

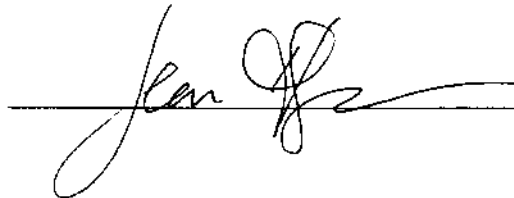
Small Town

An Honors Thesis (HONORS 499)

by

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Jean Harper

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jean Harper", is written over a horizontal line. The signature is stylized and cursive.

Ball State University
Muncie, Indiana

May 2003

December 2003

Acknowledgements

- * I owe great thanks to my advisor, Jean Harper, for her encouragement and support throughout this project. Thank you for taking on the role as my advisor.
- * Thank you, Justin Wagner, for being my rock during this project. You mean the world to me.
- * A big thanks to my family and friends for sharing their memories with me when I experienced writers block. I cannot wait for you to read the finished product!
- * And, most importantly, thank you Kendallville for giving me great memories worth writing about.

Cast List

Mom

Dad

Holly- my sister

Heather- my best childhood friend

Krista- a close childhood friend

Zach- my first boyfriend

Mandie- my best friend in the seventh grade

Kacie- my best friend in high school

Mendy- another close high school friend

The light breeze carries the train's woeful tune through the open screen into my ear, my mind, my imagination. The shrill and piercing sound, faintly resembling the tune of a broken kazoo at a New Year's party, gives me comfort as I sit by the open window. I gaze into the cornfield, watching the cornstalks sway to the breeze and to the train's constant tune.

I know the song of the train. I have heard the whistles, the clanking, and the screeches many days of my life. The reoccurring sounds have become predictable. Monotonous. Expected. They are what I crave, my treasured normalcy.



"Well, I was born in a small town

And I live in a small town

Prob'ly die in a small town

Oh, those small communities"

Welcome to Kendallville, Indiana. In this small Midwestern town, located in the northeast corner of Indiana, you will see, smell, and hear typical small town America. Large oak and maple trees line the streets. In the fall, the aroma of burning leaves fills the air. Green streetlights light up the town as dusk falls. A church stands on every corner, tall and ornate, commanding the attention of passersby. Kendallville Middle School, a hulking brick building in the center of town, highlights Kendallville's rich architectural history. East Noble High School sits on the south side of town. A YMCA and Youth Center allow for many activities, such as t-ball and gymnastics for the younger crowd, dances for the middle school aged, and swimming and aerobics classes for all ages. Historic Main Street possesses three- and four-story turn of the century buildings that contain stores, business offices, and even ice cream shops in the first floor. Main Street also provides the perfect strip for cruisers to race and socialize on the weekends. On other streets, beautiful historic homes sit grandly beside dilapidated houses. Fast food joints, like McDonalds, Dairy Queen, and Arbys comprise much of U.S. 6, one of Kendallville's main arteries. Factories surround the outside of Kendallville. Wal-Mart is also on U.S. 6. A common occurrence in a small midwestern town: always seeing someone you know on your weekly Wal-Mart run.

"Hi there!"

"How's school been goin' for ya?"

"Great. How have you been?"

"Really well."

"Well, I'll see you around!"

"Ok, see ya." In a small town like Kendallville, most people at least recognize your face and probably know a few things about you.

"Guess who I saw at Wal-Mart?"

"Who?"

"Monica Smith. I heard from John that she lost her job and got pregnant by that Bill guy."

"Oh wow. You know, her whole family disowned her because of that pregnancy."

You get the picture. Like other small towns, the Kendallville rumor mill is always overflowing with juicy gossip.

Bixler Lake is often the butt of town jokes, as it once was rumored to contain raw sewage. It was also rumored that people often bathe in the lake during the summer months.

The park surrounding Bixler Lake contains many of Kendallville's make-out spots. People alternate between the gazebo, the parking lot, and the ever-popular nature trails. The nature trails are a good option during the day, as you and your loved one can hide beneath the leafy green foliage. At night, the gazebo and parking lot work well as they are not in well lit areas.

In northeast Indiana, we experience all four seasons. The summers in Kendallville are hot, sticky and sweaty, with an even number of sunny and stormy days. Some days begin without humidity, the sky clear and blue, but end in stormy chaos as clouds and dew points build, causing the sky to drop buckets of rain. The summer stickiness lessens as September approaches, and by October, the leaves on the oak and maple trees turn gorgeous shades of orange and burgundy. The air becomes crisp and dry, the perfect atmosphere for Kendallville's famous Apple Festival. By November, northerly winds usher in the first signs of winter, from frost and freezing rain to snow. Winter takes hold, as temperatures drop and a white blanket of snow covers the ground. For the next three months, cold temperatures and the occasional snowfall forces people to hibernate, although when the temperature rises above fifty degrees in mid-February, people celebrate by riding in their cars with windows down and music blaring. By April, flowers bloom and the air turns warm again, thus giving Kendallville citizens the license to celebrate yet another season of warmth and sunlight.



"Educated in a small town

Taught the fear of Jesus in a small town"

First Communion

In kindergarten, Mrs. Welfle taught me how to write my name in Crayola, tie my shoes, and told me how God created the world in seven days. In first grade, Sister Deborah taught me how to pray the rosary, recite the Hail Mary with a great deal of conviction, and sing 'O Queen of Heaven' until my throat hurt.

By second grade, God was everywhere. My teacher, Miss Teders, was an ex-nun turned second grade teacher. With a soft voice and a petite stature, Miss Teders did not particularly strike me as intimidating. Kids in my class were even taller than her. But when provoked, the demure Miss Teders would transform herself. If we failed to cooperate in religious studies, she would point at us and shout, "Do you want to get your first Communion?"

"Yes, Miss Teders!" we would reply in unison, shaking in our tiny wooden chairs.

Communion was a big deal. Miss Teders explained why we were eating the body of Jesus. She told us, "The piece of bread symbolizes Jesus. When you take the bread, don't chew it—let it melt in your mouth." I didn't want to hurt Jesus, so I practiced for the big day often, using various food items to act as the host. Sometimes Holly and I would play "First Communion" with Better Cheddars.

"Body of Christ," Holly would solemnly say as I held one palm in the other, facing my hands out toward the round yellow cracker. I let the cracker melt in my mouth, and wondered: would the unleavened bread taste as good as a Better Cheddar?

I couldn't wait to taste the bread. And I wanted to do what the older kids did. Tuesday and Thursday were church days. When communion time approached, all of the third, fourth, and fifth graders would slowly walk up the center aisle of church to receive the coveted Body of Christ. It reminded me of a wedding procession, each step slow and timed. We watched closely as Father Woodman would place the small, round piece of unleavened bread in their hand. They would place the bread in their mouths, make the sign of the cross, and walk up the aisle, trying not to giggle.

The big day finally came. My curly brown hair, freshly permed, lay flat under my flowing white veil. My white J.C. Penney's dress itched and my white panty hose kept sliding down. As I entered St. Mary's church, nervous jitters shook my tiny body. I saw my classmates, the girls clad in white dresses similar to mine, the boys in suits, looking like miniature businessmen going to a job interview. Fidgety and anxious, we squirmed in the wooden pews waiting for Father Woodman to start the mass. After what seemed like hours, communion time began.

I stood up and adjusted my panty hose. We filed out of our pews, and I turned around and saw Mom, Dad, and Holly smiling at me. Miss Teders also sat behind, beaming at her class of First Communicants. I took a few steps, and at once, was in the procession. Father handed Missy the bread of life, then Lucy, then Heather, and finally me. I looked up at Father as he solemnly said, "This is the body of Christ." I took the bread in my hand, put it in my mouth, and let it melt. The unleavened bread, small, white, with an imprint of a cross on its surface, tasted nothing like a

Better Cheddar. It tasted more like foam with a hint of cardboard. I made the sign of the cross, and tried my hardest not to giggle as I raced back to the pew.

Lessons in Modesty

The Ten Commandments were a hot topic for second graders at Saint Mary's Catholic School. Miss Teders taught us the "kid" version of the commandments. "Thou shall honor thy father and mother" became "when mom or dad wants you to clean your room, you should always do what they say." Each commandment was important, and not following them would result in serious consequences. One of the "kid" commandments, "Thou shalt be modest," struck a chord with me. Miss Teders defined modesty as properly clothing yourself, and not revealing body parts, like your belly button. I became self-conscious about what I wore, and tried my hardest not to break this commandment.

Second grade was also a prime time for Barbie play. Heather and I spent afternoons styling Barbie's silky blonde hair into the latest styles, and dressing her voluptuous body with skimpy outfits. One day, Heather and I prepared our Barbies for their latest outing—a date with Ken. The Barbie to Ken ratio was thirty-to-one, so date preparations always took a while. As I squeezed one Barbie into a tight, eighties-style neon green mini-dress, I thought of Miss Teder's stern lecture over modesty. "Heather!" I exclaimed, "This Barbie is immodest!"

"So is mine!" she replied, holding up her scantily clad Midge doll. With long red hair flowing and a short jean skirt with matching leather bra top, Midge resembled a prostitute ready for a high night on a random street corner.

With that observation, the immodest Barbie was born. Heather and I grouped Barbies according to their levels of modesty. The modest Barbies wore conservative clothing—long, flowing dresses, baggy sweatshirts, and jeans. They were the epitome of all things good in the world and were lavished with our complete attention. The immodest Barbies, condemned to the dark corner of the room, wore skimpy clothes that barely covered their plastic bodies.

Sometimes they were even naked.

Occasionally, we brought out the immodest Barbies to wreak havoc on modest Barbie land. They would yank modest Barbie hair, stomp on modest Barbie head, and even steal modest Barbie boyfriend. Ken had a weakness for the immodest crew. But the modest Barbies always won him back with their high morals and dedication to the Ten Commandments.

Heather and I were sure we had a place reserved in heaven based on our religious Barbie play. Good always overcame evil. We knew it was what Miss Teters and God would want.

Antifreeze

I loved Zach, but he did not love me. Zach loved me, but I did not love him. Fifth grade at St. Mary's proved to contain more drama than a single episode of *Days of Our Lives*. When Zach and I were on good terms, he wrote me romantic love notes. Once he drew me a picture of a lovesick boy whose eyes had become hearts and whose tongue hung out of his mouth like a dog. Zach told Ryan to give it to me at recess. I blushed at the silly caricature, showed my best friends Heather and Heidi (who said Zach had the hots for me), and hid it in the back of my desk so Ms. Chagnon would not find it. Zach really was the man of my dreams, with dark brown hair, a cute smile, and deep brown eyes that sparkled, especially when he shot chocolate milk out of his nostrils. Zach always made me feel like his number one girl, but in a class with ten other eligible bachelorettes, his wandering eye proved the demise of our magical relationship.

After two weeks of bliss, one of Zach's compadres dropped a bombshell on me. "Zach doesn't want to go with you anymore," Mike told me.

"How could he!" I cried to Heidi as we filed into the school after recess. He told me he loved me in all five of the love notes he so carefully wrote. My heart broke as I remembered the good times, the covert glances in the classroom and the way he would accidentally brush up against my arm when he strolled to sharpen his pencil.

I made my way back into the classroom, and furiously wrote Zach a note, asking him why he would dump me after he told me he loved me. Maybe he likes Nicole or Lindsay L., I fumed. I gave him the note in person during bathroom break, and ran to the back of line, waiting for his response.

The response never came. Instead, Zach began flirting with other girls, leaving my broken heart in the dust. During recess, he never asked me to play basketball on his team anymore. He asked the other girls instead, and made fun of me if I missed a shot and ignored me if I would retaliate.

One recess, on a particularly gray day, fifth grade decided to play kickball. Of course, I was not on Zach's team. I ran to kick the squishy red ball, and managed to aim it right into first base, where I was called "out." Zach proceeded to make fun of me. "Can't you kick the ball up the center?" he mocked, and rolled his eyes as I tried to respond. Fuming, I spotted Zach's blue jacket haphazardly situated on the blacktop. When he was not looking, I began to stomp on his beloved blue jacket in a nearby puddle of antifreeze. I squashed the jacket for every time he made fun of my basketball shot, flirted with other girls, and made me feel insignificant. The shiny blue coat became sticky with gooey antifreeze. Frankie, one of Zach's buddies, saw my act of fury.

"What are you doing?" he yelled at me. Frankie had a reputation for being a bully, so as soon as I saw that he noticed my destruction, I took off towards the school. Frankie chased me and knocked me to the ground. While this occurred, Zach

discovered his sticky blue jacket, and stormed off to tell Sister Teresa, the principal, about the atrocious crime I had committed. I escaped from Frankie's strong grip just as the bell rang, signaling the end of recess. I ran to the front of the girl's line, avoiding Zach's angry glare.

Sister called Zach and me out of the classroom, and sternly asked if I ruined Zach's jacket. I bowed my head and nodded, unable to make eye contact. Zach then said, "Don't worry about it—my mom will clean it up." Sister gave him a questioning stare, and allowed me to return to the classroom.

It's funny how things turn out. Zach, who was my first case of puppy love/heart break ended up being my first real kiss. But that was six years after the antifreeze incident. One day I reminded Zach of the times he made fun of me, hurt my feelings, and nearly got me in trouble. He laughed and shrugged it off by saying, "I only wanted your attention."

Storms

I hate storms. I hated storms. I will always hate storms.

Storms occur frequently in northeast Indiana, especially during the spring and summer months. Loud thunder, high winds, and flashes of lightning accompany these storms. The threat of a tornado is always in place. A siren on the other side of town would always screech if a tornado was in the area. Holly and I would make sure we had the cats, and the family would run to the basement to sit and wait...

Night Storm

3 A.M. I wake up to loud crashes of thunder. I squeeze my favorite Pound Puppy, Spot, and hope the booming goes away. BAM! The thunder continues. "One one thousand, two, two thousand, three, three thousand," I whisper. At "four, four thousand," a thunderous BOOM shakes the house. Tiny figurines sitting on my dresser wobble. I bound out of bed and run to Mom and Dad's room.

"Can I sleep with you until the storm's over?" I ask, my heart pounding.

"Sure, honey," Mom says. I snuggle against her warm body. I feel safe. The storm will never find me here, I think. I cover my ears against the crashing noises, and slowly drift to sleep. I wake up the next morning in my own bed, with Spot under my arm.

Hail

Mom refused to stop mowing the backyard, even as the sky turned from light gray to menacing black. The stalks of corn began to sway impatiently, awaiting the impending storm. Rusty paced around his doghouse, retreating to his small wooden hideaway after the first clap of thunder. I watched as the threatening dark clouds approached from the western horizon, first enveloping the woods, then the cornfield, and finally me. I stood by my swing-set, crying as Mom rushed to finish mowing. The ominous black sky finally burst with rain, and we raced inside. Mom made me go to the basement. I quickly ran down the stairs. Loud bangs, crashes, and thuds pealed through the corridor. I curled into a ball on the scratchy foam couch, covering my ears and shivering in the cool dark. After five minutes of hiding from the storm's wrath, Mom yelled at me to come upstairs. She picked me up and held me tightly, pacing back and forth. White pieces of hail fell from the sky, bouncing off the bay window. Finally, the hail stopped falling and the wind ceased. Mom put me down and opened the sliding glass door, allowing me to pick up a piece of the frozen hail. The hail, the size of Mom's fist, felt cold and slippery. Mom put the piece of hail in the freezer so I could show Dad when he got home from work.



"All my friends are so small town
My parents live in the same small town"

The Burs

Racing down the street on my pink banana-seat bike, nothing could ruin my day. The warm sun beat on my bare shoulders. By the end of the summer, they would be kissed with a coat of freckles. Krista led the pack on our daily excursion to the creek. I was the next oldest, so naturally, I followed Krista. Krista's little brother Tim tagged along and rounded out the pack.

The creek was an outlet of Little Long Lake. The creek area consisted of trees lining the tiny outlet, the water covered with a mossy layer of green goo. A cement wall prevented us from falling in. We looked down into the goo, looking for signs of life. Fish darted to and fro, while the occasional turtle casually popped its slimy head out of the water. Occasionally, we wandered around the cement wall to see how close we could get to the swampy area without falling in.

I felt exceptionally brave that day. I slowly walked down the slope and stuck my big toe in the mucky water. Success! I walked back up the slope only to feel painful tugging on my head. I looked over my shoulder to see my long strands of brown hair covered with prickly burs. I reached to touch my scalp and discovered more burs covering the top of my head. "Krista! Get them out!" I exclaimed. Krista managed to release me from the death grip of the bur tree. Hot tears began pouring out of my eyes as the stubborn burs stuck to my hair. I yanked, pulled, and twisted my quickly diminishing strands of hair. Finally, out of sheer desperation, I rode my bike home.

"Mom, I got burs in my hair!" I cried as I ran into the garage.

"Sit on this stool and let me take a look," she replied. She picked at my head and said, "I think I might have to cut your hair to get them out." Panic overcame me. I took great pride in my dark brown mane and now, I faced the fact that I may look like a boy for the rest of the summer.

"Please Mom, just try and pull them out!"

And she did. For three full hours. She delicately removed each prickly bur until there were none left.

I never ventured past the concrete wall again. Once in a while, the temptation to touch the mucky water reared its ugly head, but the sight of the scary bur bush reminded me to stay away.

The Skyhawk

Mom cried the day we sold the Skyhawk. "It was the best car I'll ever have," she tearfully told my younger sister Holly and me. The Skyhawk had become an intricate part of Mom's persona. For eighteen years, she tooted around town in the small red automobile. Anyone who saw the infamous car knew Mary Jo would be in the driver's seat. It had a distinct look, rounded like the back of a ladybug. It even had a hatchback. Originally, the outside finish was a bright red, but age had faded the hue into a reddish-orange tint. The seats were covered with a red felt fabric with small, round circles that felt bumpy when you touched them. The roof was also covered with the felt fabric. At one point, the fabric came loose from the roof, so Mom resourcefully used silver thumbtacks to prevent it from falling on our heads. The red steering wheel, made out of a hard plastic, was skinny enough for the smallest of hands to wrap around. And the smell—a cross between new tennis shoes and raisins.

She religiously lugged Holly and me to and from school, dance class, and other practices in the Skyhawk. She was even kind to the neighbor kids, who always seemed to need a ride home from the bus stop. She would drive through our neighborhood, dropping every last child off, always waiting in their driveway until they got inside. Sometimes she would honk the horn, which sounded like Donald Duck on his deathbed. Crammed in the tiny backseat between my Lisa Frank backpack and neighbor-boy Matt's Nike Airs, I began to curse my mother's beloved "taxi."

By the time I turned eleven, I thoroughly resented this “ladybug” of a car. It wasn’t simply because it was the “town taxi.” In my prepubescent mind, any car that was older than dirt was deemed not cool. Grand Ams and Camrys were the thing, not 1978 Buick Skyhawks. Just like disco, the Skyhawk had gone out of style in the early 80s. However, this did not faze Mom. “I will keep this car until it falls apart!” she often said.

“But the car is so old and ugly... don’t you want a new one?” I retorted.

“As long as it runs, I don’t need a new one,” Mom said. “Besides, this car is the reason why I’ve been able to stay home with you girls all of these years.” Mom stayed at home while Dad worked long hours at The News-Sun. She took care of Holly and me, cooking, cleaning, and acting as the resident housewife. The Skyhawk had been paid off before Holly was out of diapers. The financial burden of a car payment was non-existent, and Mom was able to do the whole June Cleaver thing.

I was now informed of the reason why Mom had to keep the hillbilly car. However, this new information did not make me loathe the Skyhawk any less. If mom came to pick me up, I would sprint to the car, avoiding eye contact with anyone I would pass. If she drove me to school, I would slouch down in the passenger’s seat, trying my darndest to keep my dark brown mane hidden so fellow students wouldn’t be able to identify me.

After years of this torture, the tireless Skyhawk began to act its age. Even though the car was old, it was always dependable. In its eighteenth year of existence, however, things started to go wrong. Mom often spent at least ten minutes attempting to start the engine every morning. And then it started dying on the road. This scared Mom. "We need to have a family discussion about the Skyhawk," she told Holly, Dad, and me at dinner one night, shortly after the breakdowns began. Like other family meetings in the past, Mom took the liberty of controlling the discussion. "I think I need to get a new car," she said, looking down at her plate full of food. We all knew it had been acting up lately, but didn't want to say anything for fear of upsetting her. "I need something more dependable than the Skyhawk," she added.

"All right!" Holly and I exclaimed. Finally! A new car. A normal car. And most importantly, a nice car. I was so excited I could barely finish my dinner. The next day, Mom reluctantly began the search for a new car and found a great deal on a 1993 Grand Am. She took it.

And so the era of the Skyhawk came to an end. Dad put an ad in the Peddler's Post and quickly found a buyer, an eager 16-year old girl who had wrecked her previous vehicle. I could tell Mom was devastated when the car sold, even though she initially didn't show it.

Mom cried the day we sold the Skyhawk. We stood at the family room window, Mom, Dad, Holly, and me. We watched as the young girl excitedly started

the small red car (after one try, I might add). I realized Mom was crying when the new owner nearly backed into our mailbox on the way out of the driveway. I suddenly felt terrible for all of the times I had resented the car and for feeling triumphant when she finally realized she needed a new vehicle. The Skyhawk had become a part of our family, and most certainly, a part of Mom. I went over and hugged her tightly, watching her beloved red car putt away.

Dad

Tom Hullinger, CPA. Conservative. When we went to MCL Cafeteria, Dad always reminded Holly and me, "Don't let your eyes be bigger than your stomach." Of course, I took too many side dishes, stuffing myself on mac and cheese before I could even get to the chicken leg. Dad would then give me the equivalent of the "money doesn't grow on trees" spiel, and eat the rest of my meal.

Tom Hullinger, music aficionado. Every morning, the sounds of America, Dave Clark Five, and the Beatles would blare out of Mom and Dad's room. He played music when completing menial tasks, from putting away the dishes to washing the van. Music always surrounded Dad. If one of his favorite artists put out a new album, Dad would seek out the best deal and purchase the CD. He went to great lengths to see these artists/bands in concert. When he got word that his favorite band, Ambrosia, was on their "last" tour, he packed up and flew to Los Angeles to see the show, meeting the band in the meantime.

Conservative Dad and liberal Dad confused me. If I wanted the new Beach Blast Barbie, Dad told me to save my one-dollar per week allowance. However, if I went to a music store and found the newest New Kids on the Block tape, a few seconds of puppy dog eyes would ensure me the boy band's crooning for days to come.

As I got older, I recognized Dad's soft spot for music, and realized I shared the same passion. The radio blared when I played Barbies with Holly on lazy Sunday

afternoons, worked on homework, while I took showers—you name it. I was truly my father's daughter.

Apple Festival

In Kendallville, the fall season begins on the first weekend of October at the annual Apple Festival. The intoxicating scent of homemade apple dumplings, pork tenderloins, apple fritters, and spiced apple cider fills the crisp autumn air. Thousands of people crowd the narrow dirt paths at the Noble County Fairgrounds to satisfy their craving for the delicious fall fare. Familiar friendly faces man the various food booths. People from other towns and states come yearly—this is the one time of the year when you can be in Kendallville and meet someone from California.

The dress code is strictly pioneer. Men running the food booths dress in flannel shirts frayed around the edges and wear straw hats. Women with tight buns wear long dresses with wool shawls wrapped around their shoulders.

Raise a Ruckus, an old fashioned, country music review put on by high school students, is performed throughout the festival. The sounds of a four man "Apple" quartet fills the air. You can spit apple seeds, compete in an old fashioned spelling bee or even make your own candle. Antiques for sale fill the Merchant's Building.

It's the same every year. Every food booth is in the same place. Holly and I gorge ourselves on oven roasted almonds, apple dumplings, cider, and caramel corn (in that order). The whole town is there, taking a piece of time and translating it into a Kendallville tradition.

Sports

Every Friday night during basketball season, most of Kendallville goes to watch the glory and the heartbreak of high school basketball. From early on, it seemed that the only way to get noticed in Kendallville was to be an athlete or cheerleader. In my transition from St. Mary's sheltered atmosphere to Kendallville Middle School, I felt I needed to be a cheerleader in order to fit in. Becoming a rah-rah would secure my place in the "cool" crowd, something I desperately wanted.

The competition was fierce. There was perpetually perky Melissa, a short spunky girl who hung out with all the cool girls; Erica, a tall brunette who looked at least sixteen; buxom Elizabeth, the girl all of the guys wanted; and Regina, the goddess/bitch of the soon-to-be seventh grade.

Twenty-five hopefuls learned a cheer dance to "Rhythm is a Dancer." I bopped along, memorizing every twist, turn, and shake in the choreography. I practiced in front of my mirror, in the shower, and on the bus.

Tryouts began. I tried my best, nailing every intricate move in the dance, yelling out individual cheers in my loud cheerleader voice, and turning cartwheels in the enormous gym in front of a table of stern judges. Everything went well until I turned my final cartwheel. I landed, my back facing the judge table. "Let's go Comets!" I shouted enthusiastically to the cement wall. I turned around, smiled nervously at the un-amused judges, and pranced out of the gym.

I didn't make it. I guess the judges were going for an "older" look. Every girl who made it, Melissa, Elizabeth, Erica, and Regina, looked much more mature than me, a 4'8", 80 pound scrawny and flat as a board little girl.

Or maybe they were looking for a girl who cheered to people and not cement walls.

But I bet they'll want me next year when I get bigger boobs.

The Strand

A typical Friday night in seventh grade at the Strand:

- 1) Mom drops a friend and me off at the Strand to "watch" a movie.
- 2) As soon as Mom's car is out of sight, we run to find various people from our grade. Awkward flirting and handholding commences.
- 3) We enter the theatre, filling close to three full rows and making sure we sit next to our significant other or crush.
- 4) The movie begins. We do not even notice. We are too busy throwing Hot Tamales at each other and gossiping over who is "going with" who. This goes on for about two hours...
- 5) The movie ends. We line up by the lone pay phone in the corner to call Mom or Dad for a ride. Last minute goodbyes, hugs, and even kisses occur. We leave the Strand, only to repeat the ritual next Friday.

Lightning Jack was playing at the Strand that Friday night. Heather and I spent an hour applying Bonnie Belle blue eye shadow and light pink lip-gloss. Our jeans were tight-rolled 80s style, and our oversized Guess t-shirts billowed over the tops of our jeans. We were two seventh grade ingénues on a mission: to get boys.

At the last minute, I decided to put on my stretchy navy blue body suit. The last time I wore the body suit, Shane made a comment to Heather—that my chest looked good when I wore it. My double-A cup size was hardly one to write home about, so Shane's comment was a pleasant surprise. Plus, I knew he was going to be at the Strand that night.

Mom dropped us off across the street from the Strand (never in front—how embarrassing!). The streets of downtown Kendallville were filled with the usual cruisers, slowly driving their trucks and cars up and down Main Street. Some die-hard cruisers had neon runners in shades of electric blue and magenta decorating their Fords. Most of the vehicles had bass systems that would rival the amps of a ghetto sled straight out of south central Los Angeles. The difference, of course, was the music. Rather than the sounds of rappers like Snoop Dogg or Dr. Dre resonating from the vehicles, strains of Garth Brooks thumped out of the souped-up trucks.

"Oh my gosh! There he is!" I squealed to Heather as we crossed the busy street. His sapphire flannel shirt brought out his bright blue eyes. He leaned nonchalantly against the front wall of the theatre. I quickly adjusted my bodysuit, making sure my boobs were in place.

Shane held my hand through the entire movie. Our clasped hands dripped with sweat, but I did not want to give up his grip. I spent the entire movie wondering what he was thinking—Were my sweaty palms grossing him out? Did he like my boobs? Did he want to kiss me? After the movie, Heather and I went to the bathroom.

“He said he wants to kiss you,” Heather informed me.

“What?” I had never been kissed, so naturally, I was scared out of my wits. We decided to take the back alley to Baskin and Robbins, where Dad planned to pick me up. Heather ran ahead, joining up with other kids from our grade. Shane held my now-dry hand as we walked down the dark alley. Lofty old buildings surrounded us. It felt like a scene out of an old movie ...only, this was Kendallville. Just outside of the alley were cruisers, honking and proudly showing off their beloved 4 X 4’s.

Baskin and Robbins. Shane looked down at me, and I knew he was about to kiss me. As he leaned down, I turned my head, and his lips hit me in the middle of my cheek. Just as Shane leaned back up, Dad pulled up in the blue mini-van.

“Bye Shane!” I said as Heather and I bounded towards the vehicle. My cheek stung. My heart felt like it was trying to escape my well-endowed chest.

"How was the movie?" Dad asked.

"It was good," I replied, "Just a normal night at the Strand."

My first day of seventh grade, I befriended Heidi. Or actually, Heidi befriended me. Heidi was tall and gangly with stringy brown hair. She had Attention Deficit Disorder and had to go to the nurse's office to take "hyper" pills. People called her "Hyper Heidi." I knew very few kids, with the exception of Saint Mary's buddies who also came to Kendallville Central Middle School. Heidi advised me of the ins and outs of KCMS. "Don't hang out with Jessica or Jenny. They're preps. And Mike and Rob. They're hoods." I went with Heidi to the first football game and talked to some of the preps. This angered Heidi. Soon, I started to associate with the dreaded preps and disassociate with Heidi.

"Didn't you used to hang out with Hyper Heidi?"

"Not really," I replied. I saw Heidi looking at me out of the corner of my eye. I turned my head and walked away.

Three Musketeers

"We'll make it one for all and all for one!" Mandy, Jacque and I belted out. Seventh grade was the year of the Three Musketeers, Mandy, Jacque and me. We had most of our classes together, primped before middle school dances together, ate lunch together, and had many boyfriend crises together. We even had code names—I was Lin-Lin, Mandy was De-De, and Jacque was Shaque because she was tall like the basketball player Shaquille O'Neal.

Mandy was the coolest. Her dad let her paint her room in whatever shade she wanted (sponge painted lilac). He even allowed her to paint her closet all black. Mandy had three sisters and a brother. "I saw my sister smoking pot in her room!" she once told me. Mom never let me spend the night at Mandy's house, no matter how much I begged. "We won't stay up all night, I promise!" I pleaded.

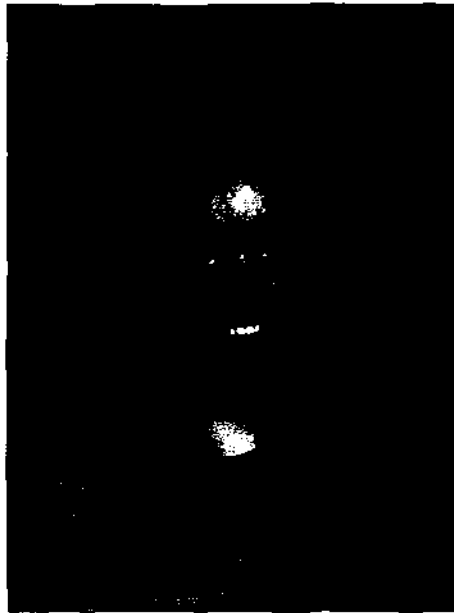
"Is her dad ever there? Or her mom? You need an adult around," said Mom. "I think he will be there. Anyways, we are almost adults" I would retort.

In eighth grade, Mandy stopped calling me to hang out. Jacque had drifted and only called Mandy on occasion. And then Mandy started spending time with the other Mandy in class. They wore button-down work shirts with names like "Ted" and "Ernie" on the front and played "When I Come Around" by Green Day on their guitars. To help separate their Siamese personas, my Mandy changed the spelling of

her name to Mandie. The only time she talked to me was if she needed a ride to school or a dance. I was yesterday's news.

That December, the eighth grade class went on a class field trip to see various vignettes turned into plays. During intermission, I went to the bathroom. In the bathroom stall, I heard Mandie disgustedly tell Mandy, "Guess who I have to sit by? Lindsay Hullinger." Anger and betrayal filled me. I stared at the metal latch on the door of the bathroom stall, debating whether to yank Mandie's long brown hair out of her head or yell at her. "You were my best friend!" I wanted to shout. I knew Mandie used me for rides and for company when her Siamese twin wasn't available. But how was I to know that she despised me?

After the play incident, I barely talked to Mandie. I couldn't even look at her, nor could I really trust any other people. I couldn't let anybody else in. I relied on myself for the rest of eighth grade while Mandie relied on her new friends.



"My job is so small town
Provides little opportunity"

Bakers

At Bakers Fruit and Flower Farm, I carried out bags for crippled old ladies, washed muddy gourds, gave gardeners advice on what type of green bean might grow best in their garden, and dusted endless jars of apple butter—all in a day's work. Bakers closed at six every evening, which worked out well with my schedule, filled with academics and theatre/show choir practice after seven at night. The store on the west side of town on U.S. 6 was the epitome of small-town charm. The customer is always right policy always applied.

"Always greet the customers. Ask them if they need help finding anything. Never leave the main room when customers are in the store. And make sure everything is full and fresh looking." Brian, the owner and boss of Bakers, would preach this mantra daily, trying to mold us into responsible and accommodating sixteen year olds. We complied, putting out piles of bananas, filling the produce case, and always greeting customers.

The Bakers' scent was distinct, a cross between the Southern glazed donuts baked daily by Elaine and the musty smell of an old farmhouse. "You smell like a Bakers girl!" Mom would gush as I breezed by her after work. The musty donut scent transferred its way to my Pontiac Sunbird, the cheap gray interior fabric absorbing and then emitting Bakers signature scent.

Odd and eccentric customers popped in from time to time. There was Banana Man, a gentleman no older than thirty who stopped in every afternoon to purchase

one single banana. He always requested a single brown bag, although we never knew why he used the bag (he never put the banana in the bag). Our sixteen year old minds would go wild imagining what banana man did with the bag. Another odd customer had a fetish with his large round belly. While one of my co-worker's rang up this man and his mother, the man loudly slapped his stomach to the beat of a non-existent song. I stifled laughter as I bagged his groceries. The stomach slapping lasted until the man left the store.

Some of our other memorable customers came from the neighboring trailer park. Rambunctious boys came in with handfuls of pennies to see how much 68 cents would buy. With sticky, dirt-covered fingers, the trailer park boys pawed through boxes filled with Snickers, bubble gum, and caramels. "Do I have enough for this?"

"You have enough for a Snickers, but not the caramels and gum."

"Aww." The boys reluctantly put away the candy and bought the Snickers. Five minutes later, they ran back with enough change to buy the caramels and bubble gum.

The trailer park kids were known to steal, so we always kept a close watch on them. They would stroll down the two aisles, smelling spices, shaking baking ingredients, and squeezing bread. After this, the kids would come up front and sort through the boxes of candy, until they found a winner. Never did I catch a trailer park kid stealing, probably because I stared them down until they left the store.

Tired moms carrying young children stopped in to purchase necessities like gallons of milk and loaves of bread, using food stamps to pay. Food stamps were also used for necessities like Jelly Bellies. A woman once bought 25 dollars worth of the candy with welfare money.

And then there were the old ladies.

"Will you go in the back to get the freshest possible flat of blueberries?"

"These strawberries look overripe. Can I examine all of the other boxes you have?"

"Will you carry the 50 pound box of potatoes to my car?" And, of course, we complied. My bicep size increased tremendously the two years I was employed at Bakers.

In the winter, business tended to be slow. After cleaning lines of shelves and filling the banana shelf to its capacity, boredom took hold. For entertainment purposes, we turned to the items around us. Sometimes we pulled stickers off the fruit and placed them on our apron. By the end of our shift, our aprons were a collage of Dole, Del Monte, and Sunkist. And then there were yams.

Yams have a pinkish-orange tint, and resemble the skin of a ninety-year old man with a bad case of dry skin. Small hairs sprung from the tips of the oddly shaped vegetable. On those slow days, yams provided great entertainment as Heather and I would stick the hairy vegetable into the armhole of our sweatshirts and call each other "Stumpy." However, only extreme boredom led to yam play. And if Brian was away.

Despite long, boring shifts, the temperamental old ladies, and the trailer park kids, Bakers was a great first job. And yes, I still find yams hilarious.



"Got nothing against a big town

Still hayseed enough to say

Look who's in the big town

But my bed is in a small town"

RENT

My choir director was in shock the day of our final performance. "Lindsay, you lit up the stage! I couldn't believe that was you!"

It's about time you noticed, I thought.

I didn't want to go. Yes, it was a week away from home, but dancing and singing eight hours a day did not appeal to me. Show choir camp was something the really "good" choir students did. I was only average, never sang solos, and was always placed in the middle and back corners of the stage in performance. Once in a while I got a dancing partner. Besides, the girl to guy ratio was ten to one. Definitely no chance for a summer camp romance.

I grudgingly went to Show Choir Camps of America in the tiny town of Tiffin, Ohio. I roomed with Lucy, a girl I had known since kindergarten. She was known as the "girl with the big voice" from first grade on. We went to the main hall get our name buttons and group assignments. "What's your name?" the girl signing campers in asked.

"Lindsay Hullinger." She looked around for my button, a very important part of camp. This button allowed you to eat, go to the nightly shows, and most importantly, helped you to remember the names of cute boys you might meet.

"I can't seem to find your button. Here, use this one for now." She handed me a button with the name Bill Hohnke on it. "I am pretty sure he won't be coming," she told me.

"Bill Honke? What kind of a name is that?" But I complied and put the lime green button on my tank top.

"What's up Bill?" Some of my choir mates laughed at my new name.

"Very funny."

Lucy and I moved into our tiny dorm room and then joined some of our choir friends for the special dance group tryouts. Only the best of the best made this elite squad. We danced in large groups and the expert judges chose a select few. Some of the campers not brave enough to try out watched, cheering us on. I noted two guys sitting in the peanut gallery. One had curly brown hair and wore a tie-dye bandana around his head. He was a dead-ringer for Greg Brady. The other also had dark hair and looked about 30. I figured he was a camp clinician.

After the tryouts, the two guys yelled at me. "Hey Bill!" I went back to meet them. The thirty year old asked me, "Why do you have my button on?"

"You're the real Bill Hohnke?"

"Yes I am." Greg Brady laughed.

"The girl said you weren't coming to camp," I said. And you look like you're 30, I thought to myself.

"Well, I guess there'll be two Bill Hohnke's this week," the real Bill told me.

We arrived at 8 AM the next morning to begin learning the music to RENT. Greg Brady was also in my group. He still wore his tie-dye hair band. Doug Jack, our choreographer, wore a goatee and had a pair of silver Oakley's hanging above his collarbone. "If you've been here before, this year is going to be different than any other year," Doug told us.

People in my group knew this play, belting out the words on the first run through. "How we gonna pay last year's rent?" I was in a daze. How can I be singing about some of this stuff, I thought. RENT is a love story times three, featuring a homosexual, heterosexual, and lesbian couple, two of which struggle with AIDS. The message of the story overwhelmed me.

Nobody ever talked about that kind of stuff in Kendallville, and when they did, the conversation usually led to "homosexuals are damned to Hell." Even though people tried to act open-minded, the only "right" sexual preference was to be straight. RENT went against these beliefs.

But I didn't care. Immersed in the lyrics and the music, I laid aside all misconceptions I once held for the groups featured in the musical.

"There's only us; there's only this. Forget regret, for life is yours to miss. No other road, no other way. No day but today."

I picked up on the choreography quickly. Doug saw something in me, something no one else ever had. He put me in the front row for half of the show.

On the day of our final performance, I asked Greg Brady if he had any more tie-dye headbands. He gave me his spare to wear for the performance on the last day.

At the final performance, I lit up the stage with fifty others. We shined. We belted out every word to the musical. And we meant it.

No day but today.

California

Top five reasons why California is different from Indiana:

- 1) There is an ocean. With waves. And salt water.
- 2) They speak an alien language. "Pop" is soda. "Phat" means cool. And "tight" means really cool.
- 3) There are cliffs and mountains with mansions nestles within. Hello Hollywood.
- 4) Crazy people....*really* crazy people live out there.
- 5) The weather is always nice. No snow days.

The Pacific Ocean was more than I had ever imagined. Waves crested high over the boulders fastened tight to the ocean floor. The chilly ocean mist sprayed in our faces as we romped around Malibu Beach like excited puppy dogs that hadn't been let out of the cage in weeks. Gigantic cliffs with huge mansions looming in the hills overlooked the Pacific Coast Highway.

Transported from the flat, monotonous cornfields of Indiana to the rocky Pacific Coast, we were out of our element. California was an alien planet with palm trees lining the streets. In our accidental detour to Crenshaw (a.k.a. the ghetto), we passed many hair weave parlors. One stood out in particular. Instead of a normal sign, this weave store featured a giant head spurting out an afro. We were the minority and never saw Caucasians, a radical difference from all-white Kendallville.

We even referred to carbonated beverages differently. We called Sprite and Coke "pop." They called it "soda."

Kacie's Aunt Sue hailed from Northern California and had not been to L.A. in thirty years. But, she willingly agreed to "chaperone" our excursion. Even our limited Midwest experience proved more worldly than Aunt Sue's. When we got lost in Crenshaw, Aunt Sue asked people at the bus stop for directions. We slumped down in the back seat, hoping not to be shot. Aunt Sue even allowed Kacie to drive her sparkling Lexus on our many nights out. We drove on the winding superhighways, coming in at four and five A.M.

Maury the drunken surfer found us one day on Malibu Beach. We were just finishing writing our names in the sand when the intoxicated man stumbled our way. Maury looked like a strung out Beach Boy with board shorts and a potbelly. "Hi, my name is Maury," he slurred. Our next beach project was to create a person made of sand. Maury contributed to the cause, constructing a giant penis on the sand figure. We quickly ran away when Maury asked when we could meet again. One night in Santa Monica we met Hot neck brace boy. He was from Colorado and liked to ski so much that he had broken his neck in the act. He took us for a ride in his jeep that night. "Let's drive to Tijuana," Hot neck brace boy suggested. Mendy and I white knuckled in the back seat as Kacie convinced him to drop us back off at our hotel.

Later in the week, we met three boys from Oregon who drove down the coast for their spring break in L.A. Derrick let me paint his toenails dark blue and

wore Oakley sunglasses two years before they became popular in the Midwest. Jeremiah had an air of confidence and mystique, a commanding presence that resulted in Kacie and Mendy swooning over him the entire week, despite their coupled status. Ryan had perfected the West Coast, G-funk thing by consistently rolling up his right pant leg and flashing the "west side" gang sign. They bladed, surfed, smoked pot, and spoke bizarre phrases like "tight" and "phat" with the greatest of confidence. They came to visit on our last night at the Casa Malibu. We camped out on the beach while Aunt Sue slept, drank beer, and ran around in the sand. The bright lights of L.A. sparkled in the distance.

I cried the night we left California. I didn't want to face the cornfields, the monotony, and the annoying, immature boys only found in Indiana. The spontaneity, the ocean, bright lights, afro hair signs, luxury cars, and West Coast boys swirled in my mind on that long red-eye flight home. Life did go beyond flat land and endless fields.

Mom

She smiled and laughed as she took cash and gave change to the students. She always looked young. Every day she wore little girl barrettes, delicate pink, purple, and baby blue butterflies, to keep her bangs from falling in her face. The rest of her chestnut brown hair remained in a hairnet. The barrettes always matched the color of her uniform. Today they were blue.

I had on my high school graduation dress, black with tiny blue and gold flowers. I walked up to get my daily dose of fat for the last time from the mashed potatoes, turkey, and chocolate chip cookies abundant in the lunch line. She waited for me at the end of the line, just as she always had for the past four years.

"Hi Mom." She looked up at me, her dark brown eyes teary.

"Do you realize this is the last day you will ever go through my line?"

"Yeah, I guess it is," I replied, my eyes watering. I paid her \$1.25 and exited the lunch line.



"No, I cannot forget where it is that I come from
I cannot forget the people who love me
Yeah, I can be myself here in this small town
And people let me be just what I want to be"

Epilogue

We all grow up in different places. We all have diverse experiences as we move through various stages in our lives.

But we all share the innocence of youth, the awkwardness of early adolescence, and the self-discovery that comes afterwards.

And no matter what, we all have a place we call home.