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ENG 305: Creative Nonfiction

Dr. Hess

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Little Victories

From the time we are small children, adults are always asking us, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" And I've always told them cheerily, "I want to be an author." Honestly, since I learned how to craft letters with a pencil, I've been writing stories. I had the biggest imagination as a little girl. I remember one of my first stories was called "Amalia's Life" because I found out that my parents had almost named me Amalia and I became enamored by the name. The prospect of being able to have nicknames enchanted me. "Anna" didn't lend itself well to nicknames, but Amalia did. Would I have picked Molly or Amy or Mia? The possibilities seemed infinite to me as a seven-year-old. So I took matters into my own hands and wrote a story about Amalia, a pretty blonde girl who hadn't yet chosen a nickname, but who loved to take naps in the sun-tanned grassy fields with the horses at her grandparents' house. It felt like a masterpiece.

My older brother, Dane, had always had his life going the way he wanted it, too. He was always a theatre kid, even in middle school. This pleased my mother extensively because her father, Denny, had worked in the theatre industry for his entire career and she felt as though Dane was channeling Denny. He would spend days at the high school theatre, only coming home to sleep for a few hours. I still remember what he'd say as he whirled out the front door in the mornings, blond

curls flailing and hazel-green eyes sparking, while I was just slugging down the stairs in my jammies: "Bye, family, don't do drugs!" And that was the last I'd see of him until the next morning, because I'd be in bed before he would return home, exhausted. But he loved what he did. He was a technical director who sometimes acted on the stage, but really thrived in the booth. He went to San Diego State University, started dating a wonderful girl name Carissa, who was a lighting designer and who I adored, and graduated with a degree in Technical Theatre.

One time while he was still in college and while I was a freshman in high school, I was vacationing in San Diego with my friend Emily. Dane was working on a show at school called *The Glass Menagerie* by Tennessee Williams. I'd never heard of it before and when I'd asked him about it, he offered a vague description along the lines of, "It's about a family and the daughter has this collection of small, glass figurines. But you should come see it while you're down here! I'll get you comped tickets." He always did things like that, getting me free tickets and giving me backstage tours of his theatres; it was his way of bragging, establishing his masculinity in a field that was stereotyped as homosexual, especially by our other brother, Eric, who was an engineer and hyper-masculine.

So we went and I was awed by how comfortable Dane was in the theatre. He walked around like he was in charge of everything and everyone greeted him and was really excited to meet "Mini-Dane and her friend." I wanted that. I wanted to be that sure of my life and my choices.

I loved the idea of knowing what you wanted to do with your life. I'm a planner and a control freak and I abhor when things don't go according to plan. So

after that trip, I became even more enamored with the idea of being a writer, even though, as I got into high school, I didn't write much. I tried desperately to participate in NaNoWriMo every year, which is National Novel Writing Month. It's this competition where you try to write a 50,000-word novel during the month of November. Emily and I would sometimes team up and try to write a Jonas Brothers/Taylor Swift Fan Fiction, but we never got to 50,000 words.

I had daydreams about writing world-famous novels, of being the next Judy Blume. In my mind, I was already a brilliant writer. I didn't even have to try; my first draft was publishable quality. But that was where I faced issues. I'd sit down for a few hours, write out a story that I was happy with, and then be done with it. That was the first and only draft. I despised revising my work. I hated when teachers made me turn in a rough draft and then a revised copy. "Why do I have to revise? This is my best work already!" I'd complain to my parents. And they'd always encourage me to write more stories, but I'd brush them off, claiming I didn't have enough time. "This summer," I'd tell them, "I'll finally have some time to write this summer." But we both knew that I wouldn't actually get around to it. So I'd say, "I'm just so busy during the school year with homework and everything, so when the summer comes, I just want to relax and watch TV." But I still identified myself as a writer. I didn't want to put in the necessary effort but was struggling so hard to latch onto this dream of being an author.

One day, I was talking to Dane on the phone as he drove home from his theatre. "Hey, Stinkbait." He always had the cutest nicknames for me. "I'm thinking

of joining the Peace Corps," he'd said nonchalantly. I could tell, though, that he was waiting to see what my response was.

"What? Where the hell did that come from? Why?" I couldn't fathom why he would want to leave his perfect life. He had the job, the girl, and a great apartment in SAN DIEGO. It was difficult for me to hide my disdain.

"Why not?" A typical response from Dane. He could taste my frustration and confusion through the silence, so he followed with, "No, I don't know. It just seems like it would be fun. A good learning experience."

"But, like, would you be living without electricity and stuff?" My judgmental tone even shocked me. But I definitely couldn't see Dane surviving such a primitive lifestyle.

"I don't know, probably. It'd be fun," he insisted. "You could come visit me!"

"Yeah right!" I snorted.

But as his long-winded application process continued, I began to learn more about what had been going on in his life. Shortly after that conversation, he broke up with Carissa, which I probably took harder than he did. When I asked my mom why, she'd explained to me how they were on very different wavelengths. "Carissa wanted to get married, have kids, and make Dane a stay-at-home dad while she traveled the world for work. He said, 'Fuck that!'" My dad had explained to me another aspect: "He's in an industry where the only way to move up and make more money is for his boss to retire. He's feeling stuck." But I still didn't understand. I found it extremely selfish of him to leave us all for two years. He'd miss my 21st

birthday and Christmases and maybe even my college graduation! Why wouldn't he think about us before making this life-altering decision?

"Hey, kid! I'm going to Ghana!" The excitement in his voice was tangible. "I just found out my placement and I wanted to call and tell you!"

"That's awesome! Wow, Ghana! Where exactly in Africa is it?"

"Southwest. But, like the sticky-outy part, not by the Cape."

"Well, congratulations, Nane-Nane. That's really exciting." I was happy for him, honestly. It was just really difficult for me to accept that I wouldn't get to see my older brother for two entire years.

It wasn't until he came out to New Jersey to visit before he deployed that I finally began to comprehend his decisions. We'd ignored the subject of his departure the whole 4 days, until it was unavoidable.

"Don't be sad, kid," he'd said as I helped him put the two duffle bags he'd consolidated his life down to into the car. There wasn't so much as a glimmer of sadness in him. There was just calm, something I realized I hadn't seen in him in years. I looked out of place with my shaking and leaky eyes next to his confident, stoic figure that loomed a whole foot above me. He curled his huge, brotherly arms around my delicate, little-sisterly frame.

"I'm not," I tried to say with a laugh. I don't think he was convinced.

"Two years is gonna fly by. I'll be back to stick your face in my armpit before you know it!" This worked to elicit a gurgled chuckle from me. He folded himself

into the tiny rental car as the powdery snow fluttered down gently. "Bye, kid! I'll call as soon as I can!"

As I sat in my room crying, blaming him for his selfish choice to leave, it began to hit me. He had been doing the same thing I was; he had been striving so hard to hold onto the life he'd set up for himself, to the life he thought he wanted to live. But it just wasn't working for him anymore. He was evolving, which is inevitable, so he adapted. He made a change. And his idea for a change was to go to Ghana for two years with the Peace Corps.

The only difference, though, was that I wasn't done trying to grab onto whatever I could to save my idyllic dream life. And I'm still not. But I've accepted that it may happen; there may come a day when I wake up and realize that being an author is not the ultimate goal, that I'm trying to force it too much. But I've learned that it's okay if I change my mind, because Dane did it and couldn't be happier with his decision.

I've also learned to appreciate the little victories in life, as well, from his move to Africa. He's helped me to appreciate that I have running water, a toilet, electricity. I have a huge amount of respect for him because he was willing to give up everything to go help the less fortunate and underprivileged. And not only help them, but become one of them, live with them. That takes dedication that many people will never possess. But I'm still selfish. And I still want to be a writer, even if it may seem frivolous after his selfless sacrifice. I'm not quite ready to give up on that dream yet.

But, like all of my writing, I'm a rough draft. And while, no, I can't go back and make any revisions on things I've already done, I can use those mistakes to improve my draft in the future, to shape myself as a writer and as a person. And I'm going to stay selfish for now, because it makes me happy even though it may not last forever.