

SOLACE IN THE WRITTEN WORD

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Honorable Mention, Essay

WHEN I WAS ELEVEN YEARS OLD, my parents moved our small family, which consisted of my parents, my little sister Joanna, me and our little zoo of pets, from our home in Queens, New York, across the country to Scottsdale, Arizona. Before we left Bayside, my babysitter's mom, Claire Curtain, gave me the C.S. Lewis collection, *The Chronicles of Narnia* as a going away gift. At the time, the only title I recognized was *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. I had seen the animated story on television one time, and I'm not sure why, but I thought it was pretty cool. Little did I know it, but Ms. Curtain gave me a key to sanctuary. Those seven books would become my main source for solace in the upcoming chapter of my life.

My first year living in Arizona is a struggle for me to describe, even now, twenty years later, when I go back in my mind and search for the accurate words, all I can say is that it was disappointing and lonely. First of all, I was starting seventh grade in a school where I didn't know another soul. I also had the thick Queens accent that was quite a novelty to the other seventh graders. I'll never forget the embarrassment and frustration of asking a teacher, as I was standing in front of a full class, if his name was Mr. Hall. I felt like I was in a bad dream with thirty-one faces staring and smirking at me like I was a sideshow escapee. What came out of my mouth must have sounded like, "Ah yoo Mista Hwall?"

Mr. Hall couldn't understand me either, "Excuse me?"

"Is dis Mista Hwall's klass?"

"What?"

"Ah yoo Mista Hwall? Is dis Mista Hwall's klass?" I don't know how I could have sounded any clearer.

He shooed me off to the library where someone else could deal with me. Once my accent became public knowledge I became a source of entertainment, but not the cool kind. All anyone seemed to want to hear from me were the words, "kwaduh," "kwofee" and hot "dawg."

Not only did I sound different but I looked different too. After six years in Catholic school, where the only clothing options were blue blouse with plaid jumper or white blouse with plaid jumper, it was my first time attending public school, which meant no uniforms and new reasons to be the odd one out. Everyday I felt like the kid on *Sesame Street* who's "doin' their own thing," but in this case different was not good. I walked around with my head down and my long stringy brown hair hanging in front of my face to try to hide myself from the judging eyes of other kids. My book bag was some turquoise duffle bag my dad got from work, back when we lived in New York, so it stood out among the homogenously hip back packs of the other middle schoolers. Instead of jeans, I wore legging type pants that became cut-offs once the holes in the knees got big. These were matched with random tops.

Some of them were sort of grown up things that, “fell off the back of the truck” at dad’s work in a Fashion Center building in New York. My other option was one of dad’s extra large t-shirts that advertised *Mister Boston’s Rum* or said something that was customized for the inside jokes that only my family and friends in Bayside would understand. For instance, I used to wear a cobalt blue shirt of his that had a black panther on the back, it read, “When called by a panther don’t anther.” This was because my dad was known for doing things like standing on tables and reciting poetry, like this one from Ogden Nash, in public places, such as *Dairy Queen*.

Sounding weird, looking weird, and being shy made it difficult for me to make friends. And the few friends I eventually made would not be invited over to my house; I didn’t even like being there. At 7207 North 79th Place, there was the creepy living room where within the first few weeks we were in Arizona, Chris, a close friend to my family and mom’s drinking buddy, died of a drug overdose. We thought he was passed out from partying. After a full day and night of laying face down on the living room floor, my father went to shake him awake and felt how stiff and cold he was. The house was also filled with stench of alcoholism that was leaking out of the gloomy cavity of my mother’s bedroom where she would vomit into towels and then hide them, like dirty little secrets, under the bed and in her nightstand. The walls and doors were branded with holes from the fights and flights that occurred between my drunken mother and my sister and me. There was a chunk taken out of a corner of the wall from a time she tried to swat me with a metal crutch. My bedroom door took a hit from a flying backgammon game my mother chucked at me once when she was after me. I closed that door just in time to see the white and brown dice shoot under the door and roll to my feet. And my sister’s room had a big circle bashed into the drywall from the time my mother fell and hit her head after a push I gave her in an attempt to protect my little sister.

Over the course of a few months, our bird flew away and one of the dogs ran away, after it killed the rabbit that was also trying to escape. Even the animals that came with us knew it was a bad place.

I didn’t feel safe in that house. My father was out of town sometimes, tying up loose ends in New York, so sometimes it was just Joanna and me against this frightening monster that smelled, mumbled, and stumbled more like a bum on the street than the beautiful, sassy, and classy woman that I only knew from fleeting memories and faded photographs. She didn’t even call me by my name. I discovered this when my sister was leaving to catch the school bus one morning. Joanna found her lurking in the hallway, in the shadow of an open closet door with a broom in her hands, her stance in strike position. When Joanna asked her what she doing, she answered in her raspy slur, “I’m lookin’ for Scarecrow.”

I tried to stay out of the house or at least out of her sight as much as possible. So when I wasn’t riding my bike and exploring the wash next to our neighborhood, I was in my room, usually reading.

That’s when I learned about escaping into a story. I found refuge in reading about Narnia, its creatures, its creation, and the adventures of those that

lived there. I learned lessons about selfishness and gluttony from Edmund and his Turkish delight issue. Lucy taught me about trust and loyalty with her faith and love for Aslan. I wasn't the focus of ridicule or anger, I fit right in with my friends, Lucy, Edmund, Prince Caspian and the talking animals on the Dawn Treader, adventuring the ocean and discovering new lands and encountering fantastic things like a streams that turns anything into gold and books with spells for every possibility.

When Clair Curtain gave me those books, was she aware that she was throwing me a lifeline? Getting lost in those seven books pushed out of my mind the dread and anxieties I had about fitting in at school. More importantly, it was a break from the bizarre unpredictable world that came from living with a raging alcoholic mother about to hit bottom.

