

My experience in tennis



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Revised Personal Essay

Ten years old, short curly chestnut hair, big cornflower blue eyes: I ran with Mikaela between the tall walnut trees behind my house. It was a town house, the end unit in a row of identical houses—dark green door, dark green shutters, bronze numbers tacked below the peephole. A chilly breeze blew and I felt goose bumps welling up between my arm hairs as we ran.

Crunching leaves, walnut shells cracked open, oozing black juices from the sticky, green avocado-esque shell. Pushing branches aside of tall, almost bamboo-like bushes reaching for the sky, we continued on through the little wilderness, farther and farther away from my backyard.

White tennis shoes overhead...I didn't think much of them at the time. But there they dangled, dirty shoelaces knotted over a thin telephone wire. We ran out of the shrub-infested entanglement, and continued into an area spotted heavily with maple trees that almost brushed the clouds. A fence lined one edge of the forest, a DO NOT TRESPASS sign nailed pristinely into the rotting wood. I noticed a pile of little white somethings, all spread carelessly at the base of two adjoining trees. I pointed it out to Mikaela enthusiastically and suggested that it might be buried treasure or secret messages from Russian spies! My best friend, mouse brown hair fluttering, purple shirt covered in dead leaves that had snagged the stretchy fabric, skipped ahead of me to investigate.

Dirty white paper cylinders, rolled hurriedly by dirty fingers, abandoned quickly and sloppily. We stared at them, completely oblivious as to the meaning of these little slimy green-filled rolls for a moment.

“ We probably shouldn’t be here,” Mikaela whispered. “ I think these are drugs.”

“ Cigars most likely,” came my reply in a worried ten-year-old voice.

“ You mean cigarettes, Ashley. Cigars are big and brown. Haven’t you seen the Aristocats? Georges—you know that crazy old lawyer guy—smokes a big cigar.”

Feet padding the ground in quick noisy steps, we hurried back home and continued our games on the little square of cement that was the back patio. I looked back as we ran, and I saw a boy, probably 18 years old—tall, dirty blond hair, with piercing caramel brown eyes that watched us as we ran off. Once at home again, we played on the patio for hours more, the summer day completely untainted by what we had seen.

Looking back, it’s a wonder we weren’t kidnapped or killed that day. We had unknowingly found rolls of marijuana left by teenagers the night before, and that boy was undoubtedly one of them. The white tennis shoes, I later learned, were signals of the presence of marijuana in the area. Honestly, it’s a miracle nothing happened to me while I was living there. I was a young girl, very curious and eager to explore, and I had no idea of the dangers surrounding me.

My neighbors across the street included a 60 year-old single mother, named Star, with her 20 year-old daughter and her five children born outside of wedlock. Down the road, there were known prostitutes and drug dealers, and the police often visited to break up fights in the neighborhood and arrest

people. The children in these homes were so emotionally tattered; several had confided to me that their older brothers had let them try smoking cigarettes, and at eight years old, the majority of them were well aware of things no eight year old should know. Most had watched their mothers be beaten by various boyfriends, or had been beaten themselves.

Each week throughout the warmer months of the year, my mother would bring us three girls, my two younger sisters and I, outside to play jump rope. We had a long white braided rope that stretched halfway down the sidewalk that stretched from our house down to the last unit in the row. Dozens of kids from the neighborhood would come running, and there were often up to fifteen kids jumping rope at a time. Blacks, Asians, Hindus, Muslims, whites... two black boys in tattered jackets drenched with the smell of smoke, a little girl with a red bindi on her forehead and long black hair, a blond with high heels and multiple piercings along the curve of both ears...but the differences didn't change a thing. My parents would swing the rope in big vertical circles—up over our heads, down below our feet, scratching across the sidewalk, as we propelled ourselves into the air. It was a time of freedom, where all the problems at home were left behind, and these children could be just that—children. With the sun high overhead, the encroaching worries and fears that plagued these poor kids disappeared into the steady rhythm of little feet hitting the ground as the rope swung round and round.

I was born to a large family in Utah. My parents, my sisters, and I lived with my grandparents, and there were aunts and uncles and cousins visiting constantly. When I was six years old, we moved to Pennsylvania so that my

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dad could get his PhD in acoustics at Penn State University. During my days in kindergarten in Utah, I had been surrounded by dozens of Mormon children. We played house together, pretending to read the Book of Mormon and say a prayer before each “ meal.” When I moved to Pennsylvania, nobody prayed before playing house or read about the Nephites and the Lamanites, but we had just as much fun as I did in Utah. There was a dog park up the hill from my house, so my friends and I often pretended we had invisible dogs. We’d walk the dogs up to the dog park so they could meet all the other dogs. We’d pick wild blackberries along the walking path behind my house, and we’d play hide and go seek in the tall grass field inside the parameters of that path. I learned all about Penn State football and the Nittany lions, and Tom Brady (who everyone was convinced was my long lost uncle).

Looking back at that time, running through the woods behind my home and being exposed to drugs in person for the first time, it makes me realize just how protected I was. Those other children didn’t encounter drugs for the first time at age ten—they grew up with drugs. Many of them went home at night to be yelled at and hit by their mothers’ drunken boyfriends. Others wore their pajamas on over their clothes in case the government found out they were here illegally and they had to leave home in a hurry. But playing jump rope with them each humid afternoon, I had no idea. We were all just kids, having fun in the summer sun. We laughed and played, and they were no different from me.

Their difficult family situations made these poor children grow up much faster than any child should, but at heart, they were still just kids. We were

all kids, just trying to live and enjoy life and do the best we could to obey our parents and stay quiet as we bounced our legs up and down to keep us from going crazy while we listened to mind-bogglingly boring teachers every day. We were just playmates—we had wild, daring imaginations with incredible amounts of energy, and we loved playing together. Differences didn't matter. If we all just stayed children, judging only based on how good a person was at jump rope, what would the world be like?