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Writing a Novel: The Process and its Implications in Teaching

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Writing a Novel:

The Process and its Implications in Teaching

By

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An Honors Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for Graduation from the
Western Oregon University Honors Program

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Abstract

For elementary teachers especially, the writing process is an important element in the classroom. It has multiple parts and is taught throughout the year at every grade level. Thus far, I had very little writing instruction from a teacher's perspective. We took science and geography classes to learn much more than we would ever teach in the classroom. We learned the ins and outs of linguistics and language acquisition, so that we could better understand the process of reading and writing. Due to this knowledge, I am better prepared as a teacher because I can approach education from a vantage point in the subject, rather than learning the material as I teach it.

I want to teach writing from that same high vantage point. The purpose of this research is to see writing from the perspective of a writer, not just a student or educator. What factors do writer's take into account? How do real writers write, outside of school standards? How does the writing process look when it's used in an authentic way, not the processed steps it is often taught in? This is what I explored, so that I could teach writing from a more authentic perspective.

Objective

In order to teach writing in an authentic way, I needed to understand what it is like to "be a writer" and the process used. Students in elementary mostly write fiction and personal narrative. With this in mind, I focused primarily on fictional writing instead of research based or informational writing. I completed a basic, first rough draft of a short novella. It contains only the bare framework of the main story plot, with much left to be added. This allowed me to see the beginning of the drafting process and the trajectory the drafts would continue on. It also allowed me to see the editing and revising that becomes necessary and presents itself after an initial draft is completed.

Step 1: Pre-writing: The Research behind the project

Before any piece can be written, brainstorming and research must take place. A deeper understanding will make the final product much more successful.

I enrolled in two separate courses and read books on the topic of narrative writing, and gained some interesting perspectives on writing and the pre-writing stage in particular.

- ✦ 1.) One aspect to fictional writing that stood out focused on showing versus telling the reader in the story. In writing, the author can paint a picture and let the reader see what is happening, or the writer can tell the reader what happened. Typically, readers would much rather see what is happening and make their own judgment calls than have the author tell them.

Example 1: It was coming toward him, but there was nothing he could do. In one quick blur, Tom's fist landed with a sickening crunch. Blood flowed freely from Larry's nose.

Example 2: Tom punched Larry in the face and broke his nose. In the example above, description is used to show the action, rather than saying what occurred. Showing versus telling can also be used in description, not just action scenes. For example, rather than saying she

was beautiful, describe her hair that falls like a soft veil around her shoulders and eyes that glimmer like emeralds. This may feel like common sense to those who are well read, but writers, especially children, don't learn to focus on the effective parts they see in reading until they are taught.

- ^ 2.) Another important step in the pre-writing phase is to know the main characters better than the audience. Authors should delve deep into the formation of the character until they know their favorite color, what they carry in their purse or wallet, what their family is like, what they dream of, etc. The more questions an author asks about his character as it is formed, the better they can understand them as a person and write about them in a real way. This definitely helps with the characterization and believability of the character during the drafting stage.
- ^ 3.) An understanding of the basic story structure for all fiction works helps tremendously before an author starts writing. It gives a framework from which to start and how to finish. From there, it can always be tweaked and adapted during revision, but during drafting it provides a helpful structure upon which to write.
 - One common way to organize a story structure is by "acts", like in plays.
 - Act 1: This is the beginning of the story, introducing the character.

Then, a turning point should be introduced: what's the problem and why should we care? Things start to get worse for the character, but then they come up with a possible solution.

- Act 2: The character attempts to solve the problem, and things are looking better for a little while. Then something goes very wrong at it seems all hope is lost. There seems to be no way for the character to succeed in solving their problem.

- Act 3: Some decision by the character moves the story forward. Here, the final moment happens: the character either wins or loses, but either way the problem is resolved. (Sometimes the character may abandon original goal, but this must be replaced with a new one.) This is the climax. Afterward, any loose ends are tied up and the character reflects on themselves and/or their journey.

△ 4.) Although this is often overlooked in schools, especially for fiction writing, research is an important part of the pre-writing stage. Reading other books is a great way to research writing styles and story structures before you start writing. Reading will also affect the author's writing style. A great way to try out different writing styles is to read some works by a particular author and then draft some writing. It will take on some of the affects that were noticed during reading. This is something to consider as

both a great resource and something to be cautious of; while the styles of other writers can be great inspiration during a first rough draft, many writers prefer to keep their writing their own and their current outside influences to a minimum. Keeping this in mind, some writers consciously avoid reading other material before they write, or change their first rough draft to have a consistent style (closest to their own) throughout during the revision process.

Implications for Teachers

- ⤴ 1.) Aside from grammatical structures and beginning-middle-end, students are often not taught how to write. Show don't Tell is an excellent strategy that could be practiced in the classroom, just like they practice adding details, to help students make their writing more interesting. By its nature it will help students to add more detail and evidence to their story. It will also add length and possibly complexity to their sentence structure.
- ⤴ 2.) Students often spend very little time brainstorming before they write. In schools, the pre-writing stage often consists of making a list of stories the student could write about, and then picking one. Many students see the pre-writing stage as unnecessary, because taught in this way it is. Students are more likely to set themselves up for success if they spend the

time brainstorming and planning before they write, but this must be taught. One way to have students brainstorm before writing a fictional piece is to have them answer a series of questions about their character. This is only one example, but in general students should be encouraged to plan and brainstorm before they start writing.

- ⤴ 3.) Structure can be very helpful for authors, and it can definitely be helpful for students. While a beginning-middle-end structure may be appropriate for beginning writers, the story structure doesn't get much more complex as students get older. A problem and "climax" (where the problem gets solved) are added, but beyond that there is often not a further look into the structure of stories. If we gradually laid out more complex story structure for students, creating graphic organizers to help them at first, students would be capable of much more than we currently expect by middle school. One problem, of course, is that there is no time to teach material beyond what is laid out in the standards, but teaching the writing process correctly (this being a part of both the brainstorming and research aspects of pre-writing) is a part of teaching students how to write.
- ⤴ 4.) Most teachers are great at providing examples for students. The research part of pre-writing can be seen in studying examples of story

structure, or in an author study, where students write in the style of a particular author (ex: *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* by Eric Carle, *Diary of a Worm* by Doreen Cronin.) Of the four, this is the most prominent pre-writing aspect that I experienced as a writer that I could easily see occurring in the classroom. The next step is to see that examples and research are used on a more frequent basis. Authors shouldn't only be used for inspiration during an author study. Examples of story structure shouldn't only be class- or teacher-made. Use examples from real stories so students can learn to pinpoint the parts. Authors have provided a plethora of resources at the classroom's fingertips, and those resources could be used even more than they already are.

Step 2: The Process of Drafting

During my study of the writing process, I found a whole new viewpoint for the drafting stage. As a whole, the first draft should be viewed as an imperfect, incomplete version of writing, complete with only the bare bones of structure. This is very different from how most students view drafting. There are many tools that writers use when working on a draft.

- ⤴ 1.) The first important thing to realize is that real writers make huge mistakes, like tense problems or point of view, and edit and revise many times. The first draft is meant to get the author from start to finish, and explore the different formats and possibilities the story could have. It should be far from perfect; that's what editing and revising is for. An author should feel free to explore and try crazy things when writing a first draft; they can always go back and change it later if they don't like it.
- ⤴ 2.) For most writers, a lack of focus on editing reduces stress and writer's block. When the author doesn't worry about edits, spelling, or any other problems (like does it sound good?) they are free to just write and get much more accomplished. The concept of write now and edit later can help a lot of writers write more.
- ⤴ 3.) Some parts of a story are harder to write than others. For me, that was particularly the middle section of the story and the very end after the

resolution. Keeping that in mind, writers can use the tool of leaving blanks to prevent a stall in their writing. Often a writer will know that an event (maybe two side characters meeting) needs to happen, or they need to add time passing to their story. The writer knows where it needs to go, but not how to write it. They can simply leave themselves a note, such as "add passing of time" and continue on with their writing. Later, when the story is completed and they can see the whole picture, they can write in that scene with a better eye for how it fits into the story as a whole.

- ✧ 4.) Another important thing learned during my collaboration is that there are two types of writers: outline writers and discovery writers. Some writers feel they need to plan out their story before they write. They decide what will come next, and then write it. Others, however, think of how their story will start and then just write. As they are writing, their story takes form, sometimes adding things or taking turns they had never imagined. It's important to realize that these two types of writers exist, and that both are a successful way to write. Some will need to form some sort of outline, while others will struggle to make one. Asking for only one or the other seems unfair to writers of the other style.
- ✧ 5.) During a first draft, particularly in fiction, side stories or back stories can get very distracting in a first draft. Adding and keeping up with all of these

stories and plot lines can make it hard to ever see the ending of a draft. It is better to stay focused on the one main storyline first, then go back and weave in the other story lines during revision. The author should keep note of the back stories as they come to him or her, but wait until later to start writing them. For example, at the beginning of my first draft (see appendix A) I start a complex back story about the mother and her job before I ever even get to my actual plot. I quickly redirected focus and left that to continue in the revision phase. I was spending a lot of time writing about that story, to the point that it was taking away from my main story so much that I hadn't even gotten around to introducing it yet.

Implications for Teachers

- ⤴ 1.) Because real authors make huge mistakes and wait to fix them during revision, the same should be allowed and expected from students. Most students see a draft as something that should be nearly perfect the first time through, with only a few punctuation or spelling errors. For them, revising is hardly a step it all; it is mostly a step to spell check or the dictionary. Instead, students should be encouraged to try new things, write freely, and make mistakes with their drafts, with the idea that they can fix everything later during revision. Writing becomes much stronger when

more than one draft is written, and this is the first step toward encouraging students to write more than one draft.

- ⤴ 2.) Students should also be encouraged to write more and worry about editing later. Too many students are held up in their writing by spelling or correct structure that they don't write nearly as much as they could. The focus should be taken off of this and put even more strongly on just writing. Editing is something to do later with pieces you intend to revise.
- ⤴ 3.) Many students get stuck when they can't think of what to write next, and then their story is never finished. It would be great to teach students the concept of adding in a blank to fill in later. This would help many students in the upper grades who freeze up when they can't think of anything to write, if taught correctly.
- ⤴ 4.) The concept of two different writing styles, the outline and the discovery writer, was new to me. Students in school should understand that these two types of writers exist and that both are an okay and successful way to write. This could take away plenty of frustration for students who struggle with outlines or students who can't write without one.
- ⤴ 5.) While the distracting nature of side stories doesn't apply to the classroom quite as much, it may be useful for some students who try and

write too much. For students who struggle to complete anything because they add too many details, it might be useful to introduce them to writing only the "skeleton", main story first before going back and adding more detail.

Step 3: A Look at Editing and Revising

Once I completed my drafted, there were so many ways to revise. From this vantage point, I could see how revision could look, when used to its full potential.

- ✧ 1.) Revisions could be about adding crucial details. When writers leave out scenes with notes to write in later, that can be adapted during revision. Details such as research, facts, or name changes can be corrected and filled in during the revision stage. These are all things that could have drastically slowed down the writing process during the first draft. Writing style can be examined; is the language appropriate for the story and the audience? Which tense and point of view work best for this story? All of these things can be decided and adapted during revision.
- ✧ 2.) Revising can be about adding detail and background. Once the skeleton of the story is completely written, it can be tweaked or the plot can become more in depth. The main character and other characters can now be more fully developed and made more complex. More background about the character can be added to bring the audience closer to the character. Other characters can be further developed, and side plots can be added. The middle of the story is a great place to have a back story or side plot, as this tends to be the slow point of the main plot.

From the moment my draft was finished, there were many, many things I could see that I wanted to continue to work on. Because I had focused on the writing aspect while I was drafting, I now have plenty to focus on during revision. Revising should be an important step with lots to do, not a stage that takes five minutes and only involves adding a sentence or changing a word or two.

Implications for Teachers

There are so many things that teachers can teach students to focus on during revision. If students are taught to write freely and explore during the drafting phase, then the decisions can be taught to happen during revising. Students should start with a true rough copy, a mess of sorts, that they can work with and rearrange and change to make into a polished piece of work. Revision should be almost as long as the drafting phase if not longer, but students need to understand the role and purpose of revising before that can happen.

Conclusions

The writing process, as it is taught to many students in school, is not the same way that published authors work and write. For many, there is no authenticity to the writing process students learn by heart in schools. This shouldn't be the case. Students currently don't use the pre-writing and revising stages to their full potential, and don't know how to make the best use of them. Students should be taught the importance of the research and brainstorming that happens during pre-writing, and the extensive revisions that are done during revising due to a free-flowing, unorganized first draft. Instead of focusing on a perfect first draft that doesn't need "more work", students should be introduced to the value and the power of a large amount of revision.

While my research and my experiences show that there is a discrepancy between the writing process in the "real world" and the writing process as it is used by students in schools, it doesn't truly begin to identify how to implement this change in the classrooms. It certainly isn't feasible in all grades; primary students who are just learning to write, for example, are ready for very little revising no matter how often it is taught. Even in these grades, though, if drafting and revision was introduced in a different way from a different position, it might make a difference by the time these students are fourth or fifth graders, and are definitely ready for revision on a deeper level. If teachers change the way that

students view the writing process as early as elementary school, what kind of writers would we see by high school? Perhaps we would see more complex writing and deeper thinking about each piece, and less of students who have only know how to formulate a five paragraph essay in the traditional format.

It was extremely eye opening to research the narrative craft from the position of a writer, and to work alongside others as they write, both those who have been published and those seeking to be published. The experience of writing myself gave me insight to the writing process and what it could potentially look like, and what it already does look like for many writers. The next step, however, is to see its place in the classroom. At what grade level is it best to start implementing? How effective is it in the classroom? What if only one teacher in their elementary school teaches the writing process differently, and then the others stay with the traditional method? Will those students stand out as stronger writers, or will they forget what they've learned? All of these questions could begin to be answered through case studies in real classrooms.

Appendix A

Untitled by Merry Fuller; Draft 1

"Bye Mom, I'm headed out to the field!" The screen door slams as she dashes across the backyard, her long, blond braid swinging behind her. 'Just a bit further and I'll be there.' Not far beyond her backyard, an overgrown field stretches out before her. This is her heaven. You can lay flat, as the waves of grass dance in the wind and caress your skin. You can be a panther, stalking out the prey that live in these parts of the woods -- the grasshoppers, snakes, frogs that have snuck over from the pond. And the pond! // There are so many fascinating things to explore there. Along with all the aquatic creatures, my favorite part is the plants that grow along the banks. The pond is a little shallow area that branches off the creek, and the creek runs behind my house and through the field. You wouldn't believe all the different plant types just along my part of the creek! I've used my plant book to identify most of the them. My favorite plant, *, is edible and tastes just like the juices of a sour apple. When the blackberries are in season, I can have a feast right out here.

"Laura? Laura where are you?" a small voice calls out.

"I'm..." I crouch down, tiptoeing in the grass..."...right..." I see him now, and prepare to pounce. "...here!" My hands reach out of the wall of grass and grab him, tickling him all over. His peals of laughter fill the air like the sweet chatter of a robin. My little brother, Johnny, drops his bear he's laughing so hard. I hand it back to him, ruffling his soft brown curls.

"What are we doing today?" He glances at the pond, a few yards away from where I found him. "Are we going to..." He pauses while he searches for the right word, "...observe the tadpoles again today?"

"I was thinking we'd hunt for preying mantis* instead. Maybe we'll find a female today! I brought a jar just in case." I pull out one of Mama's good mason jars, with holes punched in the lid.

"You know Mama doesn't like it when we use her jam jars for bugs. We're gonna get in trouble."

"Relax. This is the old lid from last time, and she can just wash the jar when I'm done. Right?"

"His face brightens. "Okay." He loves hunting for preying mantis*. He says they're a smart bug, for learning to walk without their front two legs.*

We search the fields and find two males and one female. We're so lucky to have this bug habitat so close. I hear

Mama ring the dinner bell, so I save the female in the jar and head home, Johnny following close behind.

Grandma's over for dinner tonight. She lives just a short walk up the road, so she visits often.

"I got an interesting letter today," Mama tells her as she serves us green beans, my favorite. "It was from the Pelbrook School District."

Grandma puts down her fork. "Really?" She replies sharply.

"Unfortunately. It looks like the county finally decided we should be included in the public school system after all. Starting this year they'll be sending out a school bus to take the kids to and from Pelbrook.

"But where will you work Ellen?" Grandma is concerned, and I don't blame her. Mama has been the homeschool teacher in this town since I was two. The nearest town is 40 minutes away, and our little town is too small for a real school. But we have our own little schoolhouse, and Mama teaches the seven of us old enough for school while she looks after the three younger ones. It isn't much, but the town pays her every week for her job as schoolteacher. What will she do if she has no students to teach?

Mom runs her fingers through her hair. "I don't really

know. I guess I might go back to laundry services again."
She sits in her chair at the table.

"But that won't hardly be enough to get by, not with two kids! That's why you offered to start up the school in the first place!"

"I know. I know, " she sighs. "I'll figure something out. I've got a little saved up, and I've still got enough canned foods from last year to last us at least through the first couple months of school. We've got time; we'll figure something out." She smiles at me, finally realizing that obviously I've been listening. "This will be a great experience for you, Laura, and your brother when he's old enough." I look over at Johnny; he's obliviously building with his green beans and mashed potatoes at the end of the table. "It'll be good for you to be around more than just your cousins, make some friends." She smiles at me again.

"I *have* friends. I play with Johnny all the time, and Kathy is my *best* friend."

"Yes, well... One can never have too many friends." She starts to clear the table.

"I don't know about that, " I mutter, taking my plate to the kitchen.

~~~ //

I sit in my room, watching the mantis move around in

the jar. She really is a beauty. I'll let her out tomorrow, but I needed just a little more time to admire her. \*insert facts\*. I can't help but wonder about the conversation at the dinner table. My mom is a great teacher! Why would they make us get on some stinking old bus anyway, and take away Mama's job? We were just fine before the county got involved. I bet those Pelbrook teachers won't even want us anyway. They don't even know us! And we don't even live in town. School is going to stink this year.

Hey, maybe Kathy can come up with a plan. I run downstairs.

"Mom, can I run down to Kathy's for a little bit? Please?" I beg.

"Tonight? It's almost seven o'clock!"

"I'll be home before it gets dark. Please?"

"Oh alright." I kiss her cheek and head out the door at a run. "But be home by eight!"

Our house is right off the main road, so the dirt path that leads up to my cousin Kathy's house is just a little ways down the street. As I start up the path, easing to a brisk walk, I can't help but notice all the sounds just before sunset. The frogs are bellowing loudly now, and the crickets sing along. It's such a different music from the tunes of the morning birds, but I find it just as

fascinating in its own way.

I ring the doorbell, and my aunt Claire answers. Her full name, Clarisse, is French. She came down to visit Pelbrook one time on vacation, and fell in love with my mom's brother. She decided to stay in our little town with him, and become part of the family. She welcomes me in.

"I think Kathy's upstairs dear." She flashes me her movie star smile. When she was younger in her twenties, she was a French model. She's shown us her magazine covers at least a dozen times. I asked her once why she decided to stop and move here.

"Well, it was great fun for awhile, but eventually I just wanted to settle down somewhere quiet, away from the spotlight. Have a little girl." She's so nice. And she makes the best french baguettes I've ever tasted.

I head upstairs and knock on Kathy's door.

"Password?" I hear her call from inside.

"Waterlily." We just started seeing them wilt away in the pond. It was a sad day.\*

"Proceed." She opens the door, bowing and waving me into her room. I bust up laughing. "Do you think I should add a mustache?" She holds a fake mustache up to her lip.

"Definitely!" I laugh harder, and she joins me. It takes us forever to manage to stop, but then we get down to

business. Our moms are pretty strict about us being out after dark. I fill her in on the conversation I heard at dinnertime.

"You mean we have to change *schools*?" I nod. "This stinks. I heard that in public schools they make you go in different rooms and split you by grades and stuff. What if we're not in the same room together? And I don't want a new teacher. Aunt Ellen is awesome."

All I can do is nod again.

"But what can we do about it?" I think for a moment. "Maybe we could refuse to go to Pelbrook!"

"It couldn't hurt to try anyway," Kathy replies. "I doubt our moms will go for it. I can definitely see my mom shoving us on the bus herself."

I smile at the thought. "But if we will probably get forced to go anyway, we could try right? It might be worth that little possibility of good."

"K, so what exactly are we going to do? Stand at the door and refuse to get on the bus?"

"No. We'll have to be more clever about it."

Just then, Aunt Claire yells up the stairs. "It's almost dark! You'd better head home Laura!"

"Grr. Always the worst timing." I hug Kathy, and wave goodbye to Claire as I sprint down the stairs and head

home.

~~~ //

I spend the next month planning. What could I do to keep us from getting stuck on that bus to Pelbrook? Then I realized the key element in getting us there: the bus. If something just happened to go wrong with the bus, then I guess we'd just have to learn right here in our own town, wouldn't we?

I whispered my plan to Kathy at church Sunday.

"Damage the bus?" she accused. "Isn't that a felony? There's no way we'd get away with that."

"We don't have to really hurt it too much," I whisper back. "Just delay it long enough that we're too late to school."

"And how exactly do you plan to pop the tires without anyone noticing? I don't think this is such a good idea."

My mother gives that look. The one that says "you know you're not supposed to be talking in church".

"Don't worry. I've got it all covered," I whisper back hurriedly.

~~~//

And I did have it all covered, or so I thought. My cousin Jimmy has a tire shop. I thought he'd be glad to make me some spiky planks. Turns out, not so much.

"Now Laura, you know I couldn't go and do a thing like that. What's gotten into you kid?"

"Well, I thought you'd want to help Mom get her job back. Apparently not," I grumble.

"Now what's all this? Isn't that bus gonna take your mama down to that school with you?"

"No. They let her go, closed the door, vaminos! Why else did you think I wanted to damage a bus? I don't hate school that much."

He laughs. "I know kid. You and that brother of yours can't ever get enough of learning, can you? I should have known this had something to do with family."

"Does that mean you'll make my tire-popping contraption?"

"Not exactly. It'll only get you into a heap of trouble and won't solve anything. What you need is a better solution."

"But I've been trying to come up with a better solution! I spent the last month trying to come up with a better solution! And I just don't see how I'm getting out of getting shipped off to Pelbrook," -I spit the word out of my mouth- "without doing something about that bus!"

"I know darlin'." He pulls me into a hug. "I'll tell you what. I'll keep thinking about what I can do to help

you with your problem, but I have to ask you something first. Have you been talking to your mama about this? It might be she's already working on a solution to this job problem of hers."

Yeah, folding everyone's laundry in town. Except Grandma keeps trying to tell her that isn't gonna be enough this time. "I'll talk to her," I say sweetly. "But you'll keep your promise? You'll help me find a solution?"

"I'll try my hardest kiddo."

~~~//

It's the day before school starts, and I'm getting really nervous. I still haven't heard from Jimmy. I walk into his shop.

"Well hey there, Laura, how are you doing today?" It comes out muffled from beneath the car he's working on.

"Have you come up with any solutions yet? School starts tomorrow!"

"I do... but you're not going to like it."

"What is it?"

"Well, it's something I've been looking into for your mom. I'm going to talk to her about it while you're at school tomorrow."

"Wait, school? You mean in Pelbrook?!"

"This isn't the kind of situation that gets fixed

overnight hon, and you're not going to miss any days of your education in the mean time."

I glare at him.

"I'm serious," he continues. "Refusing to go to school will do nothing to help solve your mother's problems. It could actually get her in trouble."

Get her in trouble? I hadn't thought of that.

"So I really have to get on that bus? You're sure there's no way around it?"

"Sorry sweetheart. But I'll talk to your mama tomorrow and hopefully things will pick up soon."

"I sure hope so."

I left Jimmy's to go tell Kathy the bad news. She's as bummed as I am.

"Well, I guess we'll get to meet our new classmates tomorrow," she sighs.

~~~//

I wake up sweating. First day of school. Great. I slowly creep out of bed to throw on some clothes. Maybe if I move slow enough, I'll miss the bus and won't have to go.

"Honey, hurry up or you'll miss breakfast! Either way, you'

re not missing that bus!" I smell pancakes downstairs.

Grumbling, I pick up the pace. No point missing a decent

breakfast.

"Well don't you look cheery," Mom says, handing me a plate full of pancakes. "You'd think the world was going to end."

"Yeah, well, I'd be a lot happier if I didn't have to switch schools and spend Forty-five minutes on a big bus the shade of mustard. Really, it's enough to make anybody in their right mind grumpy."

"Sorry dear. But sometimes we need changes to be made. Keeps us on our toes, right?" She's starting to look frail from the stress.

"Seems like pointless change to me." I stuff in a mouthful of pancakes.

"Oh, five minutes 'til. Your backpack's by the door. Hurry along now." I peek over at the door. Shoot. She's got it all neat and read to go. There goes plan A.

I grab my backpack, swinging it over my shoulder and slamming the door behind me. I wonder how slowly I can walk down my driveway. The bus would probably wait for me anyway. I sigh.

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The bus is rumbling down the road, rattling us around like cheap jars in poor packaging. So far my cousin, me, and another boy from town are the only passengers. I wonder

if we will be the only ones on this bus.

"I thought you weren't coming," Kathy said. "What happened?"

"Mom intervened. A little too happily. Maybe she's glad, sending us off to some other school?"

"I doubt that. She was probably just putting on a brave face for you, helping you look on the bright side."

"Yeah, maybe..."

The bus stops to pick up two more girls. We must be getting close to town. They take a seat a couple rows behind us, giggling together. I wonder what grade they're in? One girl has blonde hair that cascades down in curls around her face. Her laugh sounds like bells. I bet the teachers adore her.

There are a few more stops. Almost everyone pauses to say Hello to blondie. It seems her name is Paige. I knew lots of people must like her. Maybe I will too. Hopefully I'll have class with her.

We finally reach our new school in Pelbrook. It's huge compared to our little schoolhouse. It's gotta be almost the size of the supermarket! I ask the bus driver for directions to the office, and he points the way. That's where Mama said we should stop first once we got to school.

Kathy and I walk in the direction of the office. It

feels like we're the only ones who have no idea where we're going. When we reach the first building, there's a door labeled "office". Thank goodness.

There's a counter with a lady there, and she prints off our "schedules". Apparently there's a different classroom for every subject here. Kathy and I check to see if we have any the same, just in case. No luck though. I guess that's what happens when you're in different grades here. We used to spend the whole day together; at least we still have lunch at the same time.

I look at my schedule: math first, in room 102. With the help of the map I picked up in the office, I find it without any trouble.

Change so she is not originally cynical about Paige. Make it so she sees it as a bright side to a new school**

I notice Paige, the blonde girl from the bus, talking with a group of friends. I go over and at a desk near her and her group. Maybe I will have a friend in my classes after all.

She leans over to me as the class begins to take their seats.

"Don't I know you from somewhere? You're one of the new girls on my bus, right?"

"Yeah. This is my first day here. They closed down my school in insert small town name."

"Oh... you're from small town? That's nice..." I couldn't tell if she was being sarcastic or not. I let the conversation drop, and the teacher walked in to start class. Is there something wrong with small town?

~~~ //

I told Kathy about it at lunch.

"I don't think she meant anything by it. She was probably just trying to make conversation," she reassures me. "What could be wrong with small town?"

"But we live in small town. What if other people hate it as much as we dislike Pelbrook?"

"Well, we don't really hate Pelbrook. We're just mad our school got closed down. Pelbrook is great for the supermarket and shopping."

"Good point." I munch on a carrot and scan the room. I guess this is a pretty good place too. It's huge, but it has its own lunchroom, and there's a music teacher. If it hadn't been my mom that lost her job, I might actually like this place. There are way more kids-- and they aren't practically all related. Heck, I hardly know anyone here! It's kind of exciting.

"Do you think we'll make any new friends here?" I ask

Kathy.

"Oh sure! I met this girl Samantha in some of my classes. She's pretty cool. Wouldn't it be awesome to have some other girls to play with too?"

"Yeah, definitely. Maybe there are some perks to Pelbrook." I wave goodbye and head to my next class.

~~~ //

The bus ride some doesn't seem as long as the one here. I smile and wave when Paige gets off at her stop. She smiles back.

I rush through my front door to tell Mom about my day. I meet my grandmother in the kitchen.

"There's celery and peanut butter on the table, if you're hungry." I notice my brother is already helping himself. I join him before there's none left. "So how was school?" she asks. "Was it as rotten as you'd hoped?"

I blush. "Actually, it was pretty cool. They have a music teacher, and a science lab, and tons of classrooms. And who knows, maybe I might meet a new friend or two. There are way more kids there."

Grandma just laughs. "So it wasn't bad after all."

"No." I blush again.

"They have a mad scientist lab?!" brother exclaims.

"No silly!" I laugh. I explain to him on the way to my

room.

~~~ //

\*time passes, more school days. Add later\*

Suzanne came home on the bus with Kathy today.

"Isn't this great?" she exclaims, looking back and forth at us. "I love this school!"

It would be great... if I were having the same kind of luck. No one seems to like me. The other day, I asked Michelle if she wanted to come over and play sometime, and I'd show her my bug collection. She just looked over at Paige, and laughed. So that didn't go very well.

Since Suzanne starting sitting with us at lunch, I've tried to chat with Paige a few times. She never says anything mean, but she always gives me this perfect, ungenueine smile. Aren't smiles supposed to be nice? Like puppy dogs, rainbows, and male dung beetles? How could someone turn something so nice into something so rotten? But maybe she doesn't mean it that way. Maybe she just sucks at smiling. That's the worst part-- she never says anything mean, so I have *no clue*.

Kathy and Suzanne are giggling at something I missed. I smile like I was paying attention.

~~~ //

"Kathy, how come everyone likes you so much?" I ask her

later that weekend.

"Not everyone likes me. Toby in my math class *hates* me." She flips through one of her mom's travel magazines.

"Yeah, but plenty of other people like you, like Suzanne and Angela. Even Michelle waves to you in the hallways!"

"Oh. Well, we just kinda get along. Like Suzanne and I both love to read, so we're always talking about different books. And Angela is amazing when it comes to movie reviews. I guess it's really just about having something in common to talk about. The rest happens from there."

"Hmm. Something to talk about..." I wave goodbye to Kathy and start heading home. Then it hit me, the perfect idea to bring to school tomorrow.

~~~ //

It was beautiful, its body glistening in the sun like a gemstone. After an hour of searching I found one, and carefully put it in the jar.

"I just know she's going to love you," I whisper, watching as it settles in its new habitat. "How could she not appreciate something so beautiful and hard working?"

I carried my prize home, ready for school the next morning.

~~~ //

I wake up, checking to see that my lovely friend is still in her jar. She is, thank goodness. I don't have time to search my room for her! I carefully place the jar in my backpack and head downstairs.

"My, you're in a hurry to get to school today!" Mom hands me a plate of toast. "What happened to the mopey girl I usually see on school mornings?"

"I'm thinking today's going to be a pretty good day," I smile.

"Glad to hear it Pumpkin."

I finish my last few bites of toast and hustle out to the bus stop. Kathy meets me shortly after.

"Woah. You beat me out here today! Was you're mom extra on top of things this morning or something?"

"Nope. I was just thinking about what you said about finding something to talk about. I've got the perfect idea." I reach for my backpack to pull out my friend when the bus shows up. "I'll show you later," I tell her.

We hop on the bus. I sit anxiously, waiting for Paige's stop. When do I show her? Do I show her once she gets on, or once we get to school? After school probably isn't the best option. I don't want to keep my pet cooped up in a jar for that long. In the hallway, on the way to our first class: that's my best bet. I smile. This was going to be a

great day.

~~~ //

We finally arrive at school. I can hardly sit still I'm so excited. And nervous. I wait until her other friends head to class before I run and catch up.

"Hey Paige." I fall into stride beside her. "I brought something awesome I thought you'd like to see." She peeks over, curious, as I reach into my bag. I pull out the jar, and her expression goes from surprise to distaste.

"Look, see how she sparkles in the light?" I say cautiously. "And there's such intricate patterning on her abdomen." I reach my hand into the jar, and my friend's many legs tickle my palm as she crawls into my palm.

Paige shrieks, backing up into the row of lockers. "You... How dare you! You're such a... freak!" she screams, eyes full of loathing.

"It's only a little orb spider," I explain, dejected. "She won't hur-"

"I don't care! Keep your disgusting bugs and you're freakish ways away from me!" Paige storms off to class.

I head out to the school lawn, trying to hide moist eyes. What was her problem anyway? Apparently no one taught her to find beauty in the life around us. I kneel down to a blade of grass and let my small friend, perhaps my only

friend, crawl back to nature. I will be late to class. I honestly don't care.

I sit there in the grass maybe two minutes, watching the spider crawl away in search of a place to build her web. It doesn't feel long enough. Why does this have to be so hard? Am I just made to be lonely, with no friends but the creatures I catch and release?

It's time to face class, so I wipe my eyes and head down the hallway. I walk in and quietly slip into my seat.

"You're tardy, Laura." My teacher frowns.

"Yes sir."

He marks it in his notes and continues teaching. Paige and one of her friends are whispering and giggling. I sink lower in my seat, wishing I was invisible.

Somehow I make it through first period, and rush out of the classroom, avoiding Paige at all costs. But word travels fast. People are snickering in the halls and looking at me. A few actually point and laugh outright. My life is over. I'm completely humiliated.

~~~ //

I hoped it'd get better by the end of the day. I'd hoped the newness would wear off. It didn't. I thought they'd get bored of teasing me, or forget. They didn't. As I get on the bus, I keep wishing I lived close enough to

walk home. I wasn't looking forward to 20 minutes more of Paige.

~~~ //

Somehow, I made it home. Kathy gave me a worried look, then headed home. She knew I'd come talk to her when I was ready. I slumped home, feet dragging.

"You're home!" my brother shouts. His brow furrows. "Laura, what's wrong?"

"It was a long day. Don't worry about it Bud."

"Why was it such a long day?" Grandma peeks her head around the corner from the kitchen, looking concerned.

"Let's just say I won't be making any new friends soon," I mutter. "There's no way I'm going back to school tomorrow," I declare louder. "They humiliated me. I can't live through that again."

"Who did? What happened?" Now she was definitely all ears. I explained what happened, and how I was treated.

"Hmm. We'll see about this," was all she said. But I knew that look.

"No, please don't get involved. If you call the school, or the principal, it will only make it more unbearable!"

"Fine. For now. But if this girl causes you any more problems it needs to be dealt with."

"Believe me, I plan to stay as *far* away from her as

possible." I head upstairs to my room. I try to get into my classification books, but even that can't distract me right now. I can't live through another day like today. I have to find a way to stay off that bus tomorrow at all costs.

~~~ //

In the morning, I act like everything is normal. I eat my breakfast, and try to smile. Mom tries to act like she's not worried about me, but she's doing a poor job. I got way more jam than usual on my toast this morning, and sugar crystals on top. I never get sugar for breakfast.

I grab my backpack and head out to the bus stop. This is where my plan begins. Luckily I beat Kathy again this morning. I don't want her convincing me to go. I cross the street and hide behind the bushes (rhododendron?) there. They completely hide me from the road.

I see Kathy arrive at the bus stop. She looks up my driveway, waiting for me. I feel a pang of guilt. Maybe I should have filled her in on today's plan, so she doesn't worry. It's too late now though.

I hadn't really thought about what I was going to do after the bus leaves. I certainly can't go home; Mom would be furious. She already has enough on her plate without worrying about my new found desire to skip school and break the law. Would the school call, if I wasn't there? Would

Kathy say something by mistake? Maybe Mom would find out no matter what I did. I watched Kathy get on the bus. Could I risk it? Was it worth the trouble I'd be in? Could I really afford to add one more stress to my mom's shoulders?

Grimly, I ran from my hiding place to get on the bus before it took off. Here goes the start of another rotten day.

~~~ //

I wish I could say today went better than I'd hoped, but it didn't. Less people laughed out loud, but there was still plenty of snickering. Just like yesterday, I somehow made it to after school. At least it was a little better today. How long would it take to wear off completely though? Seriously, was it my destiny to spend my life as a lonely hermit?

"Hey," a boy says cheerfully as he sits on the bench beside me.

"Um, Hi," I reply cautiously. Doesn't he know its social suicide to be talking with me?

"So I heard that you brought a spider for Paige McIntire. Is it true?"

"Yeah," I said flatly. So he'd come to humiliate me. I could see the smile creeping up already.

"Was it really a tarantula, or was it scientific orb

spider?I've heard it told both ways." He smiled at me, more genuine than I expected.

"You know the scientific name for the orb spider?" I ask incredulously.

"Well of course. Doesn't everybody who's anybody?" His eyes laugh. "So it really was an orb spider? Did you find it on its web?"

"Yeah. It was beautiful, unruined yet. I have a large field behind my house, so I can take my pick of insect habitat."

"Really? Awesome! Can I come over and check it out sometime?"

"Sure, if you want." My bus arrives, and I pick up my bag. That certainly went different than expected. I turn to ask him his name and tell him I have to go, but he's standing too.

I point at my bus. "Do you ride that bus too?"

"Since the beginning of the school year. Haven't you noticed?" he teases.

"Sorry," I blush.

"No biggie." He smiles wide. "My name's Alex. Nice to officially meet you."

"I'm Laura." I shake his outreached hand.

"I know," he smiles, and heads for the bus. What am I

going to do about this strange new situation? Alex.

~~~ //

The next few days, Alex starts to sit next to me on the bus. It seems he's almost as much of an expert on insects as me. Almost. Today he's coming over after school, to explore the field.

When we reach my house, I give him a tour of the backyard. I show him the stream, and the best hideouts for finding fascinating creatures. We lay in the grass, intently watching the life hopping around.

"This is really an awesome place. You're so lucky to have such a great spot," he says.

"Don't you have a good place to scavenge in Pelbrook? It seems big enough."

"Not really. There's a park nearby, but its not left wild like this field is. There are nearly as many bugs. Small town is really an awesome place."

"Well, you're welcome to come collect here as often as you'd like," I laugh. "There's plenty of insects to go around."

~~~ //

Life wasn't so bad after that. The kids at school finally grew bored of teasing me, or forgot. Paige continued to keep her distance. But really, it didn't matter anymore.

There were people who mattered, who were smart enough to see the beauty in the outside. They liked me just the way I was, bugs and all. Maybe that's what it's really about, learning whose opinion counts and whose doesn't. Well, if so, I think I'm off to a good start.

(End)

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