

Erin Lennon
Writing 220 W14
Why I Write
January 21, 2014

Because I can't speak

September 7, 2005¹:

It is rainy and cloudy and the trees, still green a with pre-Labor Day bliss, are slumped with sighs of first-day-of-school anticipation. Mom's black mini van pulls up to the side door, late, as only a new girl could be. I am wearing normal kid clothes, the kind you wear to play outside with friends, not the jumper you wear to St. Agnes — I was one year away from making it to the plaid skirt before my parents decided to move across the Hudson (making us traitors to Papa) I'll have you know.

I climb three flights of sky blue stairs flanked by faded yellow walls because the older you are, the higher your classroom is. They're so wet that I am certain my rain boots announce my arrival far before I get to classroom 5A, fifth grade.

The boy next to me is Graham, like graham cracker, he tells me. He has big ears and a gap in his teeth, but he seems nice enough. Maybe I'll be the popular girl here.

My teacher is a man. His name is Mr. Diamante and he looks like the love child of Elvis Presley and a wolf. And he is a boy teacher. Mr. Diamante talks about books I've already read and I think public school won't be so hard. He has me introduce myself to he class and the boy to the left of me leans over and asks me why I talk funny, and I say it's my accent. His name is Curtis. He's black and has an afro and a yellow stain on his left front tooth. And he has a lisp, so I ask why he talks funny.

Clever, but probably not my smartest **move**.

September 20, 2005:

There are three girls in my class who are best friends: Sydney, Caroline and Stephanie. Sydney and Caroline are blonde so they're better friends with each other than Stephanie, but Sydney moved here just a few months before me from Virginia and she is definitely the leader, but Caroline is the prettiest.

I have them over after school, but I don't really want to because the house we are renting right now while we look for real houses is too small for four people.

¹ Author's note: Though the names and the plot of this journal are as real as memory will serve, the dates are irrevocably inaccurate. I was, in fact, a fifth-grader in 2005, but do not recall the exact date of my broken foot or first day of school. Quotes should also be considered as fiction, as memory can only provide so much of a voice.

erin lennon 1/21/14 2:25 PM

Comment [1]: Should I say more here? Or is it sufficient to set him up as my first "enemy" simply be my poor choice of words?

I refer to it as “my box.” People usually laugh.

We talk about Sam Stuhler (whose name is really pronounced Steeeeeler) and how me and Caroline and Sydney are going to ask him which of us three he wants to go on a date with. He’s probably pick Caroline because they both have long blond hair and blue eyes. But I secretly think he thinks I’m funnier.

Two blondes and two brunettes. I have friends.

October 17, 2005:

It was too cold to play outside for gym class so we played soccer in the cafeteria. I was bad at soccer in my town because my town was super good at soccer, but I don’t think soccer is so popular in Madison, New Jersey, so here I think I could make a good team.

I have the ball and it’s time for the new girl to show how Long Island does soccer. That is, until the pudgy kid in my class named Juan comes in for the interception and I fall down. My ankle hurts, badly, but probably not enough for the attention-seeking stunt I’m about to pull.

The class makes a circle around me, and Mrs. Longoose — the school nurse who tells you to take a poop when you have a headache and gives you an icepack for a tummy ache — runs into the room with a walky talky. I cry and say I can’t move my ankle (and apparently I’m a good actress because they put blankets around me to stop me from “going into shock”) and Curtis comes over and puts a jacket underneath my head, and I think, “I’m in.”

The nurse tells me they can’t contact my mom, so an ambulance is coming to get me and all the kids are shuffled back to class but wish me good luck. When the drivers come I tell them not to pick me up because I’m too heavy, but they tell me not to move.

I’m going to get to the hospital and they’re going to figure out I’m a big faker. Please let there be something, anything wrong.

So when the nurse comes in and she rubs my ankle (Pain? No, lady, but I’m not telling you that) and then my foot (OUCH) and she tells me I need X-rays, I think maybe this won’t be for not after all.

She comes back and tells me that I have a fractured foot. I’ll need crutches (score!) and that I need to go to the orthopedist.

December 10, 2005:

Sometimes the girls give me mean looks when I raise my hand, looks like the ones I got at St. Agnes because I answered a lot of questions. So now I don’t answer questions as much as I used to.

erin lennon 1/21/14 2:28 PM

Comment [2]: Do my interjections capture the younger voice? Half of me likes the train of thought but the other half thinks it’s obnoxious.

But I still get good grades because I write really good papers. One time we had to write about our dream bedroom and draw a picture to go with it. In my bedroom, the floor is the bed – you don't need to climb into one. The other was about an alien, but I didn't like that so much.

These looks seem meaner than the ones the kids at my old school gave me. They make me feel like I have a big lizard in my stomach and sometimes I can't breathe at all. I don't know why, but I feel like I did something wrong to make them not like me.

Maybe I won't have friends after all.

December 22, 2005:

I don't have a present.

Sydney, Stephanie and Caroline give each other Christmas socks and friendship necklaces. Stephanie gives me a candy cane, but runs back to a table across the room where the girls sit with Sam and Curtis. They look over and back away, hands over their mouth, squinty laughing wrinkles in their eyes.

It hurt more than any of the weeks of ignoring leading up to that day.

In the last month, our class finished reading *Daphne's Book*, a story about two unlikely friends that end up being closer than ever imagined, and started reading *Bridge to Terabithia*. I wish I had a friend like Jessie, because I always fancied myself a smart Tomboy anyways. But lately, I've just wanted to build a bridge, any bridge, and crawl into an imaginary world.

When we need partners for an activity, Stephanie always gets to be a three with Caroline and Sydney now. I get stuck with Francesca, who everyone calls Franny because she has a super nasally voice and fuzzy black hair above her lip. But no one is mean to her, and she is nice enough. But definitely not *cool*.

Curtis walks towards my desk in the back corner, Sam trailing behind him, his lips curled tight together as if frogs are about to jump out of the corners of his mouth. They hover over and for a second I think this might be it. Maybe Sam is coming to tell me he likes me and the other girls are jealous and he wants to hang out and go on a date and get married one day.

"You know they don't like you, right," Curtis says. He looks part nervous, sorry almost, then just amused.

"It's true," Sam nods — the only two words Sam had said to me in the last month.

You think I don't know that, I snap. I look at the clock. It's 3:04 and the bell rings at 3:15. That's just enough time to look busy, breathe deep.

Christmas break is like almost a month. Nothing to worry about. They'll forget it after Christmas. Just don't let them see you tear. Nine minutes.

Mom is late again. It's raining.

January 4, 2006:

They didn't forget.

January 14, 2006:

I still sit at a table with Sydney, Caroline and Stephanie but now I sit with girls from another class, a girl called Moo and another little blonde girl named Katie. They both play soccer too. I don't really say much but that's okay because they both have loud, snorty laughs that make the whole table giggle all the time.

It doesn't stop me from seeing the papers. First, they started below the table, being passed between Caroline and Sydney and then to other girls like Kristin and Nicole. I want to know what they're about but they probably have something to do with the KEL (Kill Erin Lennon) club or maybe they're a new song they wrote.

I get up to throw out my tray when the circle forms in the isle because I have a chance to move without anyone noticing and Katie comes over to me by the garbage can with a concerned look in her eyes.

"Do you know what those papers say," she says.

I pretend to know, but I can take a wild guess.

January 15, 2004:

Mom hears me sob into my pillow at night and she asks a lot of questions. This morning, though, I let her hear me cry because the idea of letting her know is now better than going to school with them.

It's 2:00 and I'm in my room reading the book we would normally be reading in school. Mom runs upstairs and says it's Katie on the phone. She looks like I did this morning, crying and embarrassed to be doing so.

Katie tells me that her mom called Principle Kennedy and that Sydney and Caroline and Stephanie are in big trouble and that I can come back to school because everything is going to be okay. I get nervous for Katie because she will be next and nervous for me because if they didn't hate me before, they sure as hell will now.

Mom is staring at me from the doorway. She almost looks angry. She is angry. What didn't I tell her, how long has this been going on? We could have sued Sydney and her parents for a lot of money, but we would never do that. Why didn't I think I could come to her? She's crying, too.

January 17, 2004:

erin lennon 1/22/14 6:31 PM

Comment [3]: Effective? Or needs expansion?

Mr. Kennedy and Caroline and Stephanie and Sydney and me are together in the principle's office and the bald man is talking about how serious this all is. He asks me if I can move on with them still at the school and if I have anything to say to them.

"I forgive you," I muster through the collective tears, praying really that they'll forgive me tomorrow for bringing them here.

He tells me I don't have to forgive them, they have to earn forgiveness. They each hug me, crying, and tell me how sorry they are and that they want to be friends.

"Friends."

erin lennon 1/22/14 6:45 PM

Comment [4]: I need something better to end it with than "friends"

January 21, 2014:

Dear Caroline, Sydney and Stephanie,

Thank you.

I never did get a chance to thank you, Sydney (or can I call you Squiddy?), for all of the parties I went to that made me almost forget what you had done to me nearly a decade ago. I mean it sincerely, Caroline and Stephanie. Pretending to ignore it was the thing I wanted from November of that very year. Thank you, Curtis, for throwing sloppy Joe into my face in sixth grade. You taught me to choose my words wisely, because there are people with short, inconsiderate fuses you don't want to piss off. Thank you, Siobhan, for not hurting me or yourself when in sixth grade I bullied you just as hard as I had been under a year prior. Thank you for being my friend when I didn't deserve it. Katie, I'm not sure what I did that year to have someone do what you did for me.

I write because I can't speak. I write because when I was bullied in the fifth grade, I couldn't speak. Dramatic and traumatic as it might sounds — I do not deny that that year impacted my personality in ways I am not always aware of — what that year did for me was give me a voice in my writing. I have long been sure that my inability to ask questions, to confront people and to be put in a position of judgment are a result of cyberbullying. Ironic as it may seem, though, the you all who hid behind words and screens showed me the power of words — the way that writing can impact people has since amazed me and made me a better writer. In writing I found a voice I have yet to harness in the public sphere.

So thank you, from 524 Elm Street, Ann Arbor, MI. Thank you from the University of Michigan, from 420 Maynard Road, from the Michigan Daily. Your efforts have made me the most successful, and arguably the thickest-skinned among us. I won't forget it.

erin lennon 1/22/14 6:31 PM

Comment [5]: This might be a little too honest, right?

AN AUTHOR'S NOTE:

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Certainly, I wish I would have written this piece sooner. The memories are faded, a shame to waste good writing content.. I hope that this piece does my memory and the pain of others justice. Maybe, it will become a way with which I can reach out to people in need. Or maybe, like fifth grade, it will become nothing more than a part of memory.