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# *The Other Half of the Bracelet*

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There's always that girl in school everyone wants to be friends with. She also manages to be the same girl you want to slap upside the head. This one girl fuels the envy of about half the middle school population. She gets the boy, gets the grades, has the money. With every Prada purse she brings to school, every perfect score, and every guy hanging onto her every word, it's a miracle this girl was not mauled by the jealous passersby in the hallway.

I was not this girl. I was the girl who sat *behind* this girl in English. Her name was Natalie. Natalie, with perfect blonde hair (frosted freshly every few weeks) and very rich parents, sat in front of me in Ms. Caballos' class. Because of Natalie I discovered the animal of jealousy, my closest companion. If the animal festering inside me was tangible, it would have the other half of my *BFF* bracelet.

Ms. Caballos' room was always hotter than all the other rooms in Miami Springs Middle School. Being one of the largest middle schools in the U.S., each class was squashed to maximum capacity, and more times than not, room 115 played host to a group of kids who didn't have a substitute for their own class. In this old and warm classroom, the regularly assigned kids were seated at desks, and a handful of other kids sat along the wall, Indian style.

The classroom conditions were pretty terrible but the teacher made us write anyway. Everyday she'd slap a topic on the board and we'd scramble to write. You could hear scratching on paper for about eight minutes, and then came the part everyone hated—everyone but me. We'd read aloud up and down the row. I craved attention. Acknowledgment. Anything. And the animal inside me depended on it. My jealousy needed to be calmed. It would squirm inside me until it ate and then it would relax. Each kid would read and I wouldn't even pay attention because my animal grew restless. Then the teacher would point her short, stubby finger at me and I would read.

Her fat finger was the baton of my orchestra. She pointed, and I performed. The more people the better. New kids, kids who didn't have a substitute, my friends—the jealousy animal needed them to hear every word out of my mouth. And when I finished, the elation would last about five seconds, and then she'd point her chubby finger at Natalie, and she would positively *sing*.

She even had a perfect voice, not nasally like mine. And, she would read so well, Morgan Freeman was probably her father. Morgan-*frikkin'*-Freeman.

And everyday when she'd finish, peace radiated in the classroom. Ms. Caballos' face would contort in a twisted way I assumed was her smile and say, "Now this—" she'd wave her little arms around in excitement, "—is good writing!"

The room may have been hot, but the coldness my jealousy animal radiated could refrigerate your day old milk and make it last another week. To make it worse, Ms. Caballos would always read Natalie's work aloud when she turned in any sort of homework. It could have been a sentence long but she'd still smile in her goofy way and sigh. "Natalie, my dear," she'd say, patting Natalie's shoulder softly, "you are a great writer."

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And she really was. Natalie was *awesome*. She was nice, she was pretty, *and* she wrote well. And I envied not her beauty, but her ability. I am very much ashamed to say that Natalie was one of my closest friends. My animal that grew day by day made me envy the beautiful girl who sat in front of me. The girl who slept over, who braided my hair, who'd come to my birthday parties. And when we sat in Ms. Caballos' class, in the heat and compression, my animal formed. And I'd feed it, like a stray cat, making it linger longer.

I'd see Natalie, how she really was. I saw how she hated writing stories, or how she'd spend no time at all on her homework. This is what angered me. Because every time Ms. Caballos would open her mouth, it was about how amazing Natalie was, and no one else. And never would I hear it about me.

"Natalie will be an author," Caballos said. "What do you all want to be?" So we wrote and then read. I wanted to be an accountant, like my aunt.

Caballos looked at me, then to the class, inviting them to chime in with her fat finger, and just like that, her orchestra of laughter began. And I joined in. "You?" she asked me, her eyebrows cocked.

At the time, I laughed, because that was how I was. I joined in, convincing myself that I could never do that. And my ambition to be an accountant evaporated within those ten minutes. If it was too impossible for her to imagine me as something as normal as an accountant, I didn't dare tell her that my dream was to be an author.

I always have thought that a good writer is one you can continue to read over and over and not tire of. This was my goal, to one day write a novel that someone would pick up and read through again and again.

The annual writing competition of our school came, and Natalie submitted her entry, which I knew was really an essay she had written a previous year for her past class. I worked for a full week on mine and when I handed my paper over to Ms. Caballos, she stared at it, unsure.

"It's my entry," I told her as she examined the paper closer.

"For the contest," I further explained when I saw her blank expression.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, placing the sheet on her desk. "Of course," She gave it a small pat with her chubby hands to assure me she'd read it.

And the next week, Natalie's name echoed on the PA system. She was the winner, and I was crushed. No matter how much I'd try, I'd always fall short of the beautiful girl who sat in front of me.

Natalie and I graduated middle school, leaving room 115 forever. The summer months away from the warm classroom subdued my inner beast and allowed our friendship to continue. My monster, full of the earlier jealousy, hibernated as we visited Miami Beach daily.

In high school, Natalie and I signed up for Creative Writing and we were introduced to Ms. Ferguson, who we nicknamed Fergy. She was young, hip, tattooed, and made us write. A lot. We were challenged; we couldn't turn in our first drafts if we wanted an "A." She made us question our writing, our wording, and question why it is we write. "No clichés, no phrases," she'd say over and over. And as much as I'd wanted to chuck my notebook at her sassy head, I didn't because my respect for her exceeded the tolerance my parents would have when they received the phone call that I was expelled for striking a teacher.

Our class read "The Yellow Wallpaper" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman and I was introduced to short stories. I enjoyed the twist at the end and began focusing on writing with a plot twist. I sat and wrote for hours. We'd bring laptops to school and type away. The year continued and our class of eight read *The Catcher in the Rye*, and I knew that style was for me. It had a kind of twist at the end, it kept me entertained and I read it multiple times.

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Fergy became pregnant, and her mood swings began. Some days she'd enjoy my writings, others she would flat out deny me, but it never got me down. As her baby grew inside her, my writing skills grew alongside him. Outdoing Natalie didn't matter because Fergy never showed preference. With her many mood swings, Fergy was a broad audience. I learned that you cannot please everyone, and your writing will never appeal to everyone in the same way. Fergy taught us that what *we* think is what matters. *We* are our most important audience and a writer should impress *herself*.

For our final project, Fergy stood before our small class, rested her hands upon her pregnant belly and said, "Write about you."

No length specified, and only one rule: it had to be true.

I wrote a novel in three months, wrote a screen play in two weeks, and, somehow, this simple assignment left me staring at the blinking cursor on my computer screen. Everyday I'd sit, and nothing would come. No ideas, no words, just a blank screen. The truth was not pretty. It didn't have the flare my short stories did, didn't have the excitement I craved. My life was average, and that just wasn't ok.

Natalie wrote a poem and had time to spare. My monster growled. I was nowhere near a beginning, much less an ending.

I put my monster down when I finally put my thoughts down on paper:

*I write because the truth doesn't satisfy me.*  
*I write because nothing I say will scream as loud as my words can.*  
*I write because it is my strength.*  
*and my downf*  
*a*  
*l*  
*l.*

And my monster was gone.

I realized that, sometimes, we really do get those kinds of teachers they show in the movies, the ones that tease us and still keep their jobs no matter how horrible they make you feel. I realized that your strengths can hurt you. I realized that I was a totally different person than I ever imagined, and it scared me.

When I was in 8<sup>th</sup> grade, I was still finding myself as a person and as a writer. When I think of how I felt toward Natalie that year, guilt scrapes the lining of my intestines. We all have the ability to grow and incubate one of those little monsters, and I was lucky enough to get rid of it before it ruined a friendship.

I blamed others for my horrible feelings. I accused Ms. Caballos of allowing such a monster to climb inside of me. It was I who offered the jealousy my loyalty, and it was I who decided it was time for it to leave. I couldn't get back those wasted hours, those happy memories I didn't allow myself to have. The only thing I could take back was the bracelet.

Years later, it now encircles the wrist of the beautiful girl who sat in front of me in English class, the girl that everyone wanted to be friends with, and the one who let me become one.