it, the more misbegotten it seems." That in itself lifted my spirits, but Rowling's (2015b) response is what truly reached me: "That's a relief, I thought it was just me."

I was not alone. This conversation perfectly summed up my feelings towards my own novel. Every time I went back to it, it seemed more hopeless, more mangled, more "misbegotten." When I turned back to my self-assigned reading, Anne Lamott's *Bird by Bird*, I found even more support. Lamott (1994) corroborated that "it is fantasy to think that successful writers do not have these bored, defeated hours, these hours of deep insecurity when one feels as small and jumpy as a water bug. They do" (p. 14).

After reading that sentence, I began to realize just how much my struggles were helping me to become a better teacher. I did not come up with the idea that writing was easy entirely on my own. Writing was frequently treated as something "easy" in school. It was simplified into a

science with formulas (1 Introduction + 3 Body Paragraphs + 1 Conclusion = Perfect Essay; Person uses X and Y to prove Z = Perfect Thesis; Exposition + Rising Action + Climax + Falling Action + Denouement = Perfect Story) and rules (commas before coordinating conjunctions, avoid passive voice); it became something that could be honed with the sharp-edged knife of critiques.

Often, my teachers failed to see themselves as weathered sailors with experiences that made them more instructive than any handbook formula or rule. As a result, they often failed to talk about the complexity of writing, as if the difficulty and struggles that accompany writing can be avoided. To pretend that writing is not hard, is to be a siren leading students into rocks.

I'll admit, it seems counterintuitive to tell students that writing is hard if the goal is to give students hope and encourage them to be better writers. It seems like this admission would scare them away, and it might. Still, if I can sympathize and tell students tales of overcoming the hardships, the knots, the storms, it will lead them to a more realistic view of writing and to become better writers who do not shrink in the face of challenge. As Whitney states, "once we acknowledge that writing is hard, we can do something about it. We can tell ourselves helpful things, encourage ourselves to go on trying" (n.d.). To admit that writing is hard is to also give a certain amount of grace in responses to students' writing. Every attempt across the stormy sea is a valiant endeavor, and every knot undone is a small victory. My responses should reflect that and encourage them along with providing tips and suggestions as opposed to rules and formulas.

## Lesson 6: Don't Aim for Good

Realizing that each attempt at writing is admirable has changed the way that I view drafting and reading drafts. Throughout the thesis process, I have been continuously given one piece of advice. My thesis advisor told me every time she met with me. My boss—who recently completed his own thesis—told me whenever he saw me typing away at it. My writer friends encourage me to do it when we discussed my writings, their writings, or writing in general. Even Anne Lamott wrote a chapter on it. The advice was this: don't worry about whether or not what you're writing is good; just write. It was a piece of advice I've systematically ignored.

I did not realize my mistake at the time. To worry about whether or not something is good is to give yourself an excuse not to write. Rarely are there such things as good first drafts. As such, it's fairly important to not take criticism of a first draft and assume that it applies to the end product that is somewhere out there in the nebulous future. I did.

Although, if it were up to me, I'd say that you shouldn't even let anyone look at your first draft to criticize because the first draft should never be something in which quality is considered. Anne Lamott (1994) addresses this in her chapter by claiming:

Almost all good writing begins with terrible first efforts. You need to start somewhere. Start by getting something—anything—down on paper. A friend of mine says the first draft is the down draft—you just get it down. The second draft is the up draft—you fix it up. You try to say what you have to say more accurately. And the third draft is the dental draft, where you check every tooth, to see if it's loose or cramped or decayed, or even, God help us, healthy. (p. 25-26)

This paragraph not only gave me hope, but it began to shape my teaching philosophy. When planning for and working through assignments, I must keep in mind that writing is a multi-draft process. Merely generating an outline, rough draft, and then final draft is not enough. Pretending that an outline can take the place of a draft—as I have done and as some of my teachers have accidentally reinforced—will simply hurry along students down the path of chaos and despair that I followed. So, while it is necessary to teach students how to outline and that outlines are greatly important—because they are—it is also necessary to teach them that outlines don't have the functional importance of a first draft.

It may seem as if at this point I have lost touch with the reality that English class is generally a 45-minute period in which teachers must do 50 different things. I am well aware that it takes time for each stage of the drafting process and that there is only so much time in a period, so many periods in a week, so many weeks in a month, and months in a school year; I know that time is a precious commodity in school. That said, I also know that if one of the goals of English class is to develop better writers then the time spent on an awful, terrible, no one should ever read this draft is well worth it.

Linda Christiansen (2009) speaks on the value of having students complete multiple drafts in her book *Teaching for Joy and Justice*:

Too often writing—and thinking—in school becomes scripted (hence the five-paragraph essay) because scripts are easier to teach and easier to grade. Unfortunately, they fail to teach students how to write. Real writing is messy. And students often don't "get" how to write narratives or essays the first time we teach them. They need lots of practice without judgments; they need to be told what they are doing right, so they can repeat it; they need to examine how to move to the next draft. (p. 274)

In light of drafts' importance, Linda Christiansen has all of her students submit draft after draft of an assignment, sometimes up to even seven. Even when the final paper is "due" students are still permitted and encouraged to submit revisions, which is something that I incorporated within my own classroom during student teaching. The returns I got in terms of student learning and student perseverance were far greater than any time I lost having to grade a new paper.

Above all else, I learned from this experience and the sage advice from Lamott and Christiansen not to judge a student's writing ability or assignment's potential based on a draft. To judge the quality of a piece of writing when it's still in its drafting stages is like judging how beautiful a butterfly will be when it's still a caterpillar. Sure, you can tell some general aspects of the butterfly based on the type of caterpillar, but the thing hasn't even been in a cocoon yet. More plainly, I cannot judge a student on their first draft because I sure wouldn't want them to judge my writing based on mine.

Instead, first drafts should be used to spark a conversation with the students about their writing. Teachers must be in conversation with students about their writing and monitoring the progression of multiple drafts to get an accurate picture of what the end product will be. During my drafting stages, even when my writing failed me, I was still able to talk about my piece and convey my ideas through words. Those I spoke to could see that I had the direction and the desire, I just needed to struggle through the process some more. Discussing students' writings with the students, allows them to think through composition decisions and claim agency over their writing. It also enables teachers to become more committed to what Anne Whitney and Linda Frierich call "the value of their students' ideas, not solely as the content that one puts in to a piece of 'good writing' but as the purpose for writing at all and as writing's most valuable product" (2013, p.11). The first draft is just a step in the process and a method of gauging student

ideas in the same way that discussion is. Still, as writing is the ultimate goal, a discussion is simply the first response. After that, teachers must move on to help students realize that what they have to say has value and that their writing enables them to bring their ideas into the world (Whitney & Friedrich, 2013, p.13).

## **Fives**

It was in the process of recovering my novel that I finally felt as if I was making real strides in learning about writing and learning about teaching. I felt as if I had made it past the barriers life threw up to prevent me from succeeding. I had not considered that life had another trick up its sleeve who took the form of a boy down the street.

Heartbreak has an interesting effect on people. At least, it does on me. I end up feeling incredibly stupid for having believed anything else could have come out of the relationship, spiteful towards the person who broke my heart, and desperate to return back to the days when everything was good together. In truth, I feel a lot more than those three things, but the feelings are so densely knotted together and weigh me down so much that it is hard to parse them and identify them. Not only that, but this complexity of feelings rarely goes away entirely, It has been almost a year to when I had my heart broken, and yet I can still feel the echoes of confusion, hurt, anger, and desolateness that I felt in that moment.

Our relationship was of the "Will they, won't they?" variety, complicated by the fact that he was my best friend, my roommate's ex-boyfriend. The two did not end on very good terms to the point where I swore to my roommate that I would never be able to stand him after what he did to her. God has an interesting way of working in our lives though, and it was about six

months later that we began flirting with the idea of dating. Each time it was close enough to happen, I worried about my best friend's opinion and if he would do the same thing to me that he had done to her; I pulled away. We alternated between being best friends and bitter enemies. There was no in between.

This continued for the next year and a half until one day, after he had ignored my existence by refusing to speak to me or even look at me whenever we were around each other, I came to the conclusion that I was in love with him. Some questioned whether I simply was unused to his lack of attention, but I told them that was the point—I had never had to go without his attention before. We were either joking or arguing, and now that I didn't have either, I realized how important he was to my life.

The week after this realization, I asked him to go on a walk with me. Surprisingly, he agreed. We spent a few moments in silence as I gathered up the courage to say what I needed to say. It all sort of exploded at once. I told him that I was sorry for everything I had done and that, if he could forgive me, I thought we would be good together.

He did not agree.

He forgave me but told me that we would never work. We weren't meant to be. We'd find better people. It was nothing I had done and everything I had done. We argued on this point for a little while before he made it clear that even though he was as confused as I was, he was committed to staying away from me. We weren't good for each other.

I went home and cried myself to sleep.

The next day I woke up and began writing. I wanted to make sense of my feelings and his feelings and everything that happened between us. My writing was fragmented and in bursts, but I could not stop the stories from coming. I entitled the stories "Fives." This related back to the

childhood concept of calling "fives" on a seat so that if you left and came back within five minutes, your seat should still be open for you. I felt that this concept characterized our relationship more than anything else. I used the characters from one of my scenes about depression and coaxed them into the situation between me and the heartbreaker. Their scenes together came out so easily.

### Five Feet Away

"Do you want to talk or do you want to listen?" It was a question they were both used to asking, what with their history.

"I'll listen," he answered, looking at her for the first time in what felt like weeks. It was definitely the first time he had looked at her since they started this trip. She had been surprised when he had even answered her text, let alone that he had agree to meet with her. Then again, Teresa had told her that he would, and if anyone knew and understood Asher-or at least, anyone that Georgia could talk to- it was Teresa.

Georgia paused, trying to find the words in the letter that she had composed in the car: the apology, the explanation, the plea but nothing was forthcoming. All she could do was say, "I suck at words," the phrase that made the English major part of her soul cringe and die.

"Just go for it."

Georgia could feel the pressure rising in her chest from the sensitivity he was suddenly showing her. It pressed hard, making her eyes well up as she took in a shaky breath, bypassing all of the careful lead up she had planned and instead sinking write to the heart of the matter.

"It's killing me that you're ignoring me." She hadn't entirely meant to be so honest, at least not so soon. He nodded turning to stare at the ground. the pressure in her chest took the

familiar route tensing up her shoulders and extending down into her forearms, her fingers curling into a fist even as her stomach sunk down. She wanted to punch him, which was pretty much an hourly sensation now.

She wished she could touch him. She never could though. They had only had five days in their whole relationship when touching was allowed and those five days had passed one year and 3 months ago. She could count days, but that was too hard. Instead of touching they found other ways of expressing what they wanted to. Words, mostly in the form of barbed jokes and veiled insults. Then there was the flipping off. She liked to think of that as the "As you wish" of their relationship. Although they were by no means Buttercup and Wesley, and everyone else in their circle of friends also flipped people off as means of greeting, joke, compliment, consolation, and saying goodbye.

There were times she wished that they could simply brush hands.

There were times that she wished she could get away with beating him.

Most times she felt somewhere in between the two varying in which side she leaned more towards.

"Like, I don't think you know how absolutely miserable I've been. And I just wish I knew what I did to make you so mad at me."

"I'm not mad at you." His voice was so frustratingly calm that she was leaning towards shake on the scale of hand brush to throttle.

"Then why are you avoiding me?" She generally tried to avoid asking questions that she didn't want to know the answer to. After hearing the clichéd line so many times it had finally sunk in as a lifestyle choice worth making, especially given how sensitive she was; however, there were times like this one where her masochism and sense of guilt drove her to ask the questions, preparing herself for the bittersweet thrill of heartbreak. She had come to love the creeping loneliness, crave the feeling of the soft plush blanket and the tin of brownies (because ice cream

was a celebration food) in front of her as she drowned her sorrows in marathons of Arrested Development and other prematurely canceled shows. She had made the mistake of watching Atonement once and had cried so hard that she had trouble breathing for an entire hour. She loved the amalgamation of pity, sympathy, empathy and I told you so's that her roommates gave her. She loved capturing Teresa's sole attention for the few weeks it took her to get over the pain. But she didn't want that anymore. Not where Asher was concerned.

"You know why," he said leveling a glance at her. She could feel it in her stomach. It was the same reason they didn't hug goodbye even though she hugged all of her friends. It was the reason she didn't push him when he was being ridiculous like she pushed Tyler. It was the reason that they only had five days. "It's hard to be friends with you."

Hearing it was like Solarcaine to a sunburn. Painful at first and then soothing because it meant there was still a chance. That was always his line when talking about her. Usually it was followed by a plea to reconsider her earlier rejections or a compliment. The nicest thing anyone had ever said to her was preceded by this statement. "Sometimes I'm in awe of you," he had said. And then he had preceded to talk about how amazing she was and how good they would be together and how the door wasn't closed and all the while she had been trying to keep herself from tucking and rolling out of the car. She tried to convince herself that this was everything she wanted to hear, that it didn't matter what other people would think, that she couldn't kill it before it started again. She had told them the second day they had been allowed to touch each other that a relationship with her was going to be really hard. He had told her he could handle it.

And here she was and he said it and she didn't even want to run away. She was right when she told Teresa that she had finally broken past whatever stupid defense mechanism she had somehow erected.

"I know. And another thing that's eating me up inside is that I've ruined all chances of us ever being anything else. I finally know what I want and it's just too little, too late after

everything I've done." He doesn't flinch or look away at the statement. Instead he sighs and looks at her.

"You're too hard on yourself," he answers, not correcting me. Her stomach felt as if it were about to drop out, a bitter taste rising into her mouth as she continued to walk along side of him, the two of them winding through the unfamiliar streets of the Florida beach. "It would have never worked out. All we can be is friends."

She felt as if he broke the no touching rule. He had knocked the wind out of her body and she couldn't breathe. She could feel the statement she had been sort of working to die. - I love you. - It had taken her one year and three months to realize it, but she did. She couldn't imagine her life without him. Everything felt emptier when he was unreachable. And here he was, standing just a foot to the right and entirely unreachable.

"I disagree." The words came out small and watery. His face fell in sympathy. There was no thrill to the look. There was no bittersweet feeling to the heartbreak. Just bitterness. Pure bitterness. "Because whether I want them to or not, all roads lead to you."

### First Five Months

It took approximately fifteen minutes to determine that Asher was the biggest asshole she had met in her entire life. The only other person who could possibly have given him a run for his money was Zeke, who not only went by the name Zeke, but also refused to learn her name even after four years of hanging out with her and her good friends every Sunday. Between the two though, she had to say that Zeke was more of an egotistical jerk than straight up asshole, so the title went to Asher.

She was fairly certain if he made one more sound, she was going to kill him. It really didn't matter that he was friends with Rachel and Teresa who were basically the only people that

she had met and really liked so far in college. One more whooping noise for someone he knew or smartass rude comment and she was going to snap.

Except she wasn't.

She really wasn't the type to make a scene--especially against the friend of a friend. She just found it oddly consoling to picture herself making all of the sharp retorts that she came up with in her head.

"That's pretty clever coming from a guy who still thinks he's in middle school judging by the amount of gel keeping up that stupid faux hawk and the fact that I can smell the Axe you apparently bathed in this morning from down the block."

"Oh, so you could tell that trumpet player was flat? You were some prodigy in high school? Well then what are you doing standing next to me instead of walking in the parade?"

"Oh that inside joke you have with that guy who literally no one else here, including your girlfriend of two years, knows is probably the most hilarious thing I've heard all year from someone with a ten year old's sense of humor."

She resolved to ask Teresa of how much she really liked Asher once they got back to their room. Then maybe she could divulge to her roommate a few of the choice comments she had come up with.

But, as for now, Georgia had to content herself with looking up at the oncoming paraders instead of the friends surrounding her and dramatically rolling her eyes whenever Asher opened his mouth.

"Please," she wanted to beg him. "Please, just shut up. Just shut the fuck up. Someone shut him up."

"I like string bands," she said instead.

"Seriously?" Asher asked, his focus narrowing in on her. "No one likes string bands."

"Asher," his girlfriend, Sadie, scolded.

"Sorry," he remarked automatically. "But seriously. String bands are mostly meant for old people who still remember how to march but can't play any halfway decent music anymore."

"So you don't watch the Mummers Parade?" she pressed, refusing to give up ground.

"Not if I can help it," Adam remarked. "Besides, I think listening to a whole parade of assholes dressed up in feathers and trying to play instruments would make me want to kill myself."

Sadie glared at Asher, but he didn't really notice. The sound of his friend laughing behind him seemed to urge him on.

"I'm kind of surprised that one was even allowed to march in homecoming. Usually they're pretty strict about the who gets in. I guess this year they let in anyone who can strum out a nursery rhyme."

Sadie looked as if she'd given up on Asher and instead entered a conversation with Rachel.

Taking Sadie's cue, she turned to look back up for the future acts coming. What she would have loved to say to Asher.

"Just because you can't strum out a nursery rhyme doesn't give you the right to make fun of people who spent months learning how to march elaborate shows. I'd love to see what you did in high school, trumpet prodigy." she seethed.

"I wonder if this is their way of weeding out people from the band because it's too big. They ask people to volunteer for the string band, and whoever's hand goes up gets booted."

"You know, my uncle plays in a string band, actually," She bit. It was half true. Ross was as good as her uncle, and he played with a string band once in the local Fourth of July parade. He had considered joining the Mummers Day parade, but had hurt his knee. "And when he's actually placed first in a few national competitions for playing the banjo, so yeah." That part

was also mostly true. He consistently placed in the top three, but he'd only ever "won" two of them over the past sixteen years.

"Oh, shit. I'm an asshole, sorry," he looked very aware that he had been caught shoving his leg down his mouth.

She drew her lips into a line and looked the other way, still too angry to revel in the win.

"Wow, Asher, way to go," Teresa remarked laughing. "Sorry, Georgia, if it makes you feel any better, he really is just an asshole. It's not just to you."

"It's really fine," Georgia lied.

#### Five Revival Attempts

The thing that probably sucked the most about being stuck in the small room in the ER was not the needles, or the incessant questioning, or the fact that it was almost two in the morning and all he wanted to do was sleep; it was the sheer boredom of it all.

For one, the TV had about ten channels, none of which had any good TV on it. It was all old TV movies that hadn't even been popular when they were first released and 90s sitcoms. If he had to listen to one more nagging wife and bumbling idiot husband, there would be no question about whether or not he had an issue with his heart. He was sure it would explode. Or his head would.

And then there was the fact that his "moral support" was fast asleep in the small, teal blue plastic upholstered arm chair. Fucking, Robin. The asshole had one job. He hadn't even driven Asher to the hospital. Asher had been forced to drive himself because Robin had been too drunk to work a steering wheel. So, Robin was fast asleep and Asher was stuck watching re-runs of *Everyone Loves Raymond*.

He wished it was Georgia sitting in that chair instead. She would be awake. She would have brought it next to the bed and been looking at him scoldingly and telling him that it was one thing to have a small heart palpitation, but it better not be a heart attack or anything more serious because he wasn't allowed to die until he was 97. If he wanted to go to heaven a moment sooner, he would need her written permission, and she wouldn't grant that unless she had at least a year's notice.

No. She wouldn't say that.

She would be gentle, concerned Georgia. The Georgia that he got to see and Theresa and Sadie and he had to guess the asshole—Ryan. She wouldn't be loud and joking, she wouldn't be quiet and on the sidelines. She would be next to him, calm and attentive. The kind of Georgia she was when they had been in the car together and he had told her about his mother and the pills. She would be asking him what he wanted her to do. He'd tell her he didn't need her to do anything; he just wanted her to be there. She would have flushed and busied herself doing things that didn't need to be done, but would make him feel her presence. She would be making sure he was comfortable in the bed. She'd ask if he wanted her to call his dad. She would talk him through it in calm tones, assuring him that it would all be ok—this was a good hospital, and it's probably only something minor anyway. She would start flipping through the channels, and in half bitter and half mocking tones remark on the quality of show selection. She would give up much sooner than he had, and instead ask him about his classes, his research, his music, his family, anything to take his mind out of the hospital room, and if—when the doctors gave the all clear, he would get to watch her shoulders drop in relief and the bright smile replace the small, gentle, nervous one. She would turn to him—probably pushing that strand of hair behind her ear and make the 97 comment.

“William?”

“Yeah,” Asher sat up straighter in the tight bed, looking at the doctor who came in. The doctor looked unsettlingly like the one professor he took for that Communications gen-ed. Except, instead of greying hair, the hair had fully succumbed to old age color-wise and now was making a retreat to the back of his skull. And he smiled too easily. He always had a big smile as if any second Asher would break into tears or try to run out. It wasn’t the same as Georgia’s smile would have been.

“How are you feeling? If you had to rate the pain on a scale of 1 to 10?”

“Right now? Four. But it comes and goes in waves up to a nine.”

“And how frequent are those waves?”

“I don’t really know,” Asher shrugged. It felt as if this whole hospital was in a time warp. He just knew it was midnight when he came in, and it felt like it had been over an hour since he last saw the doctor. He’d been switching channels too much to judge it by that either.

“Alright,” the doctor nodded. He didn’t even bother to write anything down. He just nodded and stared at Asher. “Have you been feeling stressed lately?”

I am a junior in college, Asher thought blithely. I can’t remember a time I’ve felt calm and relaxed in the past five years. Actually, that wasn’t true. He could remember a time he felt calm and relaxed. It was last year and it spanned approximately three days.

“Yeah, but no more than usual.”

“And how much is ‘usual’ to you?”

“I don’t know,” Asher shrugged. “I’m a bio-major and I’m working my way through college.” And my brother is a drug addict, my mother wants to be dead, and my father is more likely than not sleeping with a woman from work. So, managing that is always fun. Not to mention the fact that the one person I really want to see right now hasn’t talked to me in months. So, a great deal probably.

“And do you ever suffer from anxious thoughts, consistent worrying?”

“Not really. Just stress.” I don’t think about things. I just feel things. That was always the problem. That’s what causes half of my stress.

“I see,” the doctor nodded again. “So that leads us with four possibilities. Number one, the worst one, something comes up in the last test. Number two, it’s gastrointestinal. If that’s the case, all you have to do whenever you feel the pain is take a swig of an antacid. Number three, you have a condition called mitral valve prolapse. It’s not life-threatening. All it means is that one of the valves to your heart does not close properly, but there’s not much we can do for it, you’d just have to live with the occasional pain. The last one and the one that I think is probably most likely is the stress.” He looked at Asher as if hoping that Asher could confirm his diagnosis. As if he was going to be like, you guessed it. I climbed out of my bed, called my dumbass drunk as shit roommate home to come to the ER with me, drove myself over here in the middle of the night because I was feeling stressed and thought this would be the best way to receive validation.

“That would be a relief,” Asher remarked.

The doctor’s smile was back and he was nodding again. “I’m sure. I’ll be back in thirty five minutes with your test results, and as long as they’re all good, you’ll be in the clear to go home, and take him with you.”

The doctor gestured at Robin who now had his head leaned over the back of the chair, mouth hanging open.

“Looks like someone’s tired.”

“Yeah,” Asher was only able to manage a tight lipped smile. He was thinking about Georgia again.

She’d complain that he woke her up at two in the morning for nothing and the least he could have done was had a foot amputated or a small case of pneumonia or something that warranted her getting up and driving all over town for him. He would offer to let her sleep on his

couch so she didn't have to drive the ten minutes back to her apartment. She would—he didn't know what she would do. He just knew how it would end.

It would end with her coming over the next day to make sure that he was ok and asking if he needed anything. They would joke and things would be good for the day. The next day she hang out again and she would respond to all of his jokes and poke fun at him, and they would keep each other up until one in the morning before he finally told her to go to bed. Then on the third, or maybe even the fourth day, something would switch in her, and the jokes would become more forced. The texts would take longer to come back and instead of the typical Georgia paragraph, he'd only get a sentence. Then she would stop texting. She wouldn't hang out. Unless it was a group, and then she would talk to him, but only if someone else was too. She would pull away and fade into the background. She would be impossible to find and to make plans with.

So he hadn't called her and she wasn't there.

He called Robin because she hadn't talked to him in months. He knew she would have come if he had asked her. She would have dropped everything and sped him to the emergency room. She would have done all of those things, and when he used this one excuse and asked her to hold her hands, she would say yes and things would be the way he wanted them to be—the way she probably wanted them to be. But the hand holding would drive her away sooner, and he would just feel as if he had lost her again. For the third time. At least now when she found out from Theresa that he was in the hospital, she wouldn't feel as if she had to come over. She'd send some texts, and they could speed through the cycle, and maybe it wouldn't hurt as much. Maybe he could go back to being angry with her and hurt by her and the fact that she didn't seem to care about him until one of them needed someone to care.

He was in the hospital for about an hour more. Then he got to drive himself (and Robin) home.

Asher rolled through the blinking yellow light and something caught his eye on his porch. There was a person there. He could make out the form of a body underneath a large grey coat. Her head leaned against the back of his house. Auburn hair spilling out over the coat. He blinked, but turned his attention away as he pulled down the side street that led to his driveway. He was seeing things. He was so tired he was hallucinating. Asher pulled into his usual spot and shoved Robin once. "We're back," he grumbles. Robin yawned and pushed open his door, almost tumbling out of the car. Asher followed him into the house, closing up behind him. He gave a glance to the front door and then before he knew what he was doing, he unlocked it and stepped out onto the front porch.

She was still there. The coat rose and fell gently with each breath. Her lips were parted slightly and underneath her the edge of her coat her phone screen glowed.

He blinked again. She sighed and shifted slightly.

"Georgia," he whispered. "Georgia," he said her name in a normal voice. She breathed in sharply and opened her eyes.

"You're here," she said, sitting up. The coat fell off her.

"Yeah, I just got back."

"How are you? I mean—did they find anything wrong or is everything ok?"

His mind whirred. Had he texted her? Did they give him something and he completely blanked out.

"It's nothing serious."

"Asher," she looked at him her brows lightly knit together, her lips tugging down at the corners but not fully committing to a frown.

"Who told you that I had gone?"

"Teresa said she was worried something was wrong and when I got here, I saw the note on the door. I was going to go to the hospital but I walked here and I was out with Teresa, so I figured I'd just wait."

"You didn't have to."

She flinched, and stood up slowly taking a few steps backwards.

"Yeah, I know. I'm sorry. I just wanted to make sure everything was ok."

He didn't know what it was in him. He couldn't keep track of the strings and how tied together he was. He just knew that one of them—an important one—broke.

"Thanks. Good to know that I have to have a heart attack to get your attention."

"You had a heart attack?" Her voice came out like a whimper.

"That's not the point. The point is that you don't give two shits about me unless I'm dead or dying."

"It's not like that," she whispered. Her eyes were shining. She was probably exhausted.

"I'm sorry. I really am so sorry. I just wanted to make sure you were ok because I care about you."

He let out a humorless laugh. "Yeah, sure,"

"I do! Just—" a small chime sound and buzzing erupted from behind her as her phone skittered along the bench. She reached behind herself and silenced it. "Time to wake up," she said softly.

"Do you want a ride home?" Asher asked looking at her. Best to cut through the circular fight and skip to the end.

"No," Georgia said. "I'll walk. But I'm not done. I'm sorry I can't be what you want me to be to you. I just can't. I tried, we tried, and it's just not that way. But don't cut me out like this. I'm doing my best. I still care about you and I still want you in my life."

"Just on your terms."

"I'm working on that."

"Yeah, well it sucks you know. To be on the other side."

"I know and I'm sorry."

"Stop saying that."

"Why? Why should I? It doesn't seem to be going through, so I'm going to keep saying it until you get it. I'm sorry, ok? I wish I was better, but I'm not. Obviously, I'm only really good at hurting people. I mean how else could you explain the fact that I walked 40 minutes from my house to yours at 2:00 in the morning because I was worried about you and it still hurts you more than shows you that I care? Should I have walked out to the hospital? Would that have proven I was serious that I am more sorry than you could know because I \*suck\* at putting my thoughts and feelings into words. What can I do to make you be friends with me?"

"You can stop pulling shit like this and giving me hope!"

"Hope?"

"Do you see anyone else out here? Where's Teresa? She's probably asleep. You don't just do shit like this for 'friends'."

"I guess you don't have very good friends."

"No, you just can't tell the difference between friendship, flirting, and acting like we're dating."

She was silent as she stared at him and then turned to stare at the street.

"I don't want you to be mad at me anymore."

"I want you to stop pretending like we can be friends. We can't always get what we want, can we?"

"What can I do?"

"Nothing. You can do nothing."

"I can't do nothing."

"You—" his chest twinged and he stopped with a sharp intake of breath. Georgia took a step towards him and then paused.

"I can go,"

"Yeah," he agreed.

"Maybe we should talk about this more later."

"There's nothing left to say."

"Asher, I'm trying so hard," tears were falling down her face. "I'm trying and I just can't—" she broke off.

He sighed looking at her and then looking at his house.

"You free tomorrow?"

"I have a break at 11:15 'til 1."

"Let's meet in the Spoke. We can, I don't know, try figure something out."

These scenes overwhelmed me. Even when I tried to pick up my novel where I had left off, I always came back to writing about Georgia and Asher. They were all I could think about and as such all I could write about. Somewhere in my obsession with making sense of their relationship for myself, for the boy, for my friends, the lesson I needed to learn finally clicked.

## Chapter 5

### Catharsis

#### Lesson 7: We Write Who We Are

I had gone into the process of writing a novel expecting easy success. I thought I would let my writer-self take over and through the process of the writing my thesis, she would communicate all she had learned to my teacher-self. I thought I could section off my life from my writing. The thing is that writing is an expression of one's view on life, and as such it is intimately tied to the feelings, thoughts, values, and moods of the author. To try to keep my life from affecting my writing process was pure folly.

A writer has as much control over his or her story as a cartographer does over his or her map. I can choose how to depict things, but there is a deeper truth there that I must convey. Conveying the truth is by no means easy, though. You must dig to get to it. I remained ignorant of this fact for much of the process. I genuinely believed that once I found the right story to tell, writing would be easy and I could knock out the novel in a month or two. I was wrong.

Finding the right story was a large part of my problem. I kept thinking I would find it within my audience. I shaped a lot of my early ideas around what I thought would entertain people and make them think I was a fantastic writer and buy everything I put out for sale. This desire diminished after Anne Lamott's *Bird by Bird* and seeing that writing to the masses as Shakespeare did is no guarantee of quality or self-satisfaction. Not that writing to entertain is

wrong or never good, but it comes down to the simple fact that if there is no you in what you are doing, then you are not going to do it well.

This is a fact not constrained to writing, but it is apparent in teaching as well. There are teachers who have little to no passion for the material they are teaching. This could be a general classroom teacher who just really hates teaching *Catcher in the Rye*, a substitute who was bored to death by European history, or a student teacher who could never get a hold of fractions. In my experience, it was difficult to pay attention, care, or really learn any of the material they hated to teach, even if *I* liked it. Conversely, I have had teachers who were so excited about what they were teaching, so completely immersed in the subject, that it was infectious. It was easy to care and to be drawn in along with them—even if I *didn't* inherently like the subject.

When I began this adventure of writing a novel, there was no me in what I was doing. The first draft of my story was good, but the world and the characters were distant to me. In my second draft, I had crafted a character who I had invested a good part of myself in. Sure, she had a completely different life and a very different personality, but the more I began to write with her, the more I recognized some of my tendencies and issues and philosophies come to surface within her. I began to see flashes of me—strengths and weaknesses—within her, and yet, even so, the writing still wasn't coming. The story would not show itself or work itself out and writing became another thing to ignore on my to-do list. It took me a long time to realize that it was because life got in the way.

It is easy to blame life for falterings and failings, but to some extent, there is a lot of blame that can be rightly attributed life. Sometimes the things a person has to face—even if those things don't seem like they should be a huge deal—are completely overwhelming. Events take over every aspect of one's existence, or at the very least they touch it and affect it. As writing is

closely tied to one's being, events of this sort should affect the stories a writer chooses to tell. I had been trying to block my life out by writing my novel, when I should have been putting my life into my writing. It's something I now recognize because of the three instances where I stopped trying to force a story out of myself and instead took a pause to write about what was on my heart. I wrote outlines and snip bits about my family, my depression, and my heart break and in these I questioned who I was, who I want to be, and how I want the world to change to fit me. These are some of the most important questions in life that I want students to address.

From this dawning realization, I developed three rules that I will tell my students on the very first day of writing instruction. The first is quite simple: you must write what's on your heart first. This story may be an escape from life. It may be little more than a veiled diary entry. Whatever the case, it is important for students to address their life in a way that suits them before they start trying to write for others' purposes. That is when they fall into the trap of writing for an audience and take themselves out of the writing.

The second rule is harder: you must tell the truth. That said, the truth can sometimes be different from reality. This is an idea Tim O'Brien explores in his 1990 novel, *The Things They Carried*. In it, O'Brien raises the question as to how we define truth: is it the facts of an event or the feelings caused by an event? I tell stories that evoke the feelings' truth, and so most of my fiction is still true even if it never actually happened. Students are free to pick which definition resonates with them, but when a story lacks truth, it is apparent; it becomes a halfhearted argument that students don't believe in.

The third rule is simultaneously the hardest and the easiest: writing should be hard even when you have found the write story. Each of my writings about life's obstacles was painfully, *painfully* true. They each had me in every line. Yet they were still hard to sit down and write

because it is hard to put feelings into words. It is hard to craft the truth in a way that other people will understand. It is hard to put myself out there because when people read what I write, they read me.

These are the rules of writing that I have either been ignorant of or ignoring for years. I cannot knowingly allow my students make my mistakes. I cannot fail to empathize with my students as they make my mistakes anyway and come to hold these rules as their own.

## **Lesson 8: Teacher as Writer**

I assumed at the outset of this project that I would become a better teacher. I did not think I had much to learn in writing, and I did not see my life coming into play at all. From the process, it has become infinitely clear that one does not learn a lesson and confine it to one specific area of one's life. That is, what I learn affects who I am in all of my different concepts. Learning that I had to seek outside help for my mental health opened me up to seek outside help for my stories. My life's experiences help me to sympathize with students who have a family member with cancer, depression and anxiety, or a broken heart. This relates back to Parker Palmer's argument within his 2007 book, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life*, "we teach who we are" because "teaching, like any truly human activity, emerges from one's inwardness, for better or worse" (p. 1-2).

If I teach who I am, then I must be self-aware and reflective so that I know exactly what I am teaching my students. Not only that, but the fact that I teach who I am coupled with the fact that learning permeates all of a students' identities gives me a newfound responsibility. What I am teaching transcends how to write an essay or a student's attitude towards reading. It shapes

how students view their role within education. I am shaping how they think and behave and interact with the world. By sharing with students how writing gave me the tools I needed to make sense of life's most difficult challenges, I am providing them with a lifeline. As such, it is imperative to give students the opportunities to talk about things happening in their life. According to Pennebaker (1997) "writing about upsetting experiences although painful in the days of writing, produces long-term improvements in mood and indicators as of well-being compared with writing about control topics" (p. 162). This finding has heavy implications for written assignments. Rather than assuming a student can work on a school essay because they are intellectually capable, a teacher must look at what is happening in that student's life and provide them with the opportunity to write about it, even if it is not entirely on topic. That said, just because a student is writing about their painful experiences does not mean that it won't relate to class topics. Indeed, teachers should be incorporating relevant writing assignments that connect students' identities outside of school with their identity as a student. Writing instruction should teach students what I learned through my thesis, that writing is more than communicating with people who are not us. Writing is communicating to the people inside of us: the learner, the writer, the daughter, the lover, and the friend.

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### EDUCATION

**Schreyer Honors College**, University Park, Pennsylvania

Expected Graduation

*College of Education, College of the Liberal Arts*

MAY 2016

Bachelor of Science in Secondary Education, English and Communication

Bachelor of Arts in English

Pending Certification in English Language Arts, grades 7 - 12

- Composed a thesis paper investigating the affects of being a writer on teaching writing with specific attention to the relationship between writing and emotional distress.

### RELATED EXPERIENCE

**Murrays Bay Intermediate School**, Auckland, New Zealand

NOV 2015 – DEC 2015

*International Student Teacher*

*Taught language features and English for four weeks to an eighth grade class.*

- Employed the principles of personalized learning to design and complete week long unit on the play *Romeo and Juliet* by William Shakespeare.
- Integrated personal devices (iPad, laptop, cell phones) into instruction through through the creation of interactive multimedia presentations.

**Abington Senior High School**, Abington, Pennsylvania

SEPT 2015 – NOV 2015

*Student Teacher*

*Taught American Literature for ten weeks to tenth graders at the honors and college prep level in addition to a Keystone test preparation course.*

- Applied differentiation and the Understanding by Design framework design to craft, implement, and assess a unit on the novel *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson.
- Collaborated with Special Education professionals to develop and assess IEP classroom accommodations.
- Regularly emailed parents to establish plans to meet student needs and better academic performance.
- Utilized a Promethean Board and laptop cart to create multimedia lessons and foster digital collaboration.

**Bellefonte Area High School**, Bellefonte, Pennsylvania

FEB 2015 – MAR 2015

*Student Teacher*

*Taught English for six weeks to ninth graders at the college prep level in addition to a creative writing elective.*

- Developed lessons within a framework curriculum, modifying them to students' needs and interests.
- Guided students through the steps of a research project to give historical context to *To Kill a Mockingbird*.
- Revised unit and lesson plans to accommodated weather related schedule changes.

**Krause Innovation Studio**, University Park, Pennsylvania

AUG 2013 – PRESENT

*Head Innovation Consultant and Research Assistant*

- Assisted guests with questions and concerns regarding the use of the workspace and the technology.
- Designed new scheduling and payroll procedures, reducing time spent on the tasks by 70%.
- Composed literature reviews on research concerning learning spaces and collaboration theories as well as the integration of iPads within the classroom.
- Conducted and transcribed interviews about guests' experiences working in different environments.
- Wrote and edited official blog posts on topics related to learning spaces, digital records of practice, and digital scholarship.
- Interviewed and trained new staff members in Studio policy and procedure, as well as technology use.

## **LEADERSHIP**

**Reformed University Fellowship (RUF)**, University Park, Pennsylvania

MAY 2013 – PRESENT

*Ministry Team Member*

- Coordinated a series of events to welcome incoming freshmen and connect them to RUF and Penn State such as a picnic, various dinners, field games, and a hike.
- Presented information about RUF at Involvement Fairs to invite students to join the organization.
- Served as a mentor to other students, regularly meeting individuals to check in on mental and spiritual health.
- Attended bi-weekly meetings to reflect on how RUF can better serve its members and the community of Penn State, then constructed plans to do so.

**RUF for THON**, University Park, Pennsylvania

AUG 2013 – MAY 2014

*Family Relations Chair*

- Raised over \$10,000 in conjunction with other organization members to benefit the IFC/Panhellenic Dance Marathon (THON) and the Four Diamonds Fund which provides emotional and financial support to families of children with pediatric cancer.
- Maintained bi-weekly contact with our THON family through various media to stay updated with their needs and activities and to inform them of RUF's activities.
- Organized the assembly of care packages to send to our THON family and arranged visits between the family and organization members.

**Keep Calm and Be a Kid**, University Park, Pennsylvania

AUG 2012 – DEC 2012

*Co-Founder and Organizer*

- Developed and produced a special event to reduce the stress in college students by educating them about its harmful effects and providing them with stress-reducing techniques that can be learned from childhood.
- Collaborated with a local business, elementary school, and campus organization to plan activities
- Established a budget and coordinated several fundraisers (selling T-Shirts and working with local restaurants) to cover expenses, surpassing our goal of \$400 by close to \$100