

Hannah Fesler

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(832) 726-3660

[hanfesler@gmail.com](mailto:hanfesler@gmail.com)

## Good Nervous

“How do you start having boyfriends?”

I remember the look on my grandmother’s face when I asked her that question. I’m still not sure how to read it. She put a hand on my shoulder and told me about the first time my mom brought a boy home for dinner. That still didn’t answer my question. How do I pick one to bring over? When will I know I’m ready?

“The right boy will be nervous to talk to you, and you’ll probably be a little nervous, too.”

I got that. I didn’t get it get it, but I got that it was one of those things I’d understand when I was older. One of my friends from school, Jenna, had a boyfriend at the time. Even then, I wasn’t sure she felt the feeling my grandma was talking about. He always looked her right in the eye, and the keychain he brought her back from France was pink. She hated pink. I don’t know how invested an eight year old boy can be in a relationship, but I recall “what’s your favorite color” being a pretty decent conversation starter at the time. Perhaps that was too low-brow for an intellectual young man like him. Jenna’s mom sure thought that damn keychain made him something special. I would be a better partner than that. I was certain.

“Why can’t girls propose to boys?”

“They can, if they want to. It’s just traditional for the boy to propose.”

I decided then I would be the one to propose to my boyfriend. If my boyfriend would be too emasculated by his girlfriend proposing, I didn’t want him. I didn’t know

what it meant to be emasculated then, but I knew I hated it when Jenna's dad was too tough to let her paint his nails. My boyfriend would like it when I held doors open for him and paid the bill. He would cry when I proposed to him and help me pick the flowers for our wedding. I didn't have to know that warm, nervous feeling my grandma told me about to know who I was.

This was one of the five pleasant memories I have of that woman. She always thought she was something fancy. Member of the Gadsen Women's club. President of WASH, Houston. From the time I could talk, I was cornered into calling her "Lala", based on some joke with her sister I never knew, despite my later demands to call her Grandma Gast after being made fun of in school. Thank god my mom took my dad's last name. Jerrie Janette Gast. I can only imagine how much worse the private school experience might've been had I been a Gast. Kids are mean.

She was a painter. I spent many hours listening to frail, gaudily made-up women laugh and suck up to her with those piercing, expensive voices that reverberated off of gallery walls and slammed into my head like bricks. They only bothered talking to me if Jerrie brought in one of my pieces to brag about my technique with acrylics. She taught me. She made sure to repeat that part until somebody made a comment about it. I knew how to measure pouring medium before I knew what number came after 20. I was her show pony in pigtails.

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Her name was Nicole. I was right about the feeling—I knew it when I felt it. She made me nervous, but good nervous. I'd never known good nervous before, and there was something about good nervous that didn't seem like a feeling you feel for a friend. The pews were a lot more comfortable when I had her high ponytail to look at. Sometimes, she'd turn to whisper to her friends, and I'd catch a glimpse of her side profile.

She was an artist, like Jerrie, only better. Her subjects weren't me, my mother, or an abstract thought. She doodled characters from our favorite animes in the margins of her notebook. I had one cut out and slipped into the front of my binder. It was a gift. I would go home, run up the stairs to my tacky, 10-year-old bedroom and imagine her hand on that pencil, tracing out those lines on the paper. It stirred the rock in my gut enough for me to breathe through my uniform.

I knew I was different, even before my thoughts turned sinful. I was a girl, but not in the same way the other girls were. Our awful blue, plaid skirts hung like lead around my waist. The thought of being some man's homemaker curdled my blood. I took to pretending, both to blend in and feel like the girl I knew was trapped under my long, blonde hair and ruffled socks. I decided to be the girl who hated the color pink and refused to watch a musical. My old favorite t-shirts were forgotten under my bed. Glittery, beaded hair ties burned holes in my bedside drawer.

Jenna invited me over for a sleepover. Nothing special. Not until I could tell there was something important on her mind. Her little arms were crossed over each other, and her fingers picked at the skin on her elbows. She kept glancing over the bedroom door, conveniently missing a lock from a forgotten punishment several months prior.

"What would you say if I thought I maybe liked girls?"

I knew what I would say if I thought that, and so I did. Until that moment, I thought eyes only lit up in flowery fanfiction. She leapt up off of the bed and held me by the hands. I reassured her that, no, I wasn't kidding, and that yes, I did have a crush on somebody at school. I felt Nicole's name fill my mouth and roll off of my tongue for the first time, and my world went quiet. Jenna's hands fell from mine. She never got around to telling me about her crush.

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Jenna and I stopped being friends in the sixth grade. Or, at least, that's what her family thought. Her mother's best friend had a prophetic dream from God that told her

I'd turn Jenna gay, like some sort of contagious disease. I still have no clue how the hell she knew I carried the plague. We were in private school; it's not like I wore basketball shorts and snapbacks to class. I couldn't. I couldn't even cut my hair. The disease must show on the outside, somehow. I wanted the cure. I couldn't live my life like a leper.

“...of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”

I didn't expect the water to be so cold. I thought maybe the blessing would warm it up a little, or something. The feeling that drove me there came rushing back to me the moment I looked up from the bowl that was supposed to give me a second chance. I couldn't miss Nicole's big, brown eyes boring into me from the small crowd of my peers, even if I wanted to. I thought that maybe, just maybe, there was still time for me to be saved. Then again, how would that mother have known my sin if not for God? It was my own fault for expecting Him to be on my side. Perhaps I was always beyond God's help.

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Eighth grade was my first year in public school. My atheist mother pulled me out of private school when she realized what it had done to my sense of identity. The idea was to expose me to religion so that I had the ability to “decide for myself” whether or not God was real. That idea fell apart. Sometimes, I still struggle to write about Him with a lowercase h. I wouldn't tell her that. She can hardly look at me when I tell her about how hard I prayed for normalcy in my brain. How hard I fought to fall in love with the few boys who would talk to me. I don't blame her for what happened. I don't blame her for feeling guilty, either.

I don't remember coming out to my father. I do, however, remember how little it came up in conversation. I remember, much later in life, how hard he loved my first girlfriend. I came out to Mom first, purely by coincidence, to which she said—

“Okay? Anything else?”

They never cared much for being popular. Dad was an only child, and never grew into the type to keep more than a few friends. Before me, there was Mom's stillborn, Joshua. She had never intended to circumcise him, nor did she pierce my ears as an infant. She always felt those were things a human being should consent to. Her friends made fun of her for it. It never bothered her. Every year, I watch her silently hang her little boy's first Christmas ornament on the upper half of her massive, ten-foot tree. She always uses two ornament hooks, just in case the cats knock it loose. A rocking horse. I often wonder what type of man a mother like mine might've made.

I went through all of the phases when they pulled me out of that school. I ditched the long, blonde hair for somebody's mom's pixie cut. The twenty dollar bills my dad passed my way every other weekend kept our local mall's Hot Topic in business. All within my first year outside those walls, I had my first kiss, three girlfriends, and a new lease on life. My first English teacher suggested my work was profound enough to win medals, and so I took her advice. One gold later, I was eating in downtown Houston with two proud parents and a new, lifelong hobby. Things were good.

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Jenna and I reconnected during high school. It was my first job. We were cake decorators at a Marble Slab in the smaller, more conservative part of town. A friend from my high school, Zara, worked there with us alongside a few others whose names I've long since forgotten. They knew who I was. Everybody did. My parents worked hard to make sure I felt secure enough to be outspoken about my identity. Zara was out, too. At least to me. She confided in me about a crush on one of our classmates during eighth period one day, and I assured her there was nothing wrong with questioning. Labels aren't always helpful for everybody. She thanked me for being her shoulder to cry on, and even left a few hearts next to her number in my yearbook. I wrote them off as friendly.

Growing up in private school taught me a few things. Campus preachers usually regret shouting "liberal" after me on my way to class, not expecting some green-haired

yuppie to know the Bible, and I can recognize judgment in a person's eyes long before I hear it. Then again, the now nameless girls from the Marble Slab weren't exactly a challenge to read. The tall brunette with perfectly even ringlets that dripped down out of her ponytail to the middle of her back was my least favorite. She flinched away from me the moment I so much as approached the sink next to her to wash the blender. We'd been working together for almost a year without incident, yet she was still convinced any physical closeness risked turning me on.

Jenna had yet to come out to them. She told me our manager had gathered the girls in the back on my day off and complained that the owner should've never hired a lesbian. We're a liability for the other women working there. New Girl, the one person who stood up for me, learned her mistake the hard way. One week after opening the front of house alone, she never stuck her neck out for me again. Zara chimed in with fantasy stories of the time I had viciously cornered her in the car and demanded she be my girlfriend. She would wait for me to schedule my shifts and immediately run to the back to ensure she wouldn't be left alone with me, lest I tear her clothes off and have her right there on the marble slab. God forbid you buy your friends a chocolate rose from the dollar store on Valentines Day.

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She's engaged now. Jenna. He's one ugly son of a bitch, the poor guy. She called me one Sunday to apologize for being the chronic pushover I knew her as. I hated her for it when we were kids, but I understood who she was by the time we worked together. I hadn't held it against her; her parents had kept her in private school all the way through high school.

That day, Nicole had told her, and all the other girls in the locker room, about the love letter faggot Hannah Fesler left in her locker in middle school. Jenna kept quiet, as she often did, but couldn't bear the guilty conscience that had been building since we parted ways. So, she called me. To apologize. Not just for keeping quiet in the locker room I never would've known about had she not called me, but for the years of

conditional friendship she had given me. I didn't ask her about her fiancé. I didn't have to. The way he kicked his foot up and fluffed his hair in their engagement posts said it all.

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Grace was my first love. She sat ahead of me in English class. Her hair was that shiny, light brown-blond color some women called "dishwater blond". What an awful word for such a beautiful color. Sometimes, she'd turn to whisper to me, and I'd get to make her laugh. I looked forward to that sound every night before bed. I heard it reverberating around in my eardrums every morning, and I started brainstorming material for it every third period. Our teacher knew. She had to. She saw my soul more clearly than any pastor ever had. I doubt she'd have tolerated my obnoxious, heavy-handed humor otherwise.

We sat together at lunch with a few of her friends. They would vent to her about their schoolwork and their families for nearly ten minutes, and she listened wholeheartedly every time. I'd never seen a more devoted, selfless human being in my life. Sometimes, the others would make jokes. They were never as good as mine. Her eyes would smile before her mouth did. I knew I had hit the jackpot when I saw the left one begin to crack.

One day, it was just us. The flu had been going around for a couple weeks. We sat at one of the smaller tables, as per her suggestion. She hated the idea of taking a bigger table from a group of people who needed it more than we did. We quickly lapsed into silence, not used to talking without ten minutes of complaints from the peanut gallery. Something was wrong. She smiled, yet her eyes stayed still. I hardly had to ask before she began to sob.

"Why is Hannah gay?"

Those were the first words her parents spoke to her when she came home from band practice the day prior. What an odd question, I remember thinking. I still can't answer that question. Why? I'm used to being told I'm gay as some sort of half-baked

insult, or saying it myself. That, I can handle. Why wasn't as easy. It wasn't easy for her, either, because whatever her answer was, they didn't like it. She had her phone taken from her, where they found some sort of clue about her hidden identity. They forbade her from speaking with me, in fear that I would do to her what I had done to poor Jenna. We kept apart from each other at band competitions, just in case one of the holier parents caught a glimpse of us together and reported back to hers.

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I used to wonder if I had lost my only chance at being loved as a woman. I continued to date around, but there was never another Grace. There was an Ashley, but I had met and dated plenty of Ashleys. Ashley never paid the bill, pumped my gas, or held the door open for me. I wondered if maybe I was too picky. I like to pay the bill and pump the gas and hold the door, but I also like to have the bill paid and gas pumped and door held for me. I'm not a boy. I never wanted to be a boy.

"You get the spider," Ashley said.

"You're the lesbian, aren't you?"

I have nothing against bisexual women. Never have. I despise Ashleys. I despise the "I've never been with a woman before", "I think women are pretty, but I'd never date one", "Is scissoring a real thing" girls. I have no problem going on dates with women who are looking to figure out their identities. I take no issue with answering questions for women who never had supportive parents like mine. I mourned the femininity I had lost as a child. I mourned the woman my dates might have seen had I kept the long hair. Had I worn a dress. Had I done my makeup. Had I not asked them out first.

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During my junior year of college, a small, blonde woman approached me on a park bench in front of the English building. I say approached—she had all but chased me from the library. There was nothing special about that day, other than how pleasant the weather was. It was cold enough to wear my favorite black turtleneck, but just warm



enough to go without a jacket. The sun warmed my arms through my sleeves as I sat there on my laptop, working through my final essays in between classes.

“Hello.”

Please, sit down. Be my guest. That’s what I wish I would’ve said. She was in the seat next to me before I even had time to respond. I opened my mouth to speak, but she beat me to it.

“I saw you passing by us in the free speech area, and I just felt called to come speak with you.”

There he goes again. What was it about me that God felt so compelled to tell everybody about? The guy needs to give me a break, one of these days.

“Hey, I get it. I used to be a Christian. I understand you think you’re doing something nice for me by reaching out and saving my soul, but I don’t believe the same way you do. Thank you for what you’re trying to do for me, but I’m not interested. I don’t want to have this conversation right now.”

I don’t know why I thought the spiel would work. It never does. Bearing the responsibility of the worlds’ eternal souls on your shoulders makes you persistent. I could see it in her blue, beady eyes.

“Please, just a minute of your time. I promise I’ll be quick.”

“Okay, fine. What is it? I’m going to hell unless I believe in your god?”

“I care deeply for your soul. I wouldn’t be bothering you if I didn’t. Could you use a prayer?”

Usually, I say yes. There’s a video floating around somewhere from a time where a couple approached me in a grocery store and asked if there was anything I needed them to pray for. I insisted my friend’s dog had cancer, or something like that, bowed my head, and put my phone on record in my pocket. I sent it to my dad later that day and we laughed about it for weeks.

“I don’t think you understand. I do not believe in prayer. I have no problem with you praying for me, if you believe you’ve been called to do it, but I am not praying with you right now.”

She was quiet, for a time.

“What is the thing you value most?”

I’d never had that question before. I could tell she had thought long and hard about it by the way her little eyes relaxed in her head during that stretch of painful silence, so I did the same. My answer was genuine.

“My life.”

That wasn’t the right answer.

“Pick something else. Imagine you have a Ferrari. God has given you the gift of life, and you have chosen to spend it in sin. That’s like destroying your Ferrari with a hammer and being mad at the person who gave it to you.”

I stared for a long time. I was tempted to look over my shoulder for a camera, but I could sense the seriousness in her tone. What a basket case.

“Seriously? If God has given me this brain that knows how to think and to feel, I would argue that not letting it do that is like keeping my Ferrari in the garage. I don’t even have a Ferrari.”

Her lips pressed together at that. Her jaw clenched up under her ears. She stood up, rifled around in her backpack, and produced a pale, yellow pamphlet. She passed it over to me, wished me a good day, and left. That was the last I saw of her.

I looked down at the pamphlet on the table in front of me.

“Where Are You Going?”, it said.

I knew what it was. It was the book my high school chemistry teacher slid across the table to me with a, “this is for you to keep” after he found out about my sexuality. It was the look of disgust on the older woman’s face across the booth from me at Starbucks. It was the horrified stare from my neighbor’s dad the day I wore my pride converse to her house.

A part of me wished I had been meaner. On a bad day, I might've been. The other voice in my head pondered that question. Where am I going? Where have I been? I'd always hoped that I was going to a three-figure salary, a beautiful wife, and two children. My odds felt slimmer and slimmer the longer I thought about them, so, most days, I neglected the thought. That neglect became harder and harder the longer that pamphlet glared up at me from the table.

Mom always said I was too picky. That day, I decided picky was okay. If I was waiting for my future partner regardless, I wasn't waiting for somebody to settle with. I was waiting for somebody who made that wait make sense. I was waiting for somebody worth waiting for.

So, I waited. I dyed my hair green every other week, and I waited. I waited for somebody else to ask me. An old friend once remarked that the green made me look too "dykey", but so be it. If God was already whispering in his believers' ears, I would prefer to beat him to it. I am unladylike. I am a loud woman. I was made for no man's comfort. I am the woman who demands what she's owed. I am not the woman who settles. If there is truly nobody in the world for her, that day, I decided she would always be enough for herself.

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Good nervous. A feeling that sucks the obligatory, "what's your major", or, "what's your favorite color" from your tongue before they have the chance to cross your lips. A feeling that interrupts every compliment, every suave gesture. A feeling that leaves you clumsy. A feeling that steals away everything but your most authentic, unrefined self. Good nervous pounds on the door and leaves a voicemail. Good nervous lingers with the smell of her hair in your car seats.

She wasn't a Grace, but a Caroline. I spent hours trimming and touching up the dorky mullet I had since grown to define myself with, only managing a few hours of

sleep. I soon forgot the pieces of hair still stuck to my back from the excessive touch-up—I could hardly look at her in my passenger seat. I never realized suffocating could feel so pleasant. She fought me for the door on the way into the gas station, and I paid for her candy before she could argue. We giggled and shouted on the top of the parking garage about Ashleys and Graces. I was nervous. Good nervous.