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### *Bullying Awareness Feature*

#### Perspectives

by Nicole M. Bouchard, Editor-in-Chief

I knew this would happen, despite all I planned to do so that it wouldn't. I knew I'd be here late at night on the eve of the new issue's publication, struggling for the words that I've never been able to write. This is, however, why I need to write this. To help shift perspectives and perceptions so that others can come to understand the nature of what this is really about and what it entails.

I've always wanted to be able to guide, comfort and help others through my experiences and in fact, I've used those experiences in a positive sense to shape many of my adult attributes and to drive accomplishments. The point is, there's a way to get to the other side and every child going through this must know that.

So—this is what this article is and what it isn't. Consider it a disclaimer. I certainly do not claim to be an authority on this subject because everyone's story is different, though they do share some similarities. I am not writing this to point fingers and admonish. It is my sincere hope that everyone—that includes current and former “bullies” of all ages—will get something out of this and really think before they act. This may include examples I've experienced or observed but it is not a personal account of my history; rather, it is a humble attempt to help shed light upon and aim to put right what is so very wrong, going on far too much in our schools today.

To begin, I feel that we have to get our definitions straight. “Bullying” is a term I hate because in many cases, it stands for something so much more severe, involving emotional, psychological and sometimes physical abuse. The connotations with this term or the equally loathsome phrase “getting picked on” just don’t quite do justice to the situations. That isn’t to say that these terms can’t apply to some instances; there are those situations that are minor that can be easily dealt with. What I’m talking about goes far deeper, often lasts for years and leaves the marks that intense trauma can. My case was severe compared to some yet I know that so many are far, far worse and we need to start by acknowledging what this really means.

This is a pervasive, serious problem with serious consequences. In the past few years, headlines about just what is happening as a result of the advent of cyber-bullying are nothing short of horrific. The hope is for legislation and effective measures to be taken to protect juveniles. You read about a promising kid with a sweet face and think, *My God, what led them to feel they couldn’t go on?* The old saying “Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me” has to be one of the most infamous falsehoods of the ages. Writers know how powerful words are; words can form a country, inspire war, shape a religion, fuel a rebellion, influence the daily lives of people over centuries. Words can be constructive or destructive, healing or dangerous but *never* to be underestimated. Any history book can assure you of that.

Once we have a clearer understanding of the ‘what’, we automatically want to examine the ‘why’. Again, I don’t have all the answers, so I’m simply speaking from a mix of personal experiences and observations of others’ experiences. People often assume that the reason for the bullying has something to do with the child being bullied, some explanation of their being a target. Not quite. It has much more to do with the aggressor. It is the up close and personal reason why they feel they *need* to behave this way—and they do perceive it as a need. They take certain influences, insecurities or issues and project them onto another child.

Why that child? It could be because that child has a trait the aggressor wants but doesn’t see in themselves. When the aggressor could be focusing on their own strengths and talents, they sometimes will be compelled to try and stifle/destroy/hurt/shame a person that has something they think they lack or don’t possess. It could be because the child is different from them (whether through nationality, background, religion, interests, etc...) and they have learned intolerance/ignorance that causes them to fear

differences and thus they feel they must attack or contain that which they don't understand. Most children don't know of or care about such things in the sandbox; these fears and prejudices are typically learned, taught or encouraged and the sources vary. It could be the old domino effect where a few children have a dispute and suddenly, the gang mentality sets in and the grudges of one or two become the motivation of a whole group to stamp out a certain individual with aggressive words and/or actions. There could be adult conflicts, competition and the use of children as tools pitted against one another for adult agendas. There are probably countless other reasons, a number of which entail the aggressor feeling better by putting someone else they secretly fear/envy down, but at the end of the day, none really matter enough to justify the behavior.

The thing about 'bullying' is that it really is like a plague. No matter the reason it started, it spreads. Kids often take what they think is the easy route and join in because 1) they see others doing it and that seems good enough (I was actually told that ridiculous one once) 2) they don't want to be the focus of it so they'd rather be in the favored majority 3) they have their own personal motivations that make them feel better to see the targeted child suffer 4) they've been bribed, paid (yes, this really happens) or threatened or 5) they just catch the wave that has gathered momentum like a tsunami and think it will secure their place in the social hierarchy.

The irony is that while some kids feel the wave is inevitable and choose to join in or do nothing, they actually have the power to turn the tide and make the negative majority the minority. Choose to do something. Examine your motives. You probably have a much truer friend in the targeted child rather the aggressor using you who could (and most often does) turn at any moment. No one really wants to be a minion. Be a leader instead. Be brave. The 'cool' thing is to be strong and decent. Take a look at someone you admire (a celebrity, historical figure, etc...); what would they do? Take a good close look at what's happening and ask yourself who you want to be. I will never regret being someone who stood up for other people. When I had a large circle of friends and was enjoying my high school years, I hated seeing anyone excluded. When I was going through the most difficult years of my life, prior to high school, I still reached out to others even though I was already being targeted and ran the risk of making it worse.

Next, we need to examine the roles people play. The focus is on the adults because their influence is typically the strongest in these situations for better or for worse. I was incredibly lucky to have parents that didn't

dismiss what I went through but instead, loved, empowered and supported me through it. Parents, you can't do any better for your child than to be there for them and acknowledge what's going on. Get them to share, express and talk about the situation. Some children feel guilty or ashamed to discuss what's going on as though they're 'bad' for 'telling'; it's a strange psychological perception transferred to them by their aggressors that they are the problem and it's wrong for them to "complain". The reality couldn't be farther from the truth and silence helps no one and nothing. Your role is pivotal for the well-being of your child. Make it clear that you support them and will help them get through this. They need to know they're not alone.

Regarding the parents of the aggressors, if you can do something to turn the situation around for the better, take action and talk to your child, examine why they feel the need to do what they're doing, educate them about the consequences and firmly, lovingly enforce a no-tolerance policy. Be aware. If you can't, won't or don't want to insert a positive influence, stay out of the kids' social dynamics and don't insert a negative one.

Teachers and school administrators, please know what you can do on such a large scale to control this problem. I will never forget an English teacher who knew what was happening and would nurture my mind and spirit with sophisticated books (designing lessons for me that matched my adult reading level), kind, encouraging words and on truly terrible days, Reese's Peanut Butter Cups discretely hidden in my desk. On the flip side, I can't forget a gym class where the bullying crossed the line into the physical realm and my arm was badly injured. The teacher responsible for the classes that day was not mine and happened to favor the notorious female aggressor, known for a vicious temper and often suspended. The male teacher screamed continuously at me in front of the classes, threatening what trouble I'd be in if I dared to go to the nurse. I'd never felt that kind of physical pain and despite how the teacher meant to terrify me, I clutched my arm and made it up that hill. When I returned to school the next day after the doctor's, determined not to let anyone of them think they'd scared me, he saw me in the hallway, arm in a sling. "That from yesterday?" I answered with a firm "yes" and glared back at him—all 99 pounds of me. He avoided my eyes, nodded, tried to smirk, grunted and walked away. The vice principal, however, nobly sprang into action and took the incident very seriously.

I've seen great things from teachers and school administrators and awful things. I won't include years of stories here that unfortunately in my case,

weigh heavily to the negative side. What I will say, is that schools can do a lot to be better equipped for these situations and we need strong, effective programs. I've read of schools that truly care and are taking measures. For some teachers, it's instinctive, but for others, there should be training programs to educate them on what to look for and how to respond. I recall a class where a new student from a foreign country was being harassed and every time he would try to defend himself, the other kids would fall silent so the teacher would only hear him. Unaware of what was transpiring, she scolded him numerous times, her anger rising, as the kids doing the harassing kept being amused. I waited with my friends after class and took the teacher aside. I told her that I knew she was at the front and couldn't see what was going on but that as a student in the back, I could. Once she understood, she said that she felt awful and thanked me for making her aware so that she could handle the situation next time. Many teachers have good intentions and it's helpful to them to point out what they might not otherwise be able to notice.

However, and I'm almost afraid to say it because I can just imagine some of the heated reactions it will cause, but for the sake of parents and children going through this, yes, sometimes some teachers/administrators will actively be a part of the bullying because they're either adult bullies themselves or they want to win a popularity contest with the kids doing the bullying. It can happen and it does, yet the opposite exists of heroic teachers and administrators as well. The point of being aware that both occur is to know that all problems might not be solved by going to teachers/administrators about them, contrary to what most sites and articles advise. Time, energy and heartache can be saved by carefully choosing who you go to for help.

The most important thing to contemplate is how to cope. And that brings me to where I'll directly address the children going through this. Saying I don't understand this kind of cruelty, wishing it didn't exist, is about as useful as saying all I want for Christmas is world peace. The fact is, these things do happen. They don't have to and the day people learn that, the day the simple fact that hate has no purpose is stamped on foreheads, we will have world peace. But 'til then, I can only offer what seem like the most basic pieces of advice for surviving bullying. I know they don't seem like brilliant, magical tools, but they are hard-won, I guarantee you. The first thing I want to tell you is that it *will* stop. All the people that have tried to keep you down, stamp out your light and punish you every day for their

own issues, are actually shaping you into what they fear most: the strongest version of all you can be. You will grow up and make a life that you want. The second thing I want to tell you is that so many amazing people went through this too; learning that favorite actors, actresses, musicians, world leaders suffered through it was immensely helpful to me. Feel great about yourself because you're in wonderful company. Never put that head of yours down.

Third, find something you love. I wanted to write since I was four-years-old, but I really found my stride at twelve, when things were most difficult in school. I actually ended up finding writing such a powerful outlet that I wrote a paper about what went on that year to free the voice that they'd tried to stifle—I wasn't about to spare details and there was immense strength in the pen. I got a shoebox full of letters as a result of that paper; it didn't erase the year but I'd stumbled upon a medium that would play a huge role in my life. Finding something you love is a way to not only escape, but to channel/acknowledge/validate every emotion you're feeling and to heighten confidence. Discovering more of who you are insulates you from the illusions your detractors would have you believe. If you're not certain of what you love, take up new activities/interests outside of school. You may find kindred spirits and you'll be learning more about what inspires you.

Fourth, find comfort. Be good to yourself and try to surround yourself with people who validate you. Go to the places you enjoy, listen to your favorite music, indulge in simple pleasures and try to make what aspects of your life you control as relaxing and fulfilling as possible.

Finally, know that what you're experiencing is not your truth. It's a very limited reality and has little to do with you. I remember going on a vacation in eighth grade to the Caribbean. I realized that in the outside world, the real world, most people were nothing like them. Every awful thing said to make me believe I was less than what I was wasn't true in the least. I was seen the way I wanted to be seen. I met wonderful people. It was as though once my eyes were opened to the truth, they couldn't be closed again. I returned to school completely detached from what was going on. They couldn't reach me anymore because their carefully constructed illusion had been shattered. I walked with my head held higher, a radiance that I understandably hadn't had in some time. Paths were cleared as they stared open-mouthed, wondering what had changed. The threats, the aggression were still there but weakened somehow. I was focused so clearly on the

future and I knew that the hell I'd been living in those halls wouldn't have any bearing on my life. I was certain.

In a year's time and another place, life was very different. I swore to myself that I would make things as I wanted them, I couldn't have been more determined and I ended up having a wonderful freshman year; but I credit that vacation as being the crack in the ice. It helped me remember who I'd always been—outgoing, highly social, confidant and nurturing but assertive when necessary. I'd never minded being the one to lead group projects, give speeches, be on stage or be the one to speak on behalf of the students to a teacher about an issue we had. The warmth of the spotlight always felt more comfortable for me and I knew I'd never allow myself to be pushed into the shadows again.

Never, ever forget who you are and for yourself, take these experiences and transform them; keep the power in your capable hands.

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### **Trying to Understand**

by Cheryl Sommese

My trembling hands awkwardly  
slip on the A-lined coat

“What will this day bring?” I wonder.  
Will they again seek me out in the hall and mock everything  
I care about?  
Chase me down after school and beat me bloody like they  
did to Angela?  
Her friend held down by two other girls so she was forced to watch,  
helpless.  
Flip over my food tray in the lunch room and force me to scrounge about  
the floor  
as they did to Joe?

Angela, Joe, and I are all so unlike,  
why us?  
I'm known to be kind-hearted and I love tailored clothes,  
Angela is beautiful and loves historical novels,  
and Joe is very smart and loves shooting hoops.

Is there a pattern to the kids you target?  
A prototype for the ones you feel you have  
to destroy?  
Is it insecurity, ignorance or  
something as petty as jealousy?  
Do you realize the scars you inflict  
never completely go away?  
Your actions even cause some kids to grab leashes or ropes,  
attach it to their still-tender necks,  
and remove the supportive bottom so  
fear, angst, and pain  
can forever cease.

A girl in the next town resorted to this and almost everyone blamed her  
instead of you,  
but more than her life ended.  
Her sister's grades plummeted,  
her Mom and Dad split,  
and now amber-colored bottles at the corner store  
seem to be the only thing that brings any of them  
comfort.

You say I'm different and that validates  
your behavior?  
Well,  
I don't see myself as different.  
But what if I am different?  
Why should differentness justify  
your actions?  
Jeannie Snow, with her black nails and pink hair, seems different to me,  
but I would never want to hurt her.

Perhaps you should know when you first chose to torment me  
my parents said I should be tougher.  
When your conduct continued despite my tougher attempts,  
they became alarmed.  
They talked to school officials,  
but as you might recall,  
only minor measures were taken.  
Band-aids cover wounds but cannot heal them  
if an active infection exists.



So, before long,  
 my parents began trembling.  
 Salty liquid wanders down my cheeks when I see them tremble,  
 so I don't tell them much  
 anymore.

Flowers lean into the sun on a glorious day—I want to lean into the sun.  
 I want the sun to lean into happiness.  
 I want happiness to overcome despair.  
 I want to understand why you do the things you do.  
 I want to protect you.  
 I want to expose you.  
 I want to leave you...alone.  
 I want you to leave me alone.  
 Please, leave me alone—  
 I used to love life and hope to love it again.

Bio- Cheryl Sommese is a freelance writer specializing in ghost blogs, newsletter pieces, and multi-topic articles. Her creative endeavors include short stories, essays, and poetry. Several of her literary works have been included in print periodicals and online publications. She considers poetry to be a particular passion and opened for the emerging poet, Muad Saleh, in two spoken word events in Manchester, NH, and New York City. She has a BA in Communications and an MA in Liberal Studies with a focus on political studies and writing from the University of New Hampshire. Ms. Sommese lives in Londonderry, NH, with her husband and two dogs.

### **Sandbox**

by Peter Franklin

She hates him,  
 I mean, I really think she does...  
 The way he kinda walks around, one foot in front of  
 The other, like he knows where he is going.  
 How arrogant of him.

She hates him,  
 Just the way he seems to smile and have a word with Everyone,  
 None too tall...too short...too comely...  
 For a "good morning" or "how are you?"  
 Can't he just mind his own business?

Does he think he's the ambassador to the world?  
How disgusting.

She hates him,  
How he made himself at home in the sandbox...and she didn't  
Even invite him in to play.  
Oh, how crowded and out of space she feels...little room for her to  
Stretch her legs and build sand castles.  
There has to be another sand box for him...  
Hopefully on the other side of the world.

She hates him,  
And makes sure to tell others...because she's sure they'll hate him too.  
After all, who wouldn't?  
Look at the way he walks. Look at the way he smiles.  
Look at the way he just kinda fits in. Look at the way he just is.  
Who does he think he is, anyway?

She hates him,  
Really right down to the bottom of her being...  
Though most of the time she really  
Doesn't know why...can't even put it into words.  
But she hates him, all right...turns her back on him, really has to force  
Herself to be pleasant...even to look his way.  
How repulsive he is!  
How can people even talk to him?

She hates him, at least she thinks she does...  
But she'd rather not think about that...  
For it's far easier just to hate him...to really loathe him...to tell  
Others to hate him...for looking deep inside is much too painful.  
The little girl inside really wants to make room in the sandbox...  
Really wants to embrace him...  
Really wants to show him how to build those sand castles...

But in the depths of her being, deep inside where it's hard  
To find the way, there is the fear of being Vulnerable.  
Of being discovered.  
That's a place she chooses not to go.  
Little does she know that he's vulnerable, too.

Bio- Peter Franklin teaches English and Creative Writing at Swampscott High School (Swampscott, MA). Peter received a BA in English & Creative Writing from the University of California, Davis, and a Juris Doctor degree from Concord Law School. Peter has been published in *The Write Place At The Write Time*, *The Camel Saloon*, and *A Long Story Short*. He has penned one anthology of poetry, *Quiet River*, available as a chapbook, and is working on a food-related collection of ekphrastic poetry, *Eating With Your Eyes*. Peter resides in Marblehead with his wife, two children, and Zorro, a dog of many talents.

### **The Bullfrog**

by Danny P. Barbare

The repugnant bullfrog is a bully  
 Who croaks and croaks  
 At the peaceful night  
 And never seems to learn  
 The world is much bigger  
 Than a pond,  
 Bigger than oneself.

Bio- Danny P. Barbare has been published locally, nationally, and abroad. His poetry has recently appeared in *Apiary*, *The Round*, *Askew*, *Picayune*, and many other online and print journals. He has been writing poetry for 32 years.

"I was bullied in high school to the point I didn't want to go to school. It also affected my grades. I have never been back to a reunion. It was such a bad time. Now I'm a poet that has been published internationally and hardly anything gets me down when it comes to writing. I believe teachers should be more attentive when certain students are being picked on. It should not be tolerated."

Poetic Skit by Rosemarie Wilson

*Please find below a two-part poetic skit that I have performed with teens against bullying entitled "No Shame in My Game, Bully" and the answer "You are The Gift--Let's Unwrap Your Talents." Here's how the skit works. I'd ask ten volunteers from the audience to act as bullies, each taunting me with the [header phrases in italics], then I would recite the positive affirmation countering their bullying. Once we made it to the end of the first portion of the skit, I'd continue to chime in with the "You are the Gift" portion of the piece, letting the audience know to capitalize on their*

*strengths and follow their dreams no matter what anyone says or how people may attempt to deter them. In May, 2013, I will continue to speak out against bullying with these pieces as a "Confidence Coach" for teens in Milwaukee, WI and in June at a plus-sized debutante ball in Detroit, Michigan.*

### **No Shame in My Game Bully**

*Whiner—*

I began to appreciate the high pitches of my voice  
when a deaf mute handed me a note requesting directions.  
What we take for granted may mean the world to others.

*You're so tall--*

Towering three inches above an average woman's height  
puts me that much closer to the sky in my reach for the stars.  
And?

*Rosie is a Nerd—*

Rosie is a Nerd--

Two buses from high school got me home around 4:30 p.m.  
then I'd get teased by friends for hitting the block so late.  
I learned they were home early because they had already dropped out of  
school.  
But see, I needed street, common and book sense.  
Nerd huh?  
Yeah, I'll be that!

*Virgin—*

That's Big V to you,  
which is much better than names my friends who lost their virginity before  
I did had been called.  
There was nothing wrong with waiting for the right person and the right  
time  
which wasn't when someone else told me—  
the time was right when I decided.  
Big V, out!

*What is she wearing?*

These aren't True Religion or Polo jeans but they're clean.

Gucci, Chanel, Louis, phooey!  
Pockets don't dictate going broke keeping up with the Jones' and the  
Combs'!

*Is that a bra or a harness—*  
Women pay thousands of dollars to upgrade their cups to the size I was  
blessed with at birth  
so my girls could be viewed as a savings account.  
Now what?

*Hey, Fatso—*  
Yeah, I'm chunky, but I'm funky.  
I love every one of my curves and so does he.  
Let's just call all of this real woman plus-size sexy.  
Next!

*Hammertime—*  
Closed-toe shoes in the summer were my friends  
until I saw a woman with no feet,  
dressed in a skirt,  
wheeling in a wheelchair.  
Cat got your tongue?

*Baldy—*  
Befriend a cancer survivor who lost her entire mane and tell me if you'll feel  
the same...  
Speak up, I can't hear you.

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**You Are the Gift—  
Let's Unwrap Your Talents**

Now that we've been improperly introduced,  
Hello.  
My name is Rosemarie Wilson, author of  
*One Single Rose . . . Poetry Blossomed from a Rose Core,*  
*One Single Rose Out of Darkness Into Light,*  
and

*Pearl's Plays.*

Here I stand,  
decades later,  
stomach full after swallowing pills of ridicule—  
recognized gifts taking advantage of faults viewed as deficiencies.  
Life ain't been no crystal stair.  
April showers formed rivers of tears inside my soul which receded with  
growth.  
Replaced by drought,  
naysayers failed to detain the unfolding of a destiny which continues to be  
written.  
At any given time, someone will make unkind or adversarial comments.  
Acceptance of societal innuendo may deter realization of dreams.  
Commentary against the spirit should not be given second thoughts.  
Sticks and stones—  
whatever, do you!  
May one man's harshness produce enough steam  
to fuel your little engine that could,  
because you can!  
We are winners.  
It is up to us to make the most of the genius we were born with.  
Dance like no one is watching,  
lift every voice and sing,  
let your pen speak on your behalf,  
channel Alek Wek or Tyson Beckford with every step—  
head high, shoulders back, caution to the wind...  
The confidence in your strides should never be taken as weakness.  
May negative energy push you forward into greatness.  
Remember, you are the gift and the choice is yours.  
Now is the time to unwrap your talents.

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Bio- Rosemarie Wilson a.k.a. One Single Rose is an award winning poet, writer, advice columnist, singer, actress, and a staunch advocate of integrity and fidelity. Since March 2009, the official release of her first self-published collection of poetry entitled *One Single Rose . . . Poetry Blossomed from a Rose Core*, she has been dubbed an inspirational poet.

Rosemarie is a Davenport University graduate, four time National Poetry Award (NPA) nominee, 2010 recipient of the NPA's New & Upcoming Poet and Poetry Author of the Year

awards, first place winner and honorable mention recipient of the Detroit Writers' Guild Paul Laurence Dunbar Poetry Contest, 2012 SAFE (Sisters Acquiring Financial Empowerment) Ambassador Award recipient and SVMixMedia.com's 2012 Performance Artist of the Year.

Rosemarie has performed nationally and internationally and her poems are included in various anthologies, publications and websites. Her second collection of poetry *One Single Rose Out of Darkness Into Light* was released on March 16, 2012. She is the host of the Spotlight at Manila Bay Café in Detroit, Michigan (open mic poetry every 1st and 3rd Friday). For more information on One Single Rose, please visit: <http://www.onesinglerose.com/>

### Color My Worlds: A Fable

by S. E. Toon

*This tale came out of a creative writing boot camp I taught for some young teens. During a cluster session they shot out words at random, then built the synapses that connected them. The undercurrent was alarming; bullying, Columbine, alienation, all bubbled underneath. Since I was teaching at primarily a dance school, I used that to write a story that addressed these concerns. After writing the story up for them in three days, I went to the school to read it.*

The surprise wasn't that Aunt Evvy passed away in her sleep the night before my birthday party; it was how her demise sucked the color out of my world. It wasn't because my ice cream cake and its ten candles were left in the downstairs freezer chest with chopped up cow parts and push pops while the adults made 'the arrangements'. It certainly wasn't because I wouldn't have Auntie E. to visit every big holiday; a solemn ritual where the family would fill her dusty apartment and suck on hard candies put out for decoration, not digestion. They were the taste and texture of mothballs. Not fun. It was because every one of her paintings of pigs and every age-old sweetie on display in her cracked antique bowls would no longer be bathed in the soft colors she had added to my life.

On the day of her funeral the world wore black. The sky cried, umbrellas hung over the attendees like sad balloons half-popped. Bowed heads stifled tears, silver droplets of mercury trickling down frowns.

I wore a dress of black lace that reached halfway down my gangly legs. My blouse was equally modest. A blossom made from gathered and pinned chiffon adorned a head band that held one mad streak of pink that cut across my formerly lackluster brown hair. It was the result of my fitful bout with bleach and Kool-Aid after I had heard the news that there would be no more lazy afternoons with Evvy. The stroke of rebellion was the only color left in my life.

People talk when a child gets lost in themselves. Different is bad. Different makes you stand out. Different gets your ass kicked.

The following Monday at Westwood Grade School couldn't end quicker especially with my new hairdo. It had already faded to cotton candy by morning. My mother offered to dye my whole head black like that wouldn't make me stand out. I told my mom, "Emily 'Strange' has black hair. How do you think she got her name?"

Life, like kids in my school, can be cruel. When you hit sixth grade you are well on your way towards learning this fact. You're past the basics of reading, writing and repetition by rote. Numbers can equal letters, straight lines aren't straight and sometimes things happen for no reason. Hello Chaos, not glad to meet you.

I hung my head low as I walked to school. Why bother looking ahead, putting on a show? I was in a horror movie, the type my folks forbade me to watch but with a little elemental code hacking, watched all the same. The taboo just made the meat cleavers and boogie men all the scarier. There were no sun symphonies in the morning sky, no blankets of flowers weaving a calico pattern in the fields alongside the road to school, no flush of life in the cheeks of the other children passing me by. They were all just a parade of cadavers-in-training, each one of their steps one step closer to a dirt nap.

As I walked towards the door to my classroom there was pushing, just a jostle of the books balanced in my arms. The Goodie-Goods, a cliché of cruelty that was sugar and spite and everything not-so-nice, bumped me as they passed me in the hallway. It was as if it was crowded, everyone elbow-to-elbow, though we were the only ones left shuffling down the near-empty gray tube to class. They pointed their fingers like pins at my hair then elbowed in a friendlier manner the only girl who didn't fit their mold, Tallulah, wide where the others were thin, quiet where they were brass. She nodded to their words and made a feeble attempt to mimic the hyena smile



of the other girls who had only befriended her as an insurance policy against anything different, any *thing* like me.

I was next on their bully list. For the first time I could remember, the morning class sped by and 'Ring!' it was recess. Unlike high school with its endless portals and shadows to hide in, grade school offers little shelter. Small classrooms, smaller restrooms and the recess field, monitored and gated. The kingdom was just the right size for the Goodie-Goods to rule.

My world had been reduced to a black and white newsreel, the kind they screened during our history lessons; a world faded, cracks and dust bugs flecking a world of death and destruction. The Goodies' world was still alive with color save for me. I was the gray smudge on their otherwise decorated Trapper-Keeper world. Tallulah was the eraser.

She cornered me between the swings and the monkey bars. I surrendered my Fruit Roll-Ups, they looked more like straps of tire than strips of fruit to me anyways. Without words she pocketed them then took another step towards me. I became lost in her shadow. I looked out across the playground where the chain link fence curled up away from the posts like an invitation. I ran. I was always good at that.

Tallulah was big but slow. I trotted away from her as the Goodies laughed at my retreat. The recess bell rang and all the other children stopped whatever drama that was playing out on the field. Except me. I kept my sights on the breach in the fence, increased my rhythmic gait and literally skipped school.

I needed to get away. The dance hall was my only ticket out. To many of my schoolmates the dance academy was all tutus and leg warmers, another school with another language to be learned, an alphabet of exercise, witness and repeat. They didn't get it. Whenever I was at a loss for words I let my feet, a swing of my hip, and my hands painting air, speak for me. That afternoon my body needed to go on a rant.

I draped black curtains over the opposing walls of mirror in the hall. Standing between them, your mirror image would reflect back again and again, smaller and smaller still; into infinity. The last thing I needed was a legion of drab clones critiquing my every expression.

My willowy frame stretched and bent in an imaginary wind. I hoofed to a distant rhythm drumming in the distance, a percussion building with each

beat of my heart. I danced in the dark unencumbered by the shadow world outside. Warmth built all around me, trickles of perspiration beaded my brow. With nothing in my world to see, I closed my eyes and lost myself in the fray.

The journey began. The sharp scent of cypress bit at my nostrils filling my lungs with a spice unknown in my hometown. I could taste the foreign dust billowing around my strumming legs as they quickened. I pranced harder cutting through the black until I accidently collided with one of the shrouded walls.

Except I didn't. My eyes opened, the curtain fell away and before me was a land that reached out forever, a world without endings, just a million new beginnings. It was torn straight from the pages of *National Geographic*. Foreign trees and shrubs dotted the pale blue haze of the horizon. My dance floor was parched, saffron yellow dirt, baked with cracks that would break apart slightly with each successive stomp of my hoof. I cut through the space unfettered. A drinking hole sped past me as I flew and I looked at its rippling surface as I passed. What I saw was an animal so a part of her world that the colors that comprised it swirled and danced alongside. Upon her head was a streak of red mane that licked the passing wind like a flame. I was in grace, face to face with my inner antelope.

I ran the desert without a care, no dead aunties, pop quizzes or bullies. My haunches propelled me high and forward, again and again, fast and agile. Every new taste, sight, and smell was a revelation. I was a lifetime away from my black and white world.

With the click of a switch and the agitated tapping of the dance instructor's toe against the wooden floor I was back. The colors leached away and the desert dissipated until all I could see was the repetition of a girl in gray sopping wet with sweat—that, and the instructor's head shaking.

As the last remnants of the exotic faded, I felt something shift in the shadows. The pool of black was still darkness from the color world, black-black. I could smell a gamey hunger beneath the last breaths of arid air. I squinted in the brightness of the incandescent bulbs as the instructor called my name. In the fading shadow I saw two eyes, brilliant blue and round. They were surrounded by a mane of white, a burst of fur in the darkness. Its teeth had a glint of hunger, almost a smile.

Then I was back. The instructor tried to reassure me that everything was going to be alright. That felt like the furthest thing from the truth. Things might get better, but they would never be the same. I already missed my jungle.

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The next day I planned on yet another act of defiance but my mother had hid the bleach and the last packet of fruit drink mix was already two quarts of fruit punch in the fridge. My streak was now just white with a rumor of red. All I wanted to do was run back to the hall and take a permanent recess but my mother had warned me that if I was tardy again I would have a week long time-out and that would include my dance lessons. She concluded with, "What has gotten into you, little lady?!"

If she only knew.

I didn't need to strike out against the world; someone else was prepared to do it for me. She was a new girl, from the *City*, a faraway place in my mind, almost as far as the *Jungle*. They certainly didn't raise rebels like her in these parts.

To use my mother's words, her hair was "a fright." It was pink, not satin ballet shoes pink; it was neon, not-from-this-world pink. It was so bright it became the solitary color in my world of monochrome. Pink Mohawk striped the top of her head; the rest of her hair, Santa-white and equally stark, was cropped short on the sides. The spikes of her hair, coaxed by product, defied gravity making her look like she had just stuck her finger in a light socket.

Her outfit was more suited for my world view. There was black on black for all the world to see. Everything was spikes and chrome as if she used a rivet gun as a Bedazzler. An encircled 'A' was spray painted upside down in the white of her torn t-shirt. Even the symbol for anarchy didn't get a fair shake with this girl. Buttons, all black and white, and too many safety pins to count, adorned her distressed leather jacket like some dystopian soldier's medals. There was nothing safe about Pink.

Her pale face looked out over the school yard. She was the only color in my world, her hair and matching lip gloss. It was like she was contemplating

not even going to school at all. I didn't blame her. She was too cool for school.

The Goodie-Goods didn't agree. Different was dangerous even if you did it with panache. Different stole the spotlight. Different got your makeup smeared by the likes of Tallulah.

I couldn't take my eyes off Pink. *What made her this way?* I thought. She wasn't born that way. The hair alone would make the delivery a fright. *What Auntie got to you?*

The more I tried to imagine what Pink and I had in common, the more I saw how different we really were. As Tallulah passed me by, totally ignoring me as yesterday's news, I felt every pore of my being fear for the new girl. *Flight! Flight! Flight!* I thought.

Unlike me, this girl was all about the fight. She just leaned up against the school's brick wall half-asleep with boredom as Tallulah got in her face. *Wow!* She was different *and* dangerous. She should have caution tape strewn in a three foot circumference around her.

I wanted to approach her, flip my strip of road-kill stained white hair casually to one side and say, "Hi...or whatever..." but I was about as cool as an egg frying on a sidewalk.

The bell rang for school to begin. Tallulah didn't budge. Pink could not; she had her cornered. I fought the urge to gallivant across the field to safety. Tallulah cracked her knuckles which was very un-Goodie-Good-like but the fact that she could was the very reason she was tolerated in the clique. Pink rolled her eyes and I could tell that she was contemplating spitting between the two of them.

I ran, but not away. A crowd started to gather. I shoed them. "Get to class, nothing to see here!" all the time darting to and fro. Pink shifted her weight from one hip to the other perhaps to try to get a rise out of her pig-tailed obstacle. It didn't.

One of the teachers called out to us. The others, Goodie-Goods included, had obediently filed inside. Tallulah, eyes locked on Pink called back, "Coming!"

I stopped next to Pink, like she needed any help, like, if she needed any help, I could give it. I guess I just wanted to belong to something. Plus, I could tell she also saw her life in shadows.

“We have to go...but...not necessarily back.” I whispered to her. Tallulah raised her hand, preparing to give Pink a good whack. “I have a place, better than this, better than wherever you came from I’d bet.” Tallulah looked at the two of us as if she was trying to figure out how to hit both of us with one punch. Pink kept her eyes forward, disregarding me like an annoying fly.

I thought I’d give honesty a shot. It’s not like she would think I was any dorkier than I always appeared. “I don’t know about you, but my world is gray, know what I mean?”

The teacher called again and Tallulah caved. There was no audience to see her dish out some whoop-ass, so what was the point? As she stepped back towards the school entrance Pink slung her courier bag over her shoulder. It seemed to be held together by only a collage of patches for bands I had never heard of.

“I’m in. Let’s book it,” she replied looking with disdain as Tallulah galumphed towards the teacher. “Everybody knows this is nowhere’, heard that in a song once.” With that we ran for the hole in the fence and I kissed next week’s lessons goodbye.

It was a perfect time to sneak into the dance academy. School was in session and there was no reason for any teachers to be around until the afternoon. The only adults skulking around would be the secretary who stayed in the office by the phone with her Sudoku and her secret stash of Girl Scout Thin Mints and the custodian who didn’t much give a damn about anything except his check on Fridays.

Pink looked at the lobby bathed in the pink without attitude. Everything was powder puff décor, silhouettes of dancers performing Swan Lake, and an overabundance of daisies.

“I am so outta here!” she protested.

“Just give it a moment!” I smiled, the first one this week.

I brought her, heels dragging, into the main practice hall where I proceeded to drape the black curtains again over the surrounding mirrors. I turned the

lights down to the faintest dim and looked at my unlikely friend. “Now dance! Dance like there is no one in the room. Dance like if there was someone in the room you wouldn’t give a damn.”

“Yeah, right! To what?”

“Just listen and move.” I swallowed my self-consciousness and started stretching my legs, then moved the undulations up, spinning my arms around my body in a twirl. I felt my heart pick up the pace and I began my gallop. Pink watched in defiance until I let out what must have sounded like a bray. She let out a laugh that I first thought was directed at me but a smile followed, revealing the whitest teeth I had even seen, even in the dark. The effect could have been due to the rest of her stark black and white attire, but boy was it white, white and sharp.

Her dance was more of a stomp, one clunky boot mashing down followed by the other. I began to smell the sunburnt earth. Pink started to pogo, bouncing up and down with both feet, her body lifting higher into the air with each jump. Her beat was a muscular melody that she pounded out with fists to the air adding a bit of a shimmy to her shake. I heard the chatter of foreign wings fly away as Pink let out another laugh, a noise no one had heard since...since never. Her next laugh was practically a roar.

With a kick of my hoof the curtain fell and our dark world was left behind. Before us was the expanse of the Serengeti. Color seeped back into every crevice of our consciousness. Pink looked over to see me in full antelope mode, running unburdened. The breeze built by speed traced lines in the short hairs of my hide. I looked over to see Pink still in mostly black and white but in brilliant effect. She was a Siberian Tiger; every strand of white fur was alive as her cobalt blue eyes burned with abandon.

I wasn’t even certain if antelope and tigers were natural enemies. Geographically they might not even exist in the same place. One thing was for sure, we were far from being natural. In that moment, the only thing that meant anything was that we were free and—well, happy.

Tigers eat meat; I knew that much and antelope were meat, albeit the fastest and most graceful happy meal on the planet. I understood that lions and tigers fed on the likes of me but I didn’t fear her in the slightest. It wasn’t just the color; it wasn’t just our mammal manifestations that made

this place so magical, it was the fearlessness of it all. We were in a world where death feared to tread.

Then the lights went on and when our eyes adjusted to the unnatural glare, the desert was swept away, leaving Pink and I standing in the middle of the open space sopping wet and gray in front of the academy's secretary. I guess she had run out of Thin Mints. Beside her was the grade school truancy officer. It was back to our black and white world, with a splash of pink.

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It had been close to two weeks since Auntie Evvy no longer walked this earth. My world had a pastel wash of color over its gray landscape. Color hadn't returned—not precisely. I promise you it was better than the constant gray but it lacked the vitality that made each of the former hues unique.

My rebellious streak had faded to tiger white and I acquired a new air of danger. I was escorted to the stone stairway that led into my school. At that point I was handed off to the school administrator who had me sit a good long while on a bench outside his office to 'Think about it.' I was then escorted to the door of my homeroom, my annoyed teacher waiting. My lockdown only enhanced my bad girl persona. The other classmates looked at me, wondering whatever happened to the mousey girl who always sat in front of the teacher. I entered the room naturally gravitating to the back. Even the Goodie-Goods were intrigued.

Pink's life was still pretty much black and white save for her fuchsia Mohawk. I could tell she at least saw that one exception, for she nurtured it daily, keeping its color a panic. Between classes we crossed paths, banging elbows. It wasn't a not-so-fine-art of bullying tactic; we had bonded. Pink smiled a mouthful of mischief, hungering for *Jungleland*. I licked my lips in agreement.

I kept walking with my appointed detention escort until I heard Pink stop two strides behind. I stopped as well, my other arm being tugged forward by the irritated adult. Pink turned back to me and these words passed her pinker-than-pink lips in a soft voice perhaps no one had ever heard before.

“Grampie Dodgeson...a month back...might as well had been my parents.” She named her ghost, ‘nuff said.

There were no Tallulah sightings that day or the next. Not unusual save for going through the motions day-to-day in a white-washed world.

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Tallulah returned on Monday of the following week, well, most of her anyways. From the outside, she was for all intents and purposes intact. Arms and legs rang in with the count of two, as did eyes and ears. One arm hung in a sling exaggerating the slouch she had on a good day. Her face was never particularly ugly. In fact, if she'd ever worn anything more than her constant scowl she could've competed for pretty status with the best of them. However, her chances now of winning any pageants in the near future were nil due to a series of staples creasing her left cheek. They struggled to prevent permanent scarring and were sore to even look at. Some things in life doctors can't heal and both Pink and I knew when we saw her shuffle into the lunch room that our former enemy would brandish deep, invisible scars no amount of healing or makeup could cover.

The word had come out; a car crash, a stranger soon a statistic, speed, a blind-sided sedan and a screech of tires. Her family survived, though Tallulah was the best of the lot. If anything could prompt her to smile, she couldn't due to the surgical steel's discipline. Lucky for her she wasn't in that habit. There was no danger in her pulling a stitch. There was no reason to when all she could see is black and white and the memory of dark pink pooled before a shattered headlight.

Pink and I had no reason to be members of the Tallulah-the-Terror Fan Club. The Goodie-Goods snubs and snickers hurt more than her bare fists and they were aimed her way. She actually never hit anyone, didn't have to; sometimes a threat is enough to bury you. In her defense, the whole time Tallulah bore down on you, she didn't seem to like it much.

Now she was the reminder of everything ugly in the world; bad news.

Tallulah was in the hell of lunchtime loneliness. The Goodies had revoked her clique membership and there was nobody in school who had any business buddying up with her; that is, except for Pink and I.



We were on a mercy mission. We approached her table in the back of the lunchroom. It was nestled beside a stack of other tables folded up in storage. This is where she had buried herself. There were two long rows of empty tables separating her from the rest of the school. She just stared down at her untouched plate of mystery meat and tater tots. We put our plates down on the table with a loud clack hoping to snap her out of her funk. It wasn't going to be that easy. The both of us knew how hard it was eating gray meat with matching veggies.

Tallulah winced at the sound of the trays meeting the table top. She looked up prepared for whatever comeuppance she felt due. Pink smiled her carnivore grin. I tried to mimic her but it was difficult when one mouth loved red meat and the other greens.

I juggled two vials in my right hand like loaded dice then placed them before her.

"It'll make you feel better," I said not expecting a reply.

"I don't do drugs, skunk-head."

"No, no, no..." I said, laughing because she got my animal all wrong. "It's the color you're missing."

Pink shook her mane, the spikes reaching for the sky in defiance. "Couldn't make you feel worse." She coaxed, then pointed to the popular table. "Look at them, not that they need a reason, but hell, give 'em one, Lulu!"

I opened each of the bottles and placed a swab beside each as if performing a ritual.

"Your choice, but it's the price of admission."

Tallulah looked up for the first time; no meanness, no fight, frankly, nothing at all living there. Silence. She looked at the vials. They stared back.

"To *what*?"

"To the mane event." Pink laughed, proud of her play on words.

"To the circus, all three rings!" I almost whinnied.

Lulu didn't go for streak or a Mohawk. It was a circle with two lines intersecting in the center. I assume she chose crosshairs because she had always felt like she was at the business end of a gun since the day she was born. After slowly and methodically drawing the pattern on one side of her pigtail-freed hair she grabbed the fruit juice vial and doused her head with it. The excess liquid not sucked up by the thirsty strands of stripped hair bled pink on her plate.

If Tallulah could have smiled, she would have.

"Don't hate me because I'm beautiful."

Pink and I laughed for her as we blotted her hair with our napkins. We stood up.

"What, now?" Tallulah whispered.

"News flash Lulu, it's a half day." Pink grinned.

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The dance hall lights dimmed. Mirrors masked.

"What now?" Lulu grumbled readying herself for a trap she felt she deserved.

"Whatever." I encouraged. "Listen and go with it."

"This is a trick, right?" Lulu asked as a warning, her good fist clenching.

"Best trick...ever!" replied Pink as she dropped her bag and started her stomp.

I began to prance around Lulu. "Free yourself!"

In a world without definition, where no one could see you make a fool out of yourself, Lulu moved one hand freely then the other with a wince; to the left, the right, again and again until her feet followed suit.

Cypress breath, swaying brush, wildlife chatter.

I kicked at the black curtain prompting the big reveal. Colors Lulu never saw before flooded her senses. She tasted the coolness of the blue, heard the yellow crackle of the earth and felt the brown of her fur.

That afternoon three children were gone from school, parents were called and punishments planned and on a plain in the wilds of forever an antelope played, a tiger fought back its hunger and a bear in all its grizzly glory danced a jig.

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A day or two had past. All three of us were suspended due to our total disregard for the rules. It seemed that an example needed to be made of us. There was no place for disregarding authority. We were content practicing our dance moves alone in our rooms. There would come another day.

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The town's local color bled dry, misfortune in newsprint. Everyone's fears and sorrows were reduced to black dots on white paper and jagged typeface. There was talk of gunfire, tears and mourning. We three girls slept in late that fateful day as death walked to school. We awoke to a world where all eyes lost sight of rainbows as all heads hung low.

Flowers, cards, candles and broken dreams were piled high before the entranceway to the school. We were told there would be people to talk to inside. 'To talk...about it.' The three of us knew that the meaning behind words would lack meaning just as the world's color lost its significance.

We met the rest of our classmates in the schoolyard, gathered hand in hand and prayed to whomever, whatever would allow such pain and would allow our colors to drain. Then for the first time Tallulah, now Lulu, spoke to the class.

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The town, still shaken to the core by the unfolding events was ill-prepared for the disappearance of the school children. The last eyewitness account of their whereabouts was by a postman on his route fulfilling his promise to deliver the mail, 'through sleet, hail and hellfire.' He spoke of a parade of children, five across and ten deep marching from the back end of the municipal playing field away from the school. Asked where they were

heading, he flipped through his stack of parcels and mused, "Nothing much up that way, just the DPW, and the dance school." When pressed if there was anything he could add, all he said was, "They were a sea of gray flowing down the street; gray and a hundred streaks of pink."

Bio- S. E. Toon's novel *Pirates of Lobster Cove* was published this past summer. She is also the manager of Ocean Village Bookstore in Marshfield, MA and a retail consultant. When not working or writing she performs creative writing seminars and part improvisation/part story-time events called *Story Circles*. The follow-up to *Pirates* should hit the shores next summer. Contact the author at [TalesbyToon.blogspot.com](http://TalesbyToon.blogspot.com)

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