

Theme:

First Friend

An iceberg. Breathtakingly beautiful and terrifyingly powerful. History is etched into its layers, and memory is hidden in its core. Onlookers are only privileged to the tip of the iceberg; they can only wonder at what is beneath, guess at its size and structure. The tip does give some clue to the rest of its person. If it shines fiercely in the light, reflecting the sunlight in a million colors that shatter across the oceans waves, it is a strong, deep iceberg that will last millennia. If the peak is fogged and dull, catching the sunlight and wearily shunting it off into the waves, it is a weak, wizened iceberg that has lost its power and will soon fade away into the waves. This essay is the tip of an iceberg; a small indication of the vast substance beneath. No photo can tell a whole story, and no essay can capture the height, depth, and width of a relationship. However, the tip will be enough to give a glimpse of the person to whom I am paying tribute. According to C.S. Lewis, everyone has a “first friend,” someone who they connect with on a level that is profound, and with whom they share a bond that no weapon or war can break. My first friend has been with me when I’ve cried in despair and laughed with pure joy. I pray that she will be with me to share those moments for the rest of our lives. What follows is for Allison, my sister in Christ and friend in everything.

The first picture isn’t the typical get-to-know-you scenario. The setting is a small Sunday school class room in a small church in a small town. A white plastic-top table with crayon marks and marker stains is pushed against a wall. Old orange leather chairs are scattered around it. In the corner of the photo, a brown-haired girl is shyly looking in through the doorway, her mother behind her. She is dressed neatly in a green-and-black checkered dress, one arm crooked around a bible. And then there’s me. Dressed in my Sunday best, seven years old, blonde, smiling, and crouching under the table. After the picture was taken, I spy the new girl immediately and command her to climb under with me. The rest of the class, all four of them, are with me. We are following our weekly ritual of hiding from the

teacher. The comfortable dark under the table is an excellent hiding place, and our slightly exasperated teacher takes all of two milliseconds to find us. Allison stares wide-eyed and I giggle. She didn't get under the table because acquaintances don't use crazy hiding places for crazy people.

The second picture is bright with laughter and color. Allison and I are together, arms around each other as we grin shyly at the camera. Our shyness is a product of nervousness and eagerness in equal measures. It is only an hour before the formal, and she and I are adorned in the fanciest dresses we have ever worn. Black velvet flows around my legs and a pink flower rides my hip. Allison, a pale beauty, wears a shimmering black silk. Curls bounce and hands flutter excitedly as we pose in the flowers of a city garden. We've talked only about the home school dance for weeks. Neither of us have ever dated, and a grand total of three boys our age go to our church, so the idea of a whole night of partner dancing ranks is bigger than space travel or national elections. We primp together, sharing make-up and getting my mom to help, since neither of us actually wore the stuff. During the grand finale, last moment pictures are taken before leaving for the dance. I look over at her and smile.

"Are you ready?" I ask around my picture-perfect smile.

Allison squeezes my hand. "Absolutely," she mouths back.

"Smile! Last time!" Mom says, rocking forward as she presses the camera to her eye, smiling with us.

The third picture is set in Trendwood Park. The day carries an autumn chill and the sun is low in the sky, shedding a golden light that filters through the leaves of the trees above our heads. Another has been added to our sisters-friend triangle; blonde and blue-eyed Megan sits with us in the warm grass. We have created another story and are now acting it out. Freckled and tall, I am a little older, not much wiser, and much more mischievous. I was the one who begged the other three to walk down to the park and act out part of our story. Allison, a year older than I, allowed her reluctance to show in a small frown but for only a moment. Her dark eyes smile with her mouth as she, our unspoken leader,

relents to my pitiful begging. In the picture, we are next to the trunk of a towering maple tree. Megan and I are kneeling in the fallen leaves next to Allison, who lies half-propped up against the tree while Ana stands near us. Megan is holding Allison's hand, and I am doing my best to look worried. Ana is turned, looking at a boy who is pedaling past us on his bicycle. Just before the picture was taken, we were all caught up in our acting. Allison, a brave messenger, had just fought off a deadly serpent to protect Megan and Ana. Megan was the raven-haired princess who was fleeing from her cruel aunt, the queen, and Ana was her horse, Lestavis. I was the mysterious man who came from the shadows to help Allison, who sustained mortal injuries. The moment passed, and Ana called to the bicycler, who looked confused because Allison was doing a superior job at looking mortally injured. Ana multiplies his confusion by yelling "CPR, we need CPR!" at him, to our amusement. Instead of joining the merriment, he quickly cycles away. Everyone laughs as the breeze plays with the tangles of blonde and brown hair.

Leaves are changing colors outside my house and Allison and I are in my driveway. We hangout every week since our houses are in walking distance and we always greet each other with a hug. We do the same that day in the beginning of my freshman year, and the picture is taken near the end of the embrace--which is longer than usual, and I know why. I'm leaving. My father, the pastor of the small church, had just taken a new job--only a few miles away, but still, I would be going to a new church and Allison had just found out. Because we were both homeschooled, church was one of our social outlets, and the only constant. We had grown up in a place that was a second home to both of us. In a small church, the members aren't a congregation, they are a close-knit family. Now, my little family was leaving for a new church family, lovingly pulling up old roots to plant new ones. We would stay at the same house, I would still be home schooled, but Allison and I both knew our relationship wouldn't be the easy, simple mixture of shared experiences any longer. So, she held onto me tightly and I hugged her back, blinking back tears. She asks me if the news was true and I said yes. Once she

lets go, we return to our normal dialogue of Terasonth and the colorful events of the home school PE class, but not until she gives me one last request. "Don't go and find another best friend" she whispers. And I wouldn't, because best friends never forget each other.

The last picture takes place in Trendwood park. Allison and I are older now, I am seventeen and she eighteen. We sit in an ash tree that overhangs a small stream. We are both talking and smiling, casually planning our futures. Our lives are already unfurling differently, as I decided to go to the local public school for high school and Allison stayed home schooled. Allison laughs at my stories of the strange realm of public school, and she patiently listens to me rant about teachers, boys, and world problems. College is our favorite discussion topic, the first taste of real freedom we will get. I am planning a trip to Colorado out loud. I would work in Estes for the summer after my senior year. I ask her to come with me, and she smiles when she says she'll think about it. We both know our time in high school is coming to a close and with that close opens a new chapter with words we will be writing for the first time in our lives. I shake back my hair and smile up at the bird perched above me. I can't worry on a day like this, when I know that no matter what I have to tackle in the future, I'll have the wisest person I know to turn to for help. I know she will be there because she's here now; nothing has been able to keep us apart. Not me leaving Country Bible, not our very different schooling, not the fact that we aren't in the same grade. Like the branches above me, we've spread out, twisting away from each other as we grow and learn and are challenged. We are connected, however, at the critical part of ourselves - our core. We share the very matter that makes up our being, our beliefs, our convictions, and what drives us to grow.

Best Author's Note: This essay, which began as an attempt to create a note-worthy piece of writing, ultimately became a personal journey through one of the hardest experiences I have experienced. The essay closely focuses on the transformation of self: from the self-honoring attitude I held throughout my life until my tenth grade year, when my world tilted over when I attended public school. The realization that all my former opinions about public school were really bitter prejudice against people I had never met caused me to question everything I thought I knew. The title "The Face in the Mirror" comes from the Bible verse James 1:23-24. "For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he is like."

The Face in the Mirror

The Beginning

When I try to remember when I was younger and lived in the rural country of Illinois, I remember flashes. Bright, vibrant colors infused with sunlight and sounds. I remember looking up into the lime-green leaves in the tree above me. Their shapes are definitely outlined, such a bright green they seem to glow, putting everything into a soft yellow light. I remember putting flowers in my hair, sliding the sticky pink petals behind my ear and pretending I was a Hawaiian princess. Walnuts lace an orange light of memory with a sharp, earthy scent. A huge walnut tree stands between our house and the church. My sister and I always picked up those walnuts. We would hold one end of our shirts in front of us and fill the pocket with walnuts and then tote the loads to the burned, brown trash barrel. We filled trash barrel after trash barrel and stained our hands and shirts green from the walnut shells. Leaves clutter the ground in my memories of autumn, when summer finally fades and school begins. Those memories don't have a color or smell; school just *was* for me. School wasn't something that I did for eight hours a day and then stopped. I was constantly learning. Everything around me was a new adventure with new information. My classroom was an open field; the cafeteria was under the oak tree. The science of the outside blended with the indoors when I watched my favorite shows, *Bill Nye the Science Guy* and *The Magic School Bus*. Gravel roads and clumps of trees riddled with stumps were my field trips. I never missed a day of school, because I never had to leave home.

Searching for a Reason

I leaned against the doorpost, arms crossed, and waited as my mother thought about my question. “It’s for a school thing,” I clarified. “I’m writing about being homeschooled. I want to know why you homeschooled me.” Mom pounded on the naan dough and tore off a bit, shaping it into a disc. “Well, when we lived in Illinois, there wasn’t a school in the town we lived in, we would have to send you eight miles away.” She threw the disc onto the little grill in our counter. I slid over and grabbed the tongs. “I just didn’t like the school mentality there. The dropout rate for high school was unbelievable, and even if you did graduate, well,” she paused, pounding out another disc while she thought. I flipped over the naan on the grill, and spread a bit of butter on the top. Mom dropped another disc on the grill and sprinkled some garlic salt on my buttered one. “When I would take you to the pool, I was horrified by the language the kids already used. Kids didn’t go to high school to get ready for college; they all went to the factories to work after graduation. Education wasn’t a priority. That’s just the mentality the community had. So I homeschooled you.” I tongued the cooked naan onto a plate and spread butter on another disc. I glanced up and saw my mother smiling slightly, lost in memories of a little house filled with little children who lived little, simple lives. The last naan slipped onto the plate. Remembering alongside my mother, I said, quietly, “I’m glad you did it--I can’t imagine anything else.”

Exponential Growth

The first day of LINK is terrifying. I’ve never taken any classes from an adult who was not related to me, and now I am expected to go once a week and sit through four classes. The building itself is foreign to me. A confusing labyrinth of alphabetically named rooms that spiral in a never-ending rectangle. I’ve been to the orientation, of course, but I don’t feel prepared. On Monday morning my mother glances back at me as she and my father drive away. I stand, trembling for a moment, my new book bag knocking pathetically against my leg. I wish I could wait two years until I was in high school and strong and brave. I can’t stand still any longer, so I walk up behind behind a boy I’ve never seen

before, catch the heavy grey door before it closed and slip inside. I walk over to a grey table and say my name. A woman who towers over me wearing a red turtleneck hands me a name tag and points me to room C, a few steps away. I shuffle into the room and sit down. Once I gather the courage to look around, I see something that changes my game plan of silence for the day. Allison, my oldest partner in crime, grins at me from across the room.

During my three years at the LINK, I transformed from a shadow to a person. I laughed and talked and cried and sang and smiled. I turned fifteen and felt older and wiser. I became smarter, but not dedicated. I competed with no opponents. I played in my own division, and I was the best in my world.

Self-Justification

I was so brilliant to do everything so much better than everyone else. I would never say that to their faces, of course--no self-respecting homeschooler would. I didn't even think negative thoughts about them on a regular basis. But when they were brought up, I closed my eyes gratefully and whispered a fervent prayer of gratitude that I wasn't public schooled. Who could imagine being a public schooled kid: cooped up in an building of white washed walls, loud concrete floors, dull classrooms, blue plastic chairs; a bleak and industrial building that no one could feel as though they belonged. Unimaginable compared to the comfort and steadiness of home: the familiar carpet with tracks from heavy use, the kitchen cluttered from breakfast, the shrill voices of my own siblings and the quiet acceptance of my small wooden writing desk. I didn't need someone telling me what to do; I was independent and driven. I was incredibly brave as well, standing up for my rights and beliefs, standing firm even against the harsh ridicule flying at me from every side. No matter how many snide comments or sarcastic jokes thrown at me by the public school realm, I would not waiver. I assumed I wouldn't anyway, as I hadn't ever actually met a public schooled student before. Public school was something I

would not touch with a twelve-foot pole. No one in their right mind would give up the independent, open-minded, free, and perfect life that I lead.

Amalgamation

I walked to school the first day. I left at exactly 7:15. The morning was still warm; summer was still clinging to the days, unwilling to give them up to autumn. The walk took me fifteen minutes to get to the school: through the student parking lot, up the path that lead past the band field and to the very doors of the school. I paused at the edge of the trail, entering, for almost the first time, into the unknown. I was beginning my sophomore year and I didn't even know what my school mascot was. I didn't know how long a class period was, or what ISS¹ meant. I had never heard a warning bell or sat in a plastic blue desk. I didn't know that the best way to get comfortable in class was to prop up my feet against the book holder attached to the bottom of the desk in front of me. The worst swear-word I'd ever heard was "crap" and I'd never worn an I.D. before. The largest class I'd ever been in was fifteen, and school lunches were a foreign concept I'd only heard of in movies. Every step I took brought me closer to all of this knowledge. The five minute walk up the path was itself earth-shattering. I'd never seen so many boys my age in one place. The kids around me were open and friendly as they shouted out greetings to old friends. The first seed of doubt at my preconceived notions of public school lodged a root firmly in my mind. I smiled to myself and walked a little faster.

Self-Actualization

In the cement basement, my bare feet were squarely planted on the cold floor. Our table was winding down, transitioning from eating to talking. We all started conversations that related to the game – trying to figure out what each other knew about the clues that we each had received. A giant game of Clue, with live people and one cold cement basement. The game had been going on for over an hour, and the conversation began to drift as new information became scarce. I was talking to my

¹ ISS: In School Suspension

neighbor, my feet now casually crossed, when a conversation a few chairs down caught my attention. He was tall, redheaded, and confident, gracing his starry-eyed listeners with his superior observation on the lowlifes that plagued his existence: public-school kids. "I'm homeschooled, but don't worry," he said, eyes half-closed, head tilted back, "I'll use small words." He smiled at his opponent, the moronic, stuttering child who spent eight hours a day learning in a public school. He continued, spreading his hands impressively in an all-encompassing arc. "And yes, I do indeed have friends, you should try to get one sometime. They're quite nice." He came forward and rested his arms on the table, folding his hands together like a honored scientist presenting new evidence. "I drove by a school the other day, and I thought, 'oh, look, a prison!'" The table exploded with mirth, the others clamoring for him to continue, begging him to bless them with his wisdom. He complied, speaking of the ignorance of the public-school beasts, but I stopped listening. I was cowering, defenseless, against the onslaught of words that pelted me. My persecutor paused, and the lull allowed me to break away, to stand up, barely feeling the cold of the floor. Hot fingers of emotion tore at my throat and the wash of my blood in my ears blotted out every other sound. Someone from a different table who hadn't witnessed the slaughter asked me what was wrong. I looked down and saw my hands shaking.

Confirmation

"I hadn't realised what I was like," I said, looking up from cleaning the counter. Twilight shined through the freshly cleaned kitchen window as I prepared the kitchen for the next day. "I didn't even think about it when I said stuff about public school kids. I thought I was right, and smarter." I picked up the oven mitt and shoved it in its drawer. "I just...I didn't know," I gesture with my hands, a upward sweeping motion with my palms thrust out, my hands trying to fill where my words stumbled.

"I know, Abs. That's why mom and I wanted you to go. You lived in your own little world, and it was time for you to get into the real one," Dad responded.

I stopped and leaned against the counter. My emotions tinged; I thought about the last few months. “But what I said, Dad! It was horrible; how I said they were stupid and godless and how I thought I was so much better than them for something I didn’t even choose! I didn’t even *know* any public-schoolers!”

“Yes, Abs. And that’s just the thing. That’s why you had to get out. I saw that... weird mentality in the homeschool realm and it’s just not reality.”

“But not all of homeschoolers are like that,” I said, thinking of my closest friend, Allison.

“No, not at all. Abigail, what you have to realize is that when public school started a lot of people were against it and many kids and parents were shunned because they exercised the right to be homeschooled. Now, people are a lot more accepting of homeschoolers, as you know from going to public school. But many of the homeschoolers here are so disconnected from the public school culture. The only knowledge they have is from people who biased against it, and they think they have people fighting to shut them down. That’s part of why they lash out.”

“Yes, but I was so arrogant! I had no idea how many more people were out in the world, and most of them are a whole lot smarter than me.”

“It’s very easy to feel smart when you don’t have any competition.”

“I just feel so... ashamed. That I didn’t act better. That I was so blind and hurtful.” I said quietly, looking down at my folded hands.

“Abs, that is part of life. Making mistakes, and then learning from them. And that’s what you’re learning to do. Does that answer your question?” Dad smiled and held out his arms for a hug. I did not move towards him instantly as I usually did. Instead, I was silent, slowly digesting the words he had just given to me. The gravity of what I had learned caused me to gather my thoughts slowly, carefully pondering each one. Opinions and judgements should not be formed lightly, but based upon personal experience and revelation. I walked over to my dad and embraced him tightly in relief.