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Third Place Essay - ENGL 1000 Literacy Autobiography Contest 2020: Little Composition Notebook

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Antionette Hasty

Professor Laura White

After a year of not writing, I was hesitant on if I would actually make a good grade on this assignment. I wasn't able to think of what I wanted to write off the bat, hence me stressing out more and more until the night before. I took some time to myself, turned on my Spotify playlist and let myself start writing until I felt that I had enough information to put down and call it complete. The next day when we had peer reviews, I didn't really think too much about what I had written down until finally seeing it and reading it aloud. That day, I had finally realized how much everything had changed overtime and it startled me a little bit since I tended to not really think too much about the events that had led me to where I am now. It was bittersweet knowing how much I'd grown. Professor White had talked about the contest a few times during the previous semester, but I didn't really put too much thought to it since I didn't really have the intention of telling anyone else about my story. I'd taken her advice of doing some edits and clarifying as much as I possibly could. Now that I think more about it and prepare to submit this for the contest, I continue to look back as to how much I've changed, but also how much I suppressed back then. It was an outlet to finally get what happened to me down on paper and show how much I've changed both as a writer and a person. So, I took a few days to try and revisit the paper and fix up some points that could've been clarified more as well as fix the timeline of events.

Little Composition Notebook

Mornings in Memphis were weird to me. Most of the city was up before the sun was, including students and teachers alike, getting ready for a day that would seem to drag along for an eternity. The weather was just as weird; most of the year consisted of that type of weather where you need a jacket in the morning and have to pray that you don't have a heatstroke in the afternoon because it always heats up so quickly. As weird as I found the town and it's ever changing people and environment, I stayed the same. Each morning, I took a moment to wake up and check my phone for notifications from familiar sites like Fanfiction.net, Wattpad and AO3 while listening to yet another song recommendation from my friend, preparing for what was in store for the week.

Literacy was and still is considered one of the most important things in my life. From the moment I was first held close to a warm body, my mom and grandmother made it a tradition to read and sing to myself and any who came after me. Nightly bedtime stories and church hymns became routine after dinner and a bath and continued even as I entered daycare and elementary school. As I grew accustomed to screaming children and a strict schedule of memorizing the months of the year and days of the week, my love and interest for books only grew. My Kindergarten teacher, Ms. Engle (I always pronounced it as Angle) had a special loft-like structure in her classroom that only a few special students were able to climb up and read a book if they met certain requirements in their behavior and participation in class. Instead of going off to play with the other children during free time, I would always climb into that little loft and sit for the entirety of the hour-long free time and read whatever books that she had available, letting a blanket thrice my size keep me warm. Back when my legs could barely reach the floor and my mind was still closed off to "the dangers of the world", the comfort of a colorful book and a calm

spot to relax while reading was enough to destress me after a long day of learning how to count and singing songs. From the adventures of Junie B. Jones, to the simple yet mesmerizing poems of the late Shel Silverstein and colorful, whimsical worlds of Dr. Seuss, the new worlds that each book brought to me gave me an insight to the thoughts and minds of every author. As if I could actually jump into their mind and tell the story with them as it came to creation. I could visualize the giant tower of garbage Cynthia Stout refused to take out, feel Sam's disgust of green eggs and ham and witness Junie B.'s antics.

Before I knew it, reading had ingrained itself into my life.

Reading fiction and non-fiction books that I had lying around my room was a part of my daily routine up until middle school. Every day, I'd come home, say hello to my grandmother, mother and the big goldfish in the even bigger fish tank she kept in her basement and rush to finish my homework (while my grandmother watched over me like a hawk to make sure that my handwriting was neat) before shooting off to my room with the latest book that I had checked out of the library that afternoon. My barbie dolls laid undisturbed on shaggy, navy blue carpet and twin baby dolls lie sleeping in their cardboard crib as I sat down in the middle of them and pretended that I was a tired mother/grandmother myself, reading to my "babies" as they drifted off to sleep. Before the day was over with, I'd be happy with what I'd read and ready to go back to the library to check out something new. I'd ramble on about what I had learned or what I had read to deaf ears and the familiar faces of my family, but that never mattered; someone was listening either way. That continued long before I had to move away from what I already knew with tears running down my face, my heart racing and ears ringing. Instead of preparing for Christmas with my mother's family, baking cookies and wrapping gifts that I wasn't technically allowed to see until Christmas day, I was thrown into a new world of strangers who I'd only

heard about from talk of my mother and a strange man I'd only known for about three months but never truly cared about, miles away from the comfort I'd grown used to. I hadn't understood what marriage was and how things worked at the time, but I still had that lingering feeling that something was wrong. I'd only be proven right months later.

I had to start over again with making new friends and meeting new family. It'd grown frustrating that at one point I just didn't bother anymore. I wasn't allowed much access outside of my home save for the condition of going to school and being forced to attend familial events that felt more like awkward therapy sessions rather than a place for making memories. The times that I was out with my mother and step-father, I did my best to steer towards the library, but most of the time it was in vain and shut down over the fact that I was just a child and didn't really have much of a say in what we could or couldn't do as a "family". When I was finished with my homework, I did not have much else to do. To combat the silence of my new room, I'd done the same as before: check out a book from the unfamiliar library while wandering eyes watched and judged what I happened to pick, come home to a quiet apartment with the smell of cigarette smoke and cheap beer still lingering in the air, sit down on my creaky bed and curl up with a teddy bear while skimming through the book I'd picked up. Instead of telling my mother about what I'd read or how my day was, I'd only respond when I was asked a question or told to do something. There was no more hearing her read each character's voice with dullness or vibrancy and no more vivid imagery of what each character did. Only empty words on a page. I couldn't feel, hear, see, taste or smell any of what the author described. Rather, I felt as if each word in a new book I read pulled me further and further away from what was being talked about, to the point where I could no longer focus and dropped it entirely. Instead of reading new books, I'd started skimming over old ones to keep the memory of conversations alive. It may not have

worked, but now I can recite some of my favorite books almost by heart. Hearing my grandmother's voice whenever she was able to call on my birthday or during holidays only seemed to make things worse. She wasn't deceased but knowing that I wasn't able to hear her read to me anymore made things harder.

Once I had entered middle school and made some temporary friends, I was slowly learning how to become more open about my interests. Between sitting outside with them during lunch and discussing the topic of bands, somehow the word "fanfiction" had come up. I had limited access to the internet as a child, with only having time to use the computer when I was at school or when the home computer wasn't occupied for at least ten minutes. I was no stranger to it at the time, but I was not fully invested to the point of knowing all the proper terminology and ins-and-outs of everything, so I didn't think too much about it. All I knew was that I had quickly grown fond of fanfiction and it was one of the very few things that was able to keep me interested and able to relate with others to avoid being left out of conversation. Although, I became lost in conversation often since I was not as immersed into what they were talking about at the time. Eventually, I was able to get hooked onto it enough to actually want to try and learn how to write my own. So, I took to a Kindle Fire I'd gotten one previous birthday and got to work. My first work was published just a few weeks later. One thing about fanfiction websites was that you can opt out of receiving notifications in your email when someone would add a story to their "Favorites" list or left a comment. To my dismay, my stepfather was the first person who had found out about my stories after going through my e-mails. I had only found out about it when I was called into the living room to discuss it. My opinion on whether my stepfather had actually cared about the content in my stories was next to none; I was more concerned about what my mom would say. I thought that she would be proud of me at the very

least for doing something that actually made me happy. Instead, I got reprimanded for the fact that there was a “bad word” in a few parts in a chapter. Yet, it didn’t discourage me for some reason; it actually pushed me to keep going. It was both a blessing and a curse at the same time.

So, I kept going. After I had changed a few settings on my account and the way that I had published my chapters online, I was back at writing again. Instead of typing the chapters and sending them to my e-mail to upload, I started to physically write them on paper and later type them up directly on the site to avoid another confrontation. I’d written on several stacks of loose-leaf sheets in a red pen familiar to grade school teachers, cancelling out the world around me and finding a way to put myself into the world of construction paper puppets but that had quickly gotten in the way both with space in my bookbag and with transportation from home to school. So, I decided to strictly start writing in my Language Arts Class considering that it was usually my last class of the day and I had little to no items in my bookbag. My teacher, Mrs. Johnson, had actually seen me writing on said stack of paper and pulled me aside from the class once everyone had left. I hadn’t known that she had actually seen me a multitude of times writing in her class; she had never told me anything up until that point. After the lesson for the day was complete and everyone had packed up to go home, she told me to stay behind for a few minutes to chat, sending an immediate panic throughout me.

I thought it was going to be the same situation as it was with my mother. I thought that I was in trouble. Being already on edge from familiar fighting at home and having another “friend” of mine yell at me earlier in the day because of something that wasn’t my fault, I was already prepared for the worst. While I was waiting for her to finish with a few wandering students who wanted to talk to her about grades, I had out the familiar notepad of paper, scribbling down ideas and finishing up yet another chapter of a book I wanted to finish when she

called me up. Instead of the scolding I previously expected, she'd opened a black cabinet next to her desk and handed me a small, red composition notebook after quickly scribbling my name on it. Her exact words are something I can't remember anymore, but she told me to "keep going" with what you're doing, which was the opposite reaction of my mom's and had shocked me even more. Instead of punishing me for being creative and telling stories, she encouraged me to continue writing until I had finished the notebook. Although she did tell me to make sure most of my focus was on my studies.

So, I did.

I carried the notebook in my bookbag and started to write about these already established characters. Anything that came to my mind. From "drabbles" (a story less than about 500 words), to "crossovers" (mixing two or more fandoms into one), I managed to write everything down I had thought of without breaking a sweat or running out of ideas to put down. Writing had become a new part of my changing routine and I loved every aspect of it. I'd spend hours just filling out character sheets of a quiet heroine taking down bullies, little fairies building and defending their homelands against dark enemies and people finding love against all odds being against them. If something didn't seem right in a show I was watching, I was able to change what happened in my mind and give a somewhat happier ending to the heroes' stories. After the encounter with my teacher, things felt different. They *were* different. While reading and creating characters, there were pains in my chest. Not like the longing pains that started when you miss something or someone dearly (those didn't come as often anymore), but more of a familiar emotional pain. From what I was able to read, I was able to actually put myself back into the world of what was being written once again. I was able to feel what characters felt, see what other characters were able to see and join in with characters on their adventures again. The words

no longer felt foreign, but rather inviting once again. I missed the feeling. It was the only good thing to come out of the almost decade that I was gone from what I had known before.

When my mother and stepfather split up a few years ago and I returned back home to Illinois, my love of reading had come back and was growing stronger every day. I had lost the desire to be read to in those familiar voices once I entered middle school, but it wasn't much to worry about as I'm now able to do the same with my younger family members (or at least try when their tablets aren't distracting them). The dreaded looming feeling of fear and timidity started to diminish, but there was something that I felt was still lacking. I'd been reading fanfiction still, but around that time I had started to dip into other options and websites to discover more, both for reading and writing. The composition notebook got full and worn down from the years that went by and technology was becoming more of a prevalent thing in schools and daily life, so I tended to not use physical pen and paper unless I was away from my phone or computer. As for writing fanfiction, I had stayed with the same one show for what felt like an eternity, but as the seasons started to slow down and focus on more of real-life events, I was wanting to branch out more. I had more exposure to the Internet, both the good and bad parts, and started to learn more about what it took to write a story of my own that didn't involve interaction between established characters. I wanted to make something that I was able to relate to and be able to truly call my own. I wanted to make a story that made me crave the same feelings that I had when I was first learning to read and imagine when I was in that Kindergarten class so many years ago. So, I took it upon myself to further learn how to create characters and learn how to create my own stories, from learning to build a world from the ground up to putting special details in characters that make them who they are. With each new character that I'm able

to create, I'm able to put a little bit of my own personality and experiences in them in order to be able to relate to them as a writer.

So now, as I'm finishing this and looking at the open OneNote application on my laptop, curled up with the same worn blankets and teddy bear, it's a bit bittersweet. The composition book had helped to give back that spark I once had while creating and, having finished it conveniently at the end of hard times, gave me the inspiration to continue to do so. I still love to read and write fanfiction to this day, but integrating a new aspect of writing into my life has managed to give me a different view on what the authors I used to read from were trying to do: entertain others with whimsical stories that others are able to relate to and also escape into.