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Designated Dater

Michelle Marek, B.A., MFA

An abstract presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of
Lindenwood University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the Degree of Masters of Fine Arts in Writing

Abstract

The following stories are a collaboration of my most influential moments in life concerning relationships with men and my family. I take seriously what a lot of people have said to me based on their words, choices, and decisions. I am an avid listener and am constantly thinking about how I could incorporate something into a story. I spent a lot of time thinking about my past and talking with those close to me to determine what type of memoir would best exemplify the real me.

In the beginning of this collaboration, I write mainly about men and how I got the viewpoint I have concerning relationships. With a descriptive story of the worst blind date I have ever had the misfortune of being on to my very first boyfriend, the reader should be able to see into my emotions.

The second half of this collaboration is in regards more to my family and the influences they have sprinkled over my life. My family brings out a different side of me and I loved displaying that.

Overall, Designated Dater has a lot of humor and wit mixed in alongside the real life situations that I remember occurring. Enjoyable as it is to read, it was a lot of fun writing.

Designated Dater

Michelle Marek, B.A., MFA

A Culminating Project presented to the Faculty of the Graduate
School of Lindenwood University in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the Degree of Masters of Fine Arts in Writing
2009

COMMITTEE IN CHARGE OF CANDIDACY

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*To my parents:
Thank you for always supporting my ability to write
and pushing me to follow what I love doing. I love you both.*

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To all of my bad dates: Thank you for being horrible. Seriously, without you, this specific thesis would not have been possible. Thank you for being the driving force.

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INTRODUCTION

I was one of those kids on the school bus who was always reading a book. In elementary school, it was the Babysitters Club or Goosebumps that would keep me glued to the pages in surprise or suspense. I was engrossed in the lives of the fictional characters. I would check out one from the school library every day it seemed. During the 1990's, those writers were popping books out faster than I could get my hands on them.

On the bus, it did not matter what was going on around me. There could have been a food fight and I would not even be fazed by it. Megan, who I always sat with on the bus, would be reading too. Sometimes we would even read the same book together.

I always worried I would miss my stop on the way home. Luckily, that only happened once and I did not have a long walk back to my street. My mom would not have been happy to have me stranded in the middle of nowhere with just my empty lunch box and book in toe.

I suppose my love of reading transferred into my love of writing. I always found myself to be creative in ideas. It was exciting for me to develop plots. Even whenever my sister, friends, and I would play house or Barbie's in our basement, every single detail had to be planned out on my end before we could begin. How old was the mom? What were her hobbies? What color hair did she have? At such a young age, I thought so much like a writer, and did not even realize it. I am sure my sister and friends made fun of my details whenever we were just suppose to be

having fun. Along with fun though, there had to be a conflict or drama involved, otherwise I would not have been happy.

My love of reading and storytelling soon followed me into middle school where in my English classes I had the opportunity to write creatively. A lot of these stories have disappeared over time before I owned my own computer and could file things properly (you should see my fancy filing system now). I wish I could see some of these pieces sometime, but alas, I am sure my writing was atrocious.

Having had to start from somewhere, I am grateful for the experience these classes brought me. It definitely boosted my self confidence in a skill I did not know I had. I was always a good student in school and all of the subjects came pretty naturally to me, but English class was the class that I loved going to because I loved the freedom writing gave me. Science is so constricted with the formulas while History never changes. Math is pretty basic with rules and P.E. was never my strong suit. My teachers in my English classes helped push me to that next level of writing, preparing me for the high school level.

In high school, I excelled in my English classes and by the time I was a junior, I was seriously interested in print journalism. I knew that I had a knack for writing and was thinking about a possible career doing what I loved. Deciding to join the school's newspaper as the On-Campus Editor and Staff Writer was the best decision I made in high school. I suppose I had enough promise that my teacher started me out as an editor.

With this confidence and my own opinion about my writing, I felt invincible. Before this class, I had always been one of the best writers in my English classes. In newspaper class however, it was more of a wake up call. Talent can be seen in different ways that I had not seen before. Sports pieces for example are written differently than profile pieces, but that does not make the writing any different or weaker in any way.

As an editor, I also saw a whole different side of the famous world of journalism. You really see what good writing is from your peers as well as from yourself. It takes a lot to realize that maybe someone else's work is better for the specific section than your own. With this experience, I grew as a writer to recognize my faults and how other's abilities can help me to grow.

As a senior, I was given another opportunity to stretch myself as a writer. I was one of the four students in the class to be given a monthly column. I was ecstatic for the first few days, until the panic set in. How on earth would I decide what to write about? What if no one cared to read what I had to say? It was during this time period that I realized writing was not just to please me any longer, but that I wanted others to read my pieces and get something from them, whether that is knowledge of a certain subject or just for enjoyment. I have always wanted to make people feel good about reading and get them interested in the art of writing. I found this especially hard to do at first, but as the year went on, my ability to write to an audience improved.

After high school, I went to college with the dream of being a journalist. Dreams change however and by my second semester my freshman year, I was a

newly announced English Education major. I still knew that I loved writing, but what I was determined to do with it had changed.

All throughout school, I had positive teachers in the English departments who would encourage us to write and write and write. I wanted to be that person for others to look to. This was the basis of my decision process. Everyone needs to know how to write successfully in all areas of life. It is needed in the business field, engineering field, and yes, for teachers of all subject areas. The skill of writing is deteriorating into the world of the twenty-first century.

Writing is becoming tainted through the use of technology, text messaging, and emailing. It is English teachers' jobs to keep the basics in tact for these students so they can be successful in the real world and work force that does not care what OMG or I.O.L. means. I was so passionate on this idea that my Senior Seminar paper was on this subject. I had combined my love of writing and love of teaching into one thing. Graduating knowing I had made the right decision was the ultimate goal I was looking for and soon found.

A few weeks before graduating however, I had the thought in the back of my head that went back to my very first passion: writing. It was the little idea that crept back into focus as I began looking for a teaching job. What about continuing school to study something that I had ultimately loved from the beginning? I had always thought I would do graduate school and what better time than the present. Taking some time to think about my options, I looked at schools around the St. Louis area for any with a graduate level writing program. Lindenwood University's MFA in Writing Program spoke to me first. I was ecstatic to find out

they had a night program leaving me the option to still teach in the day. It would be the perfect scenario. A lot of hard work would be ahead of me, but I was determined to beat the negative thoughts.

Entering into the program, I started out studying about Prose. I had no clue what specific area I was better at. As a writer, I had never had to be specific, so I was bound and determined to try out as much as I could. After my Prose class, I took Poetry and eventually moved onto Fiction. I thoroughly enjoyed every class, but there was one area I had not really dove into: Nonfiction.

Looking back on my history of writing, I think I found fiction writing to be easier because it all could be made up. In the end, people who read it would either love it, like it, or hate it. No one directly would be hurt. However, with Nonfiction, there was always that risk of people's feelings getting in the way.

It was not until my fourth cluster in Advanced Prose that I dabbled in nonfiction writing. I found out that I loved it, but was skeptical because I tended to be brutally honest. A lot of the people who read Nonfiction and know the author tend to point fingers and say, "Now, that's not how I remembered it happening!" The whole point of Nonfiction is to present the actual facts. If it is in the author's voice, then it is in their point of view. When it comes down to people's faults, they do not like to see where they may be wrong. This was something that I had to recognize and work on in my own writing. I had to not let others influence how my nonfiction writing would turn out. If you protect the people involved too much, then you are not being true to the story and to yourself as a writer. It will show in the piece and not be the best work you were hoping for.

It was in this class that I really started thinking about what my thesis was going to be about. After reading David Sedaris's "Dress Your Family in Corduroy and Denim," I knew immediately that I wanted to write a memoir style piece. I loved the casual style of his writing and how he wrote about his family. He had a clear cut voice that drew the readers into the story.

From this point on, I knew that I wanted my thesis to be a challenge. I am just that type of person when it comes to working on a big project. I want to feel like I worked hard to produce the best thing possible. In writing, I always want to be growing and learning. I realized that it should not stop when it came down to my thesis. I wanted to produce something amazing and go out of the program with a bang.

Along with working on my nonfiction writing, I wanted to add in a dose of humor as well. I really wanted it to scream "Michelle Marek." I tend to have a witty sense of humor that is not always shown in my writing, especially my fiction pieces, and I really wanted a chance to let that skill of mine shine.

Even though she is not known for her skills in writing, reading some comedic Nonfiction like that of Cheslea Handler helped me learn how to incorporate some of my own humor in places necessary ("My Horizontal Life," "Are You There Vodka? It's Me Chelsea"). The whole piece cannot be dripping with comedy, but how to mix it in with all different types of subject matter is most certainly a skill.

I love making people laugh and writing I think is a great outlet to do so. The tricky thing though is not everyone will find what you say to be funny. That

is why I was just true to myself and my style, hoping that my humor was well versed.

In regards to my six pieces that make up *Designated Dater*, determining these choices was not simple. There were around fifteen ideas floating in my head. I had watched home movies, talked to grandparents, talked to my parents and asked them about my characteristics as a youngster, met with friends and talked about funny memories, etc. The list of how men and family influenced my life could have gone on and on. To me, it was the most sensible topic for my thesis. I certainly had a lot of material.

My first piece entitled, "Twenty-something" was something that I had worked on for a good length of time during the MFA program. I was constantly moving things around and adding in details after every revision. It was the first piece that I felt completely comfortable with and really the piece that set forward the motion of the overall theme.

"Twenty-something" is really my viewpoint and probably the first time in my writing that I expressed so vocally and boldly what I honestly felt. I am the type of person who has been burned in the past by many different friends, so I was nervous in this piece to write so openly about something so many people close to me are in bliss over. Either way, like I said earlier, I had to get past these feelings and produce a great piece. Overall, I am very happy with this as the opening of the body of my thesis. It definitely sets the tone and mood through my writing style and humor-like elements. If the first piece does not tell you who I am personally, then you may want to re-read it.

My second piece, "Sweet, comic Valentine" is by far my favorite piece in the entire thesis. This one was the easiest to write. I believe I wrote the first draft in about two hours. The humorous language just flowed out on the screen. I had never been as happy with a first draft as I have been with this piece.

The events that took place in this story actually happened around the time I was considering going into the MFA program at Lindenwood University. In the back of my mind throughout the night, I told myself that I better remember everything because it most definitely would be written down for a piece in the near future. It was not until this summer that I actually decided to write it, but was more than happy with the results. After its completion, I began to wonder how it would have turned out if I had wrote it so close to the actual event. I am telling myself, really hoping, that it would not have been as good. Maybe my writing gets better as the events age.

The third piece in my thesis, "Internal Earmuffs," was a struggle for me as a writer in the beginning. Throughout a lot of the piece, I was thinking about "Twenty-something" and constantly comparing my message. The two are very similar, and in my first draft, I think that it was more like a version of "Twenty-something Part II." I really had to dig deeper and find a different perspective while pushing forward a message.

The idea of money came to mind after my second draft and I played off of the idea of that is why I believe the way I do about men. It fits perfectly and I think brings the piece to a whole new level. In this piece, I also worked

specifically to casually bring my family into the mix. I was unaware at first on how I would mix the two, but this piece connected things nicely.

“Eh, what’s his name again?” is the fourth piece in the collection and took a lot of time to decipher the tone I was going for. I wanted the language to be simple enough so the reader could hear the actual youthfulness in the speaker’s voice. With an event like that happening almost ten years ago, I decided not to include a ton of dialogue and play more off of the emotions that were felt to represent my first boyfriend and first real opinions of men.

I had fun in the reminiscing process for this piece because my attitude about life in high school is so different than it is now. I do not listen so much to the popular vote anymore. Instead, I am more confident in my own decision making skills while doing my own thing in my own time frame.

In regards to the fifth piece, “Topsy-Turvy,” I played around a lot with how I wanted to present such a milestone in my life. It is during occurrences like my sweet sixteen, graduation from high school, turning twenty-one, etc. that are very vivid in my memory. I had hoped that somehow one of these occurrences could form into a story specific enough for the theme of my thesis. Luckily enough, something did form out of my brainstorm debacle.

This was a piece where I was able to be very honest about my family. In a way, I was thinking how this one connects with “Internal Earmuffs,” just at a more personal level involving specific family members and their faults. I was able to display a problem while still keeping true to the story I was telling.

For the last and final piece of *Designated Dater*, I wanted it to be something humorous and special enough to leave a lasting impression. To me, the last piece in a collection is just as important as the first.

In the writing of “Motorcycle Men to the rescue,” I had the initial thought of being funny. My immediate family is funny all of the time anyway, so I did not think of this to be an extremely hard challenge. There were always snip-its of family vacations that we would laugh about for weeks and even years later. I thought it was finally time to truly document one of the best.

A lot of this thesis is more zoned in on who I am involving others, but for “Motorcycle Men to the rescue,” the reader gets a chance to see my parents and how their own personalities intertwine with my own. Without them, I probably would not have the sense of humor I have nor the ability to write about our crazy family.

Overall, this thesis truly exemplifies who I am as a person, student, daughter, friend, and writer. I am to a point in my life where I am comfortable being myself and letting my writing take me to different places I never thought I would be at. If someone told me back in middle school or high school that I would write all of these true life pieces about myself, I probably would not have believed them. *Designated Dater* is me, at twenty-three, to the fullest. I probably will never be in this place or mindset again, but I am grateful for the chance to document an important time of my life.

“Twenty-something”

It was 9:35 p.m.

I was in my room watching A Wedding Story on TLC because there was nothing else good on. I really should have been getting ready for bed. My phone rang. I decided that it would be one of two people: my best friend, Ashley, or the creepy guy from work who kept calling me. I was lucky enough to answer to the first, since I was not really in the mood to scream profanities.

“Oh my gosh. You are never going to guess what I found out on Facebook.”

I smiled and said, “Hey Ashley,” as I ran through a list of things that she could possibly tell me:

1. Someone was bashing one of us on the Internet.
2. Her ex found a slutty girlfriend.
3. Someone’s sexual preference changed. (Yes, it had happened before...)
4. A couple broke up.
5. Someone was getting married.

Living a twenty-something’s life pretty much revolved around the drama of situations like these. And for those of us unmarried, they involved a daily soap opera that included almost everyone we knew.

“Guess who is engaged!?”

My stomach sank. Another engagement? Here I was, faced with the facts that another “happy couple” was going to make it official. I suppose I would just

continue my struggle to find the right man as I wallowed in self-pity because I was still single and kickin' it. Maybe I would change my name. Michelle the Spinster, nice to meet 'cha.

I began to run through the list of names in my head. Who had a serious boyfriend? Who would have called me first before posting it for the entire Facebook world to read?

Friend #1, Bethany: I doubt it. Jack couldn't afford a ring just yet. They had been dating since high school, but now that they lived over 1000 miles apart from each other, I don't think it would happen now. Maybe at Christmas when he was home from his internship...

Friend #2, Cindy: No, she would have called me immediately. We were too close in college for me not to receive a phone call. I wish she would marry Vance though. They are perfect for each other.

Friend #3, Sarah Jo: Naw, that couldn't be possible. Sarah Jo and Brian just got back together and things were too rocky for anything serious to pop up. The both of them had already been engaged and I didn't think they would jump back into something again.

An actual serious contender didn't end up coming to my mind. I was stumped.

“Who, Ashley? I have no idea.”

She was quick to jump to a response.

“Jillian and Jason! And you should see her ring. She has pictures up already and it is absolutely gorgeous!”

I made my voice sound as fake as possible, putting my peppy sorority-voice skills to good use.

“I’m so happy for Jillian, Ashley! I can’t believe that Jason already asked her to marry him. How long have they been dating now, six months?”

“I think so. But seriously, you’ve got to check out the ring! Promise me that you’ll look at it soon?”

I promised her that I would and hung up, hoping to dear Jesus that it would be in-your-face ugly. Jason wasn’t that wealthy. I loved looking at ugly rings, reminding myself that someday mine would be better than theirs.

Someday. That was my problem. I was a twenty-something that wasn’t living in the moment of being engaged or married. Ever since my friends and I joined the ranks of the twenty-something’s, all everyone began to think about was the big “M” word.

Dictionary Slang: The “M” word (n):

involves a life long commitment to someone you can stand talking to for more than an hour, the end to a random sex life, the sharing of EVERYTHING, and realizing that you now have to put everyone else in your life second.

I had already witnessed a handful of my friends get married and a dozen or so fall madly in love and get swept off their feet. It was apparent in my everyday life, and almost always thrown in my face. What twenty-something would be comfortable in a world who thought that if you weren't married right out of college that something was wrong with you?

Almost half of my graduating class in college was engaged. True, there were only 500 of them, but still. All of my girlfriends remembered what our parents told us: "You'll meet your husband at college." Yeah right. I looked on campus that very first day my freshman year and definitely didn't think there was much to pick from. Those country boys may have had the muscles, but they sure didn't have much going on upstairs.

By the time I was at the age that I "should have been" married according to society around me, I had already participated in two weddings where I had to pretend to be happy.

Wedding #1: Cristin and Aaron

Cristin had been my best friend for pretty much all of my undergraduate career at Culver-Stockton College. We both shared a love of musicals, watching *Sex and the City*, and being drinking buddies on the weekends and the occasional weekday. College was a blast while it lasted, but sometime the fun had to end. Unfortunately for me, Cristin graduated at the end of my sophomore year. She was entering the big kid world a while before I had to. Luckily for me, she

decided to stay around the area, which furthered our friendship even more allowing us to still hang out socially.

When my junior year of college started, I found out that she had gotten back in touch with an old boyfriend, Aaron, and by Christmastime, the two were engaged. I honestly was ecstatic for her and that she found the love of her life. Aaron was a great guy and treated her very well. I knew that she would be happy.

But deep down, I was bitter. I was bitter due to the fact that any past romance of mine had ended in disaster. Either I wasn't right for him, or he wasn't right for me. I honestly don't know if I had seriously dated one guy that was actually someone I could see myself ending up with. In a way, I was somewhat jealous of her situation, but I couldn't let any of these thoughts or emotions show through. She had dated maybe three guys ever, and she already found the person she was meant to marry. Was there a curse on me? I thought I must've broken too many mirrors as a child.

That spring, a wedding was planned and I soon became her maid-of-honor which included the duties of: planning her bridal shower and bachelorette party, shopping for bridesmaid dresses, and allowing her to lean on me during the wedding weekend. I had to become mentally prepared. She was relying on me.

Her bridal shower took forever to plan. I had to pick up the cake not once, but twice. HyVee, a grocery store in Quincy, iced the cake in the wrong color, so it had to be redone. Everything at the party had to match, due to my own idea of perfection. The color for her wedding was hard to find, so I had to shop at three different party stores just to get the right shade of "deep rose red."

Due to my devotion to the cause, the overall bridal shower was a success. All five of the pockets in my jeans were empty. I was \$65 poorer. I remembered living on cafeteria food the whole rest of the next week.

The fall of my senior year, Cristin and Aaron tied the knot. They had a beautiful, small wedding in Hannibal, Missouri. There weren't any major catastrophes and the reception was tastefully done. (The bonus was that I did not have to kick out any drunken guests.) All in all, I officially had a best friend who was married. Honestly, it was kind of weird. I felt older than my teenage-minded maturity level and realized that our friendship would change somewhat. I believed that her husband would become her only best friend.

Wedding #2: Leslie and Philip

The summer after my senior year, I was a bridesmaid in a second wedding for my good friend, Leslie. Leslie and I had been close throughout college. I had seen the relationship between her and her fiancé, Philip, from the beginning.

On our campus, the two were inseparable. They both were involved in symphonic band, Student Government Association, and Greek Life. I knew that out of all of my friends, Leslie and Philip would make it. Their relationship would be the one that lasted. They definitely were that couple that we all looked to, in comparison to the crappy guys that we all dated; our picks only stuck around and lasted a few months at a time. Leslie had been dating Philip for three years and still going strong.

I found it very special that Philip decided to include Leslie's closest friends on the night that he was going to ask her to marry him. Philip asked our group of girls to make sure Leslie was dressed, made-up all girly-like, and ready to go by 7:00 p.m. We had to convince Leslie that we were just trying to fix her up in order to surprise Philip; she was, and still is, very low maintenance, so the task at hand was somewhat difficult. We dressed her in a cute black and red dress, fixed her hair in a stylish up-do, and sent her on her way to a romantic dinner Philip was cooking for her in the kitchen of our sorority house. Our group of friends waited in suspense at the top of the stairwell wondering, as the minutes ticked by on the clock, if he had asked her yet. I decided to test the waters, sneaking down to the kitchen to "gct a bowl."

As soon as I walked in, Leslie flew out of her chair and threw her hand in my face, showing me her gorgeous diamond ring. Philip had asked her before they began dessert by placing the black box on her plate, instead of the cake. She of course said yes, and immediately the wedding planning began.

Indeed, it was all so romantic that I, myself, got caught up in it all. It was fun sneaking around with news that would change a person's life. But just like before, I was truly happy for my friend, but left wondering when my turn was going to come around. During this time in my life, I was single and not dating anyone specific. I'd come to the realization that I was just too picky and going to stop looking for every guy that had a loser sign. Even so, the "loser" category was smarter than I was at times. They always seemed to trick me. Desserts? Presents? Flowers? Aw, for me? Thanks Mr. Loser!

Within the next few years, I began my life outside of college as I moved into the world of a twenty-something. That is, making an appearance at a wedding at least once a month, and even more in the summertime. They were definitely the social event to attend.

One I remember very vividly was the wedding of my childhood friend, Mike. Mike had met Genevieve at a summer church camp in high school. They both were young; only twenty-two when they tied the knot.

I went to that wedding with my parents and my two younger sisters. Damn weddings. The months from April to October were full of the depressing occasions. They were funerals for singlehood.

I sat in-between my sisters with my usual bitter attitude about life and love. My sister on the right had a serious boyfriend and was two years younger than me. My parents even had bets that she would be the daughter who married first. Shit. The wedding hadn't even started yet, and I was already thinking bitterly.

As the wedding proceeded and I saw how happy Mike was, I tried not to get too emotional. I kept thinking that God was giving me a visual reminder and telling me, "Good job, Michelle, you still haven't found someone yet."

I spent a lot of sleepless nights thinking about something that I had yet to experience. The "M" word. It wasn't until I had an ever important conversation with my mom that I realized something that I had overlooked. A wake-up call, as I liked to call it.

“Hey Michelle, can I talk to you for a second?” my mother asked me on a Saturday afternoon sitting in our family room reading the newspaper.

“Yeah, just make it quick, Mom.” I claimed running through the living room looking for my cell phone. I was always losing the damn thing. “I have to go to another flippin’ wedding for someone that I hope gets divorced before I even get married. Oh no, did that just come out of my mouth?”

My mom wasn’t amused. She was however used to my verbal diarrhea when it came to situations that I was strongly against.

“Michelle, did you ever stop and think for a second of what it is like for those people that aren’t in your shoes? Do you think that once they are married that maybe they are jealous of you?”

My mother had a point. “I think that maybe once they have a marriage, they yearn again for the single life in their twenties. You know that you can only be young once.”

Wow. Maybe I was the lucky one after all.

“You know mom, you do make an excellent point, but how am I supposed to just sit around while everyone else around me is happy and in love?”

I still wanted my life to make sense. For God to just let me know that I wasn’t a freak for not already being married.

“Marriage isn’t like that until after the first couple of years,” my mother said with a smile on her face. “You’ll have time to really find a great catch. Now, go have fun as a single woman. Celebrate that you don’t have to settle down!”

Announcement! Announcement! Announcement!

Through this conversation, I realized something. I don't WANT to be married in my early twenties!

I realized that I'm still young, barely out of college, and still have a lot of things I want to accomplish before "settling." I know that some people find love at a young age, but I never thought one of those people to be me.

Right now, I have a lot to look forward to such as:

1. living on my own or with a roommate,
2. going out and meeting new guys for the next couple of years,
3. being independent and relying on myself for once,
4. and doing what I want with my life.

I realized that I am exactly where I want and need to be. My teaching job and graduate work is enough for me at this very moment. My family and friends are amazing. I don't want to complicate things with a messy relationship or marriage plans.

So, as for me, today...

I'm not bitter anymore.

I know that it will all come soon enough.

An engagement.

A rock on my finger.

For now, all of this is yet to be determined.

I have a lot to look forward to being a twenty-something.

And that is the exciting thing.

“Sweet, comic Valentine”

Most people say you remember what you're wearing on a first date.

They're wrong. You are so nervous that those little details that you spent hours planning for go out the window. Unless you spill something on yourself or your date comments about a shirt (hence, your boobs looked good) or your pants (your ass looked good) or your shoes (he has an abnormal foot fetish that freaks 99 percent of the population out). Either way, first dates hold up so much pressure that you're lucky if you can remember the guy's name or what you did years later.

First dates are overrated in the idea that magic is suppose to happen. How in three hours or so are you supposed to know if this guy is the man of your dreams? Unless he is a total loser (and trust me, I've had my share of these) you honestly can't get a good enough opinion on the guy. I tend to believe that I have great first impressions when it comes to people. I've only been wrong once or twice, and yet, I think I knew things would end badly but didn't listen to my instincts in the first place.

One of the many dates I went on in my collegiate days proved to be the worst in the history of dating. Through the story telling to my friends, they couldn't believe what I had actually been through. Now, it is typical to go on your date, come home, and dish to your friends. I however, thought twice about this because 1) I was in shock still, 2) My friends would laugh hysterically for days, and 3) I was still laughing myself and instead of running into their dorm room, I had to run to the bathroom instead so I didn't wet myself.

There was a brief bit of history about this guy, Andrew, before our actual date. A few days before Valentine's Day, I was in my dorm room of my sorority house. It was my senior year of college, just a few days before my student teaching began. I'm not sure what I was doing exactly, probably watching some trashy reality show, but my good friend, Peep (yes, it's a nickname—her parents aren't that cruel), came rushing into my room.

“Hey Michelle, there's someone down in the bun room for you.”

The bun room is our front room where guys typically waited on their ladies. I know it has a funny name, and makes you think of sticky buns, but it is a sweet room, no pun intended.

Peep's eyes were bright and enlarged; hence she already knew who was waiting on me. Living in a sorority house, girls took pride in knowing each other's business. Whoever was down there waiting on me would be the highlight of someone's week or even month. Damn. This had better be good.

Going into the bun room, I had no idea what to expect. Turning the corner, I see the cutie from my Modern English Grammar class last semester. Andrew looked incredibly nervous for a reason I could probably guess.

“Hello Michelle. I know that you're an English tutor and all, and I was wondering if you could help me with something in this book.”

He had a small literature book in his hand. Maybe this wasn't what I thought at all. The kid must just have a staring problem in the cafeteria, library, and in class. No biggie.

The funny thing is that Andrew was from California. Now, going to a small liberal arts college in Missouri must have been a cultural shock for him. I figured that's why he acted so strange at times.

He didn't necessarily stand out. Okay, I take that back. He most certainly did. The kid walked around campus barefoot. Yes, barefoot. Now, my college campus was pretty small, but still. Did he know how old Johann Library was? The Civil War took place on those grounds. I couldn't even imagine looking at the bottom of his feet.

The bottom of his feet must have been disgusting. I mean, there could have been fungus growing there, or shoot, food from the cafeteria stuck. Just think, Apple Jacks saved for later? I would rather not. Even whenever the grass was freshly mowed, I bet that sucked. Maybe he did all of this because he was an avid showerer. It could be possible. I love feeling clean too, but walking around barefoot would not be my reminder to clean myself.

"So, what page is your question on?"

I took the book out of his hands seriously curious on what he needed help on. I flipped open to the page he told me to go to, surprised to find a piece of paper he neatly had stuck between the pages, so cleverly that I had not suspected it.

It was a cut out heart. Yes, a real, physical cut out heart like what you would see coming from the Kindergarten classroom. Well, labeling it Kindergarten was not giving Andrew enough credit. It was a damn mighty fine heart. Let's give him a second grade cutting level.

Still in shock as I take the heart out of the book, I understood that he didn't have a question at all. It wasn't even like a scavenger hunt with Andrew. Too bad it wasn't a clue or something because I would have been excellent at running and dodging college students thanks to my days of ghost in the graveyard and capture the flag. Instead, I read aloud what the heart said.

In his handwriting, Andrew had asked me to be his Valentine.

Should I feel honored? Why, yes I sure did. I've had guys in the past feel admirable enough to ask me out on Valentine's Day, but was this way overly cheesy? I was happy enough to have a date that night so I told the boy yes, and off I went upstairs to discuss the situation with my girls.

Around the corner I turned and there was Peep giggling like she had been kissed by her school boy crush. When Peep giggles, she really giggles. And boy did that get me going. I was laughing so hard as well that I couldn't stop.

Peep knew Andrew was crazy. He was crazy enough to ask her the day before if he had a shot at a date with me. Hoping for a dramatic performance from me, she happily told my new date, "Yes!"

We ran up the stairs to talk to my best friend Jessica. Jessica knew Andrew well and had suggested I date him back whenever he first got on campus. The no shoe thing really freaked me out right from the start.

She laughed as well, not believing that the events actually occurred. But they did. And now it looked like I was stuck on a Valentine's Day, oh what the pressure, with a guy that I hope would at least wear sandals for me. His feet could at least still breathe.

The day finally arrived and I had dressed for the occasion. He picked me up at my sorority house and I wondered how many of my sisters were spying on us. Losers without dates on Valentine's Day, I thought. Oh wait, that could have been me, and usually is me most years. He was wearing sandals. I must have gotten him on a good night. Score.

He drove the whole way to Quincy, nervous I could tell, as we had simple conversation, until he confessed to me that he had never taken a girl out before. He continued rambling, as I am still in shock over his confession, and even asked me if I had ever been on a date. Wow. I was twenty-one years old; I better as hell have been on something called a date. It felt like we were sixteen.

We finally made it to the restaurant, the Tower—not one of my favorite places, but I didn't complain. He had planned this entire evening out for us. The Tower is a favorite restaurant in Quincy. They serve both Italian and Mexican. I know what you are thinking. Gross! Yes, I agree. The only good thing about that place was the fact that they have killer margaritas. What human would want to eat both Mexican and Italian? Any male I assumed.

We walked into the doors of the restaurant and I should have known Andrew wouldn't have made reservations. His comment was, "I didn't think they would be that busy."

What a nimrod.

- 1) It was Valentine's Day
- 2) It fell on a Friday night
- 3) It's the Tower, a major couples dinner restaurant in Quincy. Duh.

So instead of going somewhere else, he claimed that he really wanted to eat here, so we would just wait. And wait, and wait, and wait. Oh my gosh, it felt like I waited forever. I was fucking starving. While we waited, I kept wishing for the date to be over as sad as that sounded. Not only did I feel like I was being starved, I had to listen some more to this guy talking about his life. He never shut up nor asked about me. So chauvinistic.

We finally made it to our table, a booth near the front of the restaurant. It was nice and private, but private was anything I wanted to be. Thank God I didn't see anyone I knew. We ordered. Actually, I ordercd, but what's the difference? Who needed romance whenever a woman could just be in charge? Now, I know that I like control in my life, but what gal doesn't want to be wined and dined for once? I like a man to take charge and make things nice for me. That's why I got the nickname "High Maintenance." Shush. Don't tell every guy that.

I looked around the restaurant. Everyone there you could tell was on a date. Happiness. Many girls had flowers at the table. They were holding hands. Making googlee eyes. I on the other hand was just praying that my date wouldn't rub my leg and play footsees with me underneath the table. I wasn't keen on developing a foot fungus.

I ordered us a pizza and hoped for the best. The Tower usually had slow service. I know, most Mexican restaurants are usually speedy, but not the Tower. I hoped our pizza would show up eventually and give Andrew something to focus on besides talking.

The pizza arrived, with two plates might I add. I grabbed one and gave one to my date. With the pizza between us both, we both dove in. I had placed two pieces on my plate, but Andrew, oh Andrew, they must do it differently in California. He slowly slid the pizza to where it was directly underneath him and ate like a caveman. He ate over the whole damn pizza. Now, my family and I are close, but not that close. Anything could have dropped over the pizza and I was not going to eat that.

"You know you have a plate here, Andrew."

"I know, but I like eating this way."

Shit. He was an animal and had no manners. I ate my two pieces in silence waiting for him to say anything else polite. Did it happen? No.

I know what you're thinking. It can't get any worse than this. Well, that's where you are wrong.

"Can I get a to-go box?"

He wanted to take the pizza with us.

"Michelle, do you want this pizza?"

Hell no.

"No thanks Andrew, you can have it." Disgusting.

We climbed back into his car after two hours of being in the restaurant. It was nine thirty. I was ready for this date to be over. Not only had I just been through the most awkward dinner of my life, but I had to fork the bill. I don't even remember what lame excuse he gave me.

Now, I could have been that bitchy girl on a first date, but I try to be nice to guys, so I wasn't going to be rude. It was his thing and I had happily agreed to spend my evening with him. Being home with the girls watching movies sounded like a better plan right about then.

"So, what do you want to do now, Michelle?"

"Oh, it doesn't matter to me."

"I think we should go see if any movies are playing."

He had a point. At least a movie would keep me from having to directly deal with Andrew. I already felt like I was living in my own movie. Laughing was all I could keep myself from doing.

We go to the Quincy theatre with six screens. Yeah, that's the biggest Quincy has. Talk about a par-tay! He parks the car and goes to look at the movie times. I was tempted to call Jessica or Peep. Too bad they were both probably on dates with decent guys.

Before I knew it, Andrew was back.

"All of the movies for the rest of the night have already started. Do you want to see Will Ferrell's new movie? It's only been playing for twenty minutes."

What? Who goes to the movies like that? Maybe if I told him no, he would just take me home.

"No, that's alright."

"Okay, well, what about going to look at some old Quincy homes?"

He was already back into the car putting it in gear and turning onto Main Street so we could look at houses...in the dark. Yes, it was here and then that I knew this guy was loony, but he never ceased to surprise me.

"Aren't these houses great? This one is my favorite!"

I couldn't see a damn thing. By now it was well after ten and I had already spent 180 minutes of my Valentine's Day in torture.

I think he ended up getting bored with the houses so he finally said he would get us back to Canton. He needed to get the car he borrowed filled up with gas and back to his roommate.

We stopped at a gas station in West Quincy. Andrew got out of the car and said he would just be a minute. Yeah, I think that's all it would take to just put \$5 in a car. That's it. All he put was \$5 in it. Now we had 1/4 of a tank of gas. Woo Hoo. That's nowhere where his roommate would like it. What the hell was this guy thinking?

I took my chance whenever he was inside to call Jessica.

"Oh my gosh, I can't talk long, but I'm on the worst date in my life. I will tell you more about it whenever I get home."

All I could hear was laughter on the other end.

I had to hang up. Click. He was coming back towards the car.

The whole drive home, we, oh excuse me, I mean, he talked and talked and talked. I was bored out of my mind. The twenty minutes back to Canton seemed to take for-ev-er. Picture that kid in the sandlot. Yep, that long.

We get to Canton, having me believe that my torture is over. I'm confined into a torture chamber of a car and I couldn't get out. We drive past the first exit of Canton. Shit. I'm going to die. He's taking me to the back roads. I'm dead. I didn't talk enough or want to see a movie that was half over. Shit. I decided to be brave.

"Where are we going?"

"Oh, I'm just taking us the back way. I wanted to drive through downtown Canton."

Oh my gosh. There is nothing in downtown Canton but the local restaurant and two gas stations. Why the hell was he doing this to me?

We moseyed along. I felt like I was riding with an elderly folk. He was maneuvering at speeds of 15 mph. What a hot speed demon. He continues talking about nonsense that I can't for the life of me remember. Yeah, that's how bad it was. I feel the car shift slightly as he turns the wheel into another gas station. Oh no.

"Hey, I need to put some more gas in here, alright?"

He had to be shitting me.

"Sure. I'm going to stretch my legs though."

I wanted to run away, but it was still a mile or two back to campus.

I get out of the car and turn around in the gas station to see my good friend Dyan. Ah hah! My lifesaver.

"Dyan! Come here! Quick!"

Andrew had gone inside to again, pay for his \$5 in gas.

"I'm on the worst date in my life with Andrew Savage. You've got to save me."

Dyan stood there with her twelve pack of beer, smirking.

"Girl, you've got to finish the date out. It's got to be almost over. Call me whenever you get back to campus."

Crap. She wasn't going to help me ditch the guy. I guess she was right. I needed to finish what I started. She got in her car and drove off just as Andrew came out of the gas station.

"Alright, ready to go?"

"Yep."

"I'm going to get you home. It's getting late."

It was 11:30 by the time he pulled up in front of my sorority house.

"I had fun tonight, Michelle, we should really do it again sometime."

Again? He must have thought for his first date, it went well. But for me, it was something I never wanted to live through again. To be nice then, I played along.

"Yeah, I'll talk to you soon. See you on campus."

I got out of that car and walked the sidewalk to the front door. I climbed the flight of steps to the third floor bursting into laughter as I searched for my friends, so I could tell them of my Valentine's Day adventure. Nothing was going to top this one, as far as being the worst date. At least it was entertaining enough.

Andrew only called me once for a second date. He got my voicemail.

I saw Andrew again a few months later. He was sneaking into one of my sorority sister's dorm room. Darn the luck it wasn't mine.

"I forgot my internal earmuffs"

"Marry for money, Michelle. Love will come."

Great advice, right? The first time I heard this I was around ten. I had yet to have my first boyfriend or even be kissed for that matter. I was a skinny little squirt who just rode her pink 5-speed bike around the subdivision ignoring the boys in my cul-de-sac. All they were doing were building ramps in the dirt to wreck their bikes over. They definitely were not being little entrepreneurs and selling lemonade and cookies.

The idea of a man who made some serious money was far from realistic, even as I got older. The closest way I ever got to a millionaire or grand house involved the game of M.A.S.H. No one wanted to end up in the shack or with the garbage truck driver.

Even so, it sounded nice; the idea of rolling around in all of your, oh wait, your husband's money for the hell of it because there just seems to be so much lying around. It could be stuffed in the pillow cases instead of feathers. Hundred dollar bills fanned and used as party favors. Lavish chandeliers and gourmet food at every gathering makes the clang-clang sound of change dispensed like it is nothing. Whether it is a birthday party or anniversary for your hubbie from his big corporate job, everyone will know that your nicknames are Mr. and Mrs. Daddy Warbucks.

If only real life could be this way. Maybe they have it right in other countries believing that love will develop overtime. Find the man with the loot and run away with him. A few people have already jumped on that ban wagon

here in the United States. Just look at what Anna Nicole Smith accomplished. Eh, I don't know I could stomach that though. There is such a thing as too old or too saggy.

Maybe I still believe in the idea of a fairy tale and that the man I fall in love with will just happen to be amazingly rich as well. A girl can dream, am I right? I definitely am the type of person who has her standards. I am perfectly comfortable waiting for my prince charming to waltz in with his bling bling and charming good looks. Just be prepared to tell that to my extended family.

It was a nice summer evening with my extended family. When I mean nice, I'm concerning the weather. My family likes to acknowledge everyone's birthdays throughout the year. Sometimes, birthdays are lumped together and the people are forced to be squished together in a picture of them blowing out candles over five different desserts. Yes, my family likes a lot of food at our gatherings. We are all about the options.

The get-togethers with my extended family are in no way ordinary. The inner workings of the family are definitely strange and would make for a slap happy thirty-minute sitcom. For this family gathering, the group decided to be different and go out to eat at a restaurant and have dessert back at a home. Trailhead Brewery and Restaurant in downtown Saint Charles was calling out our name. Now a public appearance like this was a huge ordeal. The event date was changed two, no three times to please everyone. If that took a long time, then figuring out where everyone would sit could takes more than 5 minutes.

"Now if Abby wants to sit by the kids, then we need to save her a seat on this end."

"Wait, we can't have all of the men together, there is not enough room!"

"I want to be able to see the T.V.!"

To me, it doesn't matter. For the most part, we all get along in public and choose to have words with each other inside a home. We'd made that mistake before.

Sitting around the large table in the restaurant, the group of 14 is staring at a menu of 1/2 priced appetizers and specialty beers. Oh boy.

Now, being at an awkward stage in my 20's, but not married, the family has no clue where to group you. I could contribute to the adult conversation, but being the oldest grandchild, I am still going to be seen as one of the kids. At least my grandma can remember my name. When it gets down to the little ones, she just calls them, "that little boy" or "that little girl."

Either way, I'm in the middle of the table to keep the young ones in mind while still damn and determined to drink back a few beers. My savior and companion at these family functions, my sister Stephanie, who understands, had to work. Darn.

I've gotten to the age where my aunts and uncles feel it is appropriate for me to bring men around to these family functions. Can't I just say, "I'm not interested in dating right now because I have no clue where I will be in 2 months?" I'm extremely tempted to tell them all I'm a lesbian so they will get off my back. I could already tell you that my mother would not appreciate that one, or

my homophobic dad. My family is definitely more on the conservative side, as far as my dad and aunts and uncles, so I don't think that would go over too well. Not really a funny joke for them to chuckle about years later.

The grilling usually consists of a series of questions before they get to the ones they really are dying to ask:

1) QUESTION: How is school?

MY ANSWER: Great. I'm writing all the time.

(End of discussion)

2) QUESTION: Have you found a job yet?

MY ANSWER: Nope—still looking.

(End of discussion)

3) QUESTION: Who are you dating?

MY ANSWER: No one at the moment.

(End of discussion)

You know if I want to tell people if 1, 2, or 3 happened, I would bring it up. Sometimes it is just too personal and I don't feel like talking about it. If I did I would go on Sally Jesse Raphael.

I think they pick on me the most because I'm the oldest. Or because they picked on my sister Stephanie enough that she went and found herself a boyfriend. But she was smart. He lives in California. And that's far, far away from Missouri and the relatives.

Maybe I will vacation to London and find myself a man over there. The British men are usually well behaved and can deal with crazy families. Just look

at Prince William and Prince Harry. They have to deal with their goofy looking father.

Maybe the girls on the reality dating shows have the right idea. That way no one in their family can pressure them and try to set them up on dates. They have the perfect chance to say, "Watch my show! I've tried and I'm just not the marrying type." The only bad thing about this is if I would get to the finals and my new lover, if we're even really in love (I don't always think those shows are reality), had to meet my family. I bet my whole family would want to make an appearance and judge my man. There will not be a ghetto fight on my show. Phish. I want a spin off.

"Michelle, have you thought about EHarmony, or one of those dating sights? I think there's one with a fish in it. Fish of the sea?"

Breaking into my thoughts and my realization that the questioning session wasn't over, I realized that my Aunt Kate was talking to me. I bet I wouldn't find a fish of the sea. Probably just chicken.

"So and so found someone and they have been dating for 15 months straight."

Apparently everyone thinks that finding love on the Internet is the way to go. I find it extremely creepy to talk to a guy online and not really know who he is or what he looks like. He could be all muscles or all skin and bones, but I couldn't tell my aunt that.

My Aunt Kate is 33 years old and has been married for 8 years. She married my uncle whenever she was 25, an age very close to my very own. I think

she's starting to worry about me. My mom married my dad at 25 as well. Maybe I'll just get lucky and find a man in Vegas to marry that year.

"Thanks Kate, I'll think about it."

It was all I could say to stop her from probing any more. Thinking about something could mean for five seconds or five days, she didn't have to know.

"Michelle, do you want to go up to the bar and see what men are up there? Maybe we can find you a good looking man."

Smiling back at my other aunt, Dawn, I politely consider her offer, but decline, because that's not really my style.

"No thanks Aunt Dawn. I think our food is coming soon."

"Are you sure? Hey, I bet you could get a job here."

The rest of the dinner flowed, like my beer, smoothly, as I stood to find not a date, but the restroom, in dire need for a bathroom break. Maybe in there I could pull it together and somehow convince myself I could make it through dessert. No problem.

Staring into the mirror of the bathroom in a buzzed haze, I realized that in all honesty, I do appreciate how concerned my family is for my happiness. They only want the best for me and have good intentions. Maybe at the next family function there will be a guy sitting in the living room, telling me I am his date. Before that awkward and possibly embarrassing situation occurs though, I hope I find that prince charming that will be there to put a halt to question city. With good looks, charm, and a nice piggy bank, they should believe I have found a

catch. Then the questions will be redirected to my youngest sister. She better be ready.

“Eh, what’s his name again?”

I had just turned 14.

His name was Everett and I had never met another guy like him. I was now a high schooler and had decided that I needed a boyfriend. A boyfriend would seem like I was cool or something. By the time you got to high school, it was necessary to have had a boyfriend and dump him. Us girls were sweet, but it was necessary for drama to occur over pointless issues. It was crucial to discuss the pros and cons of our boyfriends

“He didn’t hold my hand long enough.”

“I can’t believe he looked at Kristen. She is such a slut.”

Because issues like these really *do* define the quality relationships in life.

Oh yes. We had it all figured out.

I remember thinking Everett had a funny name. I had never, and still don’t, know anyone else who has the name. My friend Nikki called him Everon because she was always mixing his name up. I don’t know how Everett equals Everon, but I went with it because of the attention my friends gave me.

I still thought he was cool though. He was taller than me, could sing, and had a lot of friends. Popular boys always helped in your own popularity. The sucky part was that he didn’t go to my school and I only got to see him at our choir practice for my church’s youth group. He was a friend of a friend who actually attended the church. He wasn’t the best looking guy I had ever seen, but whenever someone came up to me and said, “Everett wants to be your boyfriend,” I was ecstatic. He was cute enough. We had never spoken a word before, but we

exchanged AOL Instant Messenger names, you know, the time that talking online was cooler than talking on the phone. Phish. Parents could always pick up the line. It was easier to hide a box on the computer with just one click. Plus, what parent would know how to work an AOL Instant Messenger pop up box anyway?

I was super excited to add a new person to my online list. I had my first boyfriend and he immediately went to the top of the list on my contacts. Sweet. Now all I had to do was wait for him to get home and get online.

Everett and I talked online every night. Our conversations were mostly questions that allowed us to get to know each other. Nothing super exciting, but was a highlight of my day. I could fill all my friends in about Everett or Everon or whatever he wanted to be called.

A few weeks after we started talking online and then, oh my gosh, in person, he got up the nerve to stand alone with me outside of the church. Everyone was waiting for rides in the parking lot. Not a lot of people were left, but Everett and I stood there, with my sister (gosh!), holding hands.

Out of the corner of my anxious eyes, I see my parent's white mini-van pull into the long horizontal parking lot. Everett had just seconds to say goodbye to me. We turned and looked at each other, (yes, you can play the slow, cheesy music), and he leaned in attempting to bring his zitty face close to mine with what appeared to be chapped lips (maybe from singing?), when all of a sudden he backed away from my face, gave me a hug instead and walked away. My dad had gotten out the car.

Even in the awkward moment of what could have been a first kiss, I still talked to Everett on the Internet in hopes that he would give it a second shot. We made our next big step. We decided to see each other outside of church choir practice. Oh boy. A real date!

Except, he should have realized what he was getting himself into and I should have known better. I invited him to a 4th of July B-B-Q at my Grandma and Grandpa Jeffords house and my WHOLE extended family was going to be there. I didn't see the big deal at the time, hence my uncle brought around new women all the time. I was the oldest grandchild at 14 and I could bring my boyfriend over. Ow Ow, watch the rebel go.

I told my parents about having Everett come over on the 4th of July and they seemed all right with it. No one had to pick him up or take him home. His mom was going to drop him off and pick him up an hour or so later because he had other things to do (that should have been a mark on the dislike side in my book).

My grandparents didn't seem to mind either as at their house, we always have a ton of food. We always have two kinds of meat, seasoned differently of course, three starches, always a salad, fruit, and at least three desserts. The men in my family certainly love to eat, but each child or grandchild would take home about as much food as they brought.

There were always people stopping by our family functions just to grab a plate of food. It could be the jolly minister, the neighbor everyone knew, a friend of my uncle. Everett would just fit right in.

As soon as I heard the knock on the door, I knew immediately who it was. My sister Stephanie was already teasing me about it. The amount of crap I got from her I would soon relinquish on some of her own crazy dates and boyfriends. And boy did she sure have her share.

Everett walked into the house and everyone's attention immediately was drawn to the guest. They all had to greet the boy. I immediately felt bad for him. He really had no clue what I had roped him into. I had just told him that he could come to my grandparents for a meal. I think he was overwhelmed.

No one ever said my family was classy or smooth when it came to speaking their mind. Whenever they had to say something, they pretty much just said it. I learned at a young age that in order to get a word in, you had to raise your voice or someone would barrel right over you and keep on talking.

"So Michelle, is this some boyfriend of yours?"

"Ooohhh, how cute! Is this like a date?"

I was mortified. I could tell Everett was uncomfortable, so we took some food and went out on the back porch. I could still hear my family talking inside—obviously not caring if he or I could hear the conversation.

"I can't believe she brought a guy around. My, is she brave!"

"Remember all the girls I brought around too soon? They never lasted with all of the probing questions."

To join the family, it's like you have to be born into it. Even my aunts and uncles who married into the family still do not get the ways of the Jeffords. It is like a clique in a way. The jokes, being made uncomfortable, and not completely

understanding the traditions cause for a lot of confusion and dirty looks. After marrying into the family it just happens, so getting used to it is the only option. Other than that, I suppose you could learn how to fight back the snarky remarks with words of your own. That's what my aunt did.

After an hour or so, Everett called his mom (on his own cell phone might I add) to have her come and pick him up. Our date was over, just as quickly as it started. He didn't even want to stay for dessert, the best part of the meal!

I told him I wanted to get a picture of us real quick to show my friends at school, since they had never seen him. He reluctantly agreed, but then said, "Send me an email copy." There was still a glimmer of hope. I asked my dad to take the picture. Looking at it on the digital camera, I could tell that his smile was forced, and believe it or not, mine was as well. We looked more like acquaintances than supposed boyfriend and girlfriend.

A few minutes later, I walked Everett to the end of the short driveway as his mom pulled up to the curb. I was hoping I was going to get my kiss here, but sadly, it wasn't true. He pulled me close for a quick hug and said in his most sympathetic voice, "I'll Instant Message you later, Michelle." And just like that, he maneuvered his way into the front seat of the car, and drove away.

I couldn't decide what emotion I should have been feeling. Hurt or relieved? I know my family was pretty rude, but if they took one look at the guy and didn't like him, then why should I waste my time on him? I should be

relieved that they saved me the favor of kissing his chapped lips (yes, they were chapped again).

But the other side of me was hurt, as he didn't even stay with me an hour nor kiss me goodbye. What kind of boyfriend did he think he was being? If he thought having a girlfriend with a crazy family was rough, wait until you marry into one.

I didn't log onto my AOL Instant Messaging that night. I didn't know what to say to Everett. I needed the night to think it over. Well, I needed to talk to my friends too, and tell them, "What a jerk he was at my grandparents' house!" Of course they would give me the right advice having been so experienced in the relationship world themselves. Some of them already had not one, but two high school boyfriends.

The census was all the same. Dump him.

The next day, I logged into AOL Instant Messaging and clicked on his name. He was online. It was now or never if I was going to talk to him.

My heart was racing as I typed, "Hey, what's up?"

I waited and waited. I decided to write him again and just tell him that I wanted to break up. I was hurt and something or something, whatever excuse I added to make the breakup sound legit.

I pressed send just as he sent me back a long message.

The feeling was mutual. Phew.

I didn't want the breakup to be ultra dramatic with tears and him begging me to not break his heart. (Hey, I could only hope the guy cared about me that much. Isn't that what all girls want their men to do and say?)

I knew I probably wouldn't tell my friends that. I would have to come up with some story about how he kept me on the computer forever begging me for another chance. It was my first real breakup and I wasn't heartbroken. I knew I had scored in that regard.

I haven't brought guys around my entire extended family since. I learned real quick that the boys will run in the other direction. Moral of the story: never bring men around the family until the wedding ceremony.

“Topsy-Turvy”

It's a milestone in every young person's life. We've all been thinking about it since high school when beer was trusted underneath our noses for the first time. The head of the beer overflowed in the red cups and spilled onto shoes. The smell of consumption was strong and unsettling for the newcomers. It's the thrill of drinking and not getting caught. So why is everyone so excited to be turning the big 2-1 then? To buy their own supply, or drink happily in the townie bar, or sip red wine from a box in their own two-bedroom apartment? The thrill is gone, but the love of partying isn't.

I had to wait and wait and wait for my twenty-first birthday for what seemed like forever. In college, I had a lot of friends who were older than me. So there I was as a measly little freshman watching my junior and senior class friends go to an actual bar. Boo. I was stuck making way at the fraternity parties with the hundreds of other freshman looking for permanent or semi permanent boyfriends. I just wanted a fun Friday or Saturday night of beer pong. I even contemplated, like every other college student, what a fake ID could do. However, in a college town like Canton, Missouri, there were only two bars and then that means it would definitely look fishy whenever I actually turned twenty-one.

My birthday is in June. So to make my waiting period even more painful, I had to wait and wait and wait (yes, I had to wait) all school year before turning twenty-one at home, away from all of my college friends. Bummer.

I awoke on my twenty-first birthday not really knowing what to expect. I knew that it was the best time of year to have a birthday. School was out, it was

summer, and the weather was perfect for alcohol consumption, but I was left questioning if I should I feel different? Did I look like I was twenty-one now, older and wiser, and not someone to mess with carding? Hum, I thought I still looked the same as I did as an eighteen-year-old, but maybe the bartenders would think differently. I didn't want to be the girl who would be carded until she started to get wrinkles underneath her eyes or some grey hairs overpowering her natural brunette color. I wondered if twenty-one-year-olds had a glow about them. They typically are pretty happy the first few months after their birthdays. I hoped I looked good in glimmering lights.

I actually ended up having to work at one of my two summer jobs during the day. I spent that summer being a camp leader for around 100 kids for ten weeks straight. If there was a night that I needed to have some fun, it definitely was that first week working at camp. Talk about getting adjusted to dealing with kids eight hours a day. I was happy however, for that night, I had friends from both occupations take me out to the best Mexican restaurant in O'Fallon: Dos Primos. Tequila shots and fish bowl margaritas. Score.

My actual twenty-first birthday was definitely a good time. No, I didn't do twenty-one shots or stay out until 5a.m. bar hopping (to the nonexistence night life in O'Fallon), so I wanted the maximum experience as a newly appointed twenty-one year old: a venture to the Highway 94 Wine County.

I had always wanted to go to a winery. I had heard many fun stories about them from my friends, (yes the older ones again) and was dying to experience them for myself. From the fancy wine tasting that is usually for free, to the

drunken people attempting to buy their third and fourth bottles of wine, to the serene outside atmosphere, to the singer or bands—everything. In your twenties, the winery was apparently the place to be in the spring and fall months out of the year.

My family is definitely a family that likes their share of alcoholic beverages. Now, no one gets too crazy and we don't typically go through cases and cases of beer, but everyone loves trying new drinks and having a good time. However, for the underage grandchildren, that didn't mean for us. Even though the whole family knew that when you go to college, you typically partake in drinking, it still wasn't going to be allowed in front of the family.

“Just think of what your grandparents would say!”

So, as I hid my desire to try the new wines and beers brought to our family functions, I waited patiently until it would be my turn to partake. As the eldest grandchild, I would get the honors first while my younger sister Stephanie had to wait three more years until she could join the club.

I even thought in the back of my mind, “Next Thanksgiving, I can have a glass of wine with dinner!” Nevertheless, with that big step to consuming alcohol at family functions, I still didn't graduate from the kid's table. Pretty soon, there were so many kids that it turned into the kid's basement eating area at my aunt's house.

I did get the fortune however to taste a sip some things here or there. There was a mudslide at a birthday party, Seagram's and Seven-Up at a holiday gathering, and spiked Egg Nog on Christmas Eve. Only there I was facing the

windows, adrenaline pumping, making sure no one else in the family saw me as my uncle slipped me a taste, determining a lot of it I wasn't fond of. Give me wine or beer any day.

So my whole family got the memo and quickly found diligently happy babysitters, i.e. my two sisters, and off we were on our truck to the wineries. I was ecstatic and glad no one was going to pass up the opportunity for my first winery trip. My birthday was extended and I would get to drink in public without the fear of campus security or the po po on the lurch.

Deciding to carpool out to Hwy 94, my extended family consisted of my grandparents, grandma, two aunt/uncle couples, my parents, and me, the birthday girl. Unfortunately for us, even though it was June, the weather changed on the drive from sunny to depressingly rainy. This made the crowds nonexistent and the outside setting area was pretty sparse. The tables and chairs outside had only one or two couples snuggled together bracing the rain drizzle that would soon become heavier. The band was attempting to play underneath a pavilion for the cars that would come up the gravel road only to turn around. My family however had driven the whole way, so they were determined to stay. The rain would have to stop eventually.

Finding ourselves inside in a simple and quant room with enough tables for our loud bunch was perfect. Hearing the rain speed up as it darted against the window and then slow to a steady drizzle made the atmosphere different for the normal winery buff. Even so, my family made the best of the situation. Multiple varieties of wine were purchased: a dry white, a sweet red, a fruity wine, etc. The

cheese was placed on multiple crackers for a good crunch. Smoked sausage was cut and grapes were placed on damp napkins. A huge feast was in place for no one would have too much wine go to their head. If they felt at all lightheaded, they shove handfuls of Cheez-Its into their mouths in hopes of them sopping up all of the alcohol floating around in their stomachs.

I had already told myself way back when as a teenager that I would never get too silly or too drunk in front of my extended family members. It wasn't like I could run away from them like I could if I made a fool of myself at a bar or a party. I was going to have to see these people again for the rest of my life. If I made a fool of myself, I would never live it down. A crazy mistake made by me on my twenty-first birthday would be a story told to the rest of the grandchildren about what a fool I was. "Oh the silly young thing, drinking so much she couldn't walk straight!" They would be told they would have to be better examples and classy drinkers in front of the grandparents.

With my goal in mind, that didn't mean everyone else in the family had the same beliefs. Many of my relatives have been close to the point of embarrassment before. Usually they were removed from the sight of children frightened by their actions. At this winery get together, there weren't any kids around to shield, so everyone could let everything hang out. My aunt in particular did just that.

My aunt, who I just call Kate, is a young hip teacher who loves her family life almost as much as she loves her old life in her college years. She married my mom's brother back in 2001 whenever I was fifteen. While caring for her two

kids, she's a mother during the week, but lives the life of a single hipster when she can get away on the weekends. During this winery trip, she's only thirty-one, an age to still remember successful drinking tactics during her twenties.

Even with age however, our wise, slightly older relatives still make mistakes, and Kate did that day by drinking a bit too much wine. Now I'm not sure if she just was a light weight or she didn't eat anything, but Kate was definitely tipsy. I think tipsy is a pretty funny word; it's like you can't walk straight or say complete thoughts. Tipsy is kind of like that, you think of topsyturvy and tipsy being a made up word thought of by drunken ladies in a country bar. As far as Kate, she walked out of the winery confidently and into the half empty parking lot. The rain had let up, leaving all of us joyous for the newly acquired sunshine.

"Oh my goodness, Michelle, we need to go down to the Loop sometime and go out!" Kate slurred as she was being walked to her car by her husband. I just smiled in return, happy off of my slight buzz, but still apparent to everything going on around me.

Our fun didn't stop there. We made a pit stop at a motorcycle bar off of Hwy 94. It was a cute little townie place; something that reminded me of what I would go to in my small college town. After wine, the necessity is to order beer of course, so that is what those of us who were brave enough to venture into the place had. It ended up just being me, my parents, Kate, and her husband, Chuck. Drinking back a beer with my family was priceless. I had crossed over to the other side. I was legal.

I think it's funny that's how I remember my twenty-first birthday celebration. I was hoping to make a mark on my newly legal drinking days, but really, it kind of slowed them down. The thrill and the rush were over. Besides, seeing others make fools of themselves in public is always more entertaining.

“Motorcycle men to the rescuc”

“I cannot believe that you waited until last minute to pack!”

Shoving items into my red suitcase at every angle seemed like a good idea at the time. It was like forcing clothing into an area that was a “Do Not Enter” territory. My mother’s voice rain true every year as there I was, the night before, scrambling to get everything I needed into such a small area that was nowhere near the size of my closet. Swimsuit? Check. Good books for the car ride? Check. My old school Game Boy with its array of games? Definitely a check.

I was always a horrible packer when it came time to vacations, and each time the task was forced upon me, I think I got lazier and lazier. The whole procrastination thing definitely overcame my ability to fold and place deodorant and jewelry in every nook and cranny. I didn’t enjoy getting yelled at by my mother and right before vacation to top it off, as I would be spending ten plus days with them. I just knew that eventually I would get it all done on my own time.

My sister Stephanie had it down pat. I would even suggest that she brave my usual off limits room and help me. Her t-shirts were super rolled so tight they reminded you of towels in fancy hotel rooms, waiting to be undone. Her bags were always packed a head of time. So being the younger sister, she reluctantly helped her older sister pack so we could leave on time the next morning. I wondered if I should let her pick her seat in the car for her generosity. Nah.

All of this excitement was known as the pre-vacation drama. It would always be a scramble the last few days before leaving on a vacation.

“What do you mean we’re out of small shaving creams?”

“Where is the small, black-looking suitcase that we use every year?”

Somehow, every bag and every person would make it into the vehicle of choice, despite some bickering over seating arrangements and what we should leave behind, as we pulled away, extremely close to our planned out departure goal every summer.

Every summer during my youth, and for as long as I could remember, my dad was determined to plan a fabulous vacation every year. It all started back in his own family’s tradition of going on a vacation every summer to Florida. I’m sure that my dad would have thought of doing the exact same thing, except my mother spoke differently and wanted to see other places besides the beach. Whether that made my dad heartbroken or not, it didn’t show. I’m sure he was just excited to be vacationing away from the daily grind and routine.

The annual planning sessions would start sometime in January when the five of us would meet for a family meeting. My family of five is complex, but as far as vacations, I don’t think we were hard to please. We never demanded to fly anywhere or go to expensive resorts in Hawaii. My mom just wanted short car rides and decent hotel arrangements. Would our family drive fourteen hours straight to our destination? Forget about it! My sister Stephanie was always excited and really just requested not to sleep with “no covers Jenna” or “talks in her sleep Michelle.” Because of her request, she always got the pull-out mattress or couch to sleep on. My youngest sister Jenna was easy to please as well. She

wanted a pool to swim in and a hotel with an elevator in hopes of getting the highest floor. I just wanted some variety in our destinations. I knew vacations were about relaxing, but I just wanted to have some adventure and some fun.

All in all, my dad would ask the questions he had been thinking about since the end of our last vacation. Should we see the beach in Florida? Visit the mountains of Colorado? Can we combine a family wedding and vacation into one in Virginia? Now, the Marek's vacations were nothing like the Griswold's, but my family still managed to put a place on the map. It was always a hard decision to make, and in the end, the decision was made by Mom and Dad. I think my dad just wanted to let us kids feel included.

After determining where our final destination would take the Marek clan, my dad would plan for hours, days, and even weeks of the next few months during whatever time he had available. My dad was, and still is, a very organized individual. He needed to plan out prices of the amusement parks and hotels, have a rough estimate of the miles we would travel in one day and where we could stop for gas, and well rated restaurants by tourists in the specified area. Our vacations were never spur of the moment whims. The Marek Family Vacation (INSERT A YEAR HERE) packets would come home with pictures printed of our hotels, amusement parks, or specialties along the way. Each one of us would look through the packets, grinning from ear to ear in excitement for the chunk of days that would possibly be the highlight of the year. Every time my dad brought home a packet, my mom would act surprised that he printed out all of that material. Even so, I don't think she would have liked it if my dad didn't.

One of my most memorable vacations was during the time I was a newly announced teenager in middle school. Being thirteen and supposedly fabulous, I am sure I was a pain for others to be around. Whether it was the attitude or flaunting my knowledge as a bossy older sister, I'm sure pleasant was not an adjective pointing in my direction.

It was the summertime and my parents had decided on a trip down to Florida to see Universal Studios. No, we didn't go down there to see Disney World like the million of other families, but Universal Studios. Due to my dad's planned out packet, I was ecstatic about their amusement parks. There was Wet 'N Wild water park, the original Universal Studios, and of course the ever popular Islands of Adventure with the double dragon dueling coasters. This trip was looking to be one of the best.

Due to not wanting to drive overnight, we ended up stopping at a hotel half way in Tennessee to sleep. We had already driven a long ten hour day, so stopping to sleep sounded comforting. Imagine begin cramped up in a van all day long with two annoying younger sisters, CD players so loud you can still hear the beats through the headphones, buttons being pushed nonstop on a Game Boy attempting to beat the castle level on Super Mario Brothers 3, and a constant switch of warm or cool air circulating through the vents to keep everyone happy.

Our hotel was not one of the nicest we had ever chosen to sleep in. It was one of those where your door opened to the outside to face the parking lot. There were the typically two levels and sounds traveled fast; even whispers could be heard down into the parking lot. It reminded me of the hotels you see in movies

or on the bad side of town. Better watch out for that serial killer or line of coke on your sink.

“What floor did we get, Dad?”

Breaking into our family’s thoughts was my littlest sister, Jenna, always concerned about our location in hotels. In her eyes, the higher the floor, the better. This time, only one answer would make her happy—floor two. For everyone else, we just wanted a clean room that didn’t look like a video had been shot in it by previous residents.

Our family knew that this stop would be short, so no one made a big deal out of the choice of hotel. It didn’t look so bad on the inside of the room anyways. There were two beds and an extremely lumpy roll away bed. The room was small and tight, but we would manage. Jenna hated snuggling, so I guessed dogging elbows would be an event of the night. I was just hoping not to get a black eye from a boney elbow. Ouch.

Getting ready for a probable sleepless night was a task within itself. Squeezing in one at a time in the tiny bathroom to shower and stare at ourselves in the mirror was cut to fifteen minutes each because, “We would all be getting up early to get the free breakfast and get on the road.” That meant looking at how big my boobs had grown in the mirror after my shower would be out.

Snuggled in my bed with all the covers, I glanced over at sprawled out Jenna, lying on her back in snow angel placement. Her eyes were glued shut and her breathing steadied to a repetitive pattern. I wanted to be knocked out too. Sleep was upon me, I could feel it. My eyelids felt droopier, but my happy

thoughts about vacation land to sooth me to sleep was interrupted with screams coming from Stephanie. I honestly cannot remember what started her screaming or why she felt then and there to pick a fight with my dad. Stephanie has had so many arguments with my parents over the years that I can't remember one that happened last week, to one that happened back in 1996. Either way, she was bound and determined to be right in the situation, whatever it was they were arguing about at 11:00 at night.

That's the thing about my sister. She always has to have the last word in every argument. Typically, she tries to pull Jenna and me into a fight with her because she feels she is the mistreated middle child and wants the attention or something. Boo hoo.

"Get out of this room! The girls are sleeping! If you two want to have a screaming match, go outside and do it!"

My mom was irate because like Jenna, and supposedly me, she wanted sleep as well. We kids had a greater chance of sleeping in the car, but for my mom, that was a no-can-do. For us, we would just have splotchy red marks on our faces from them being plastered against the windows because our pillows had slipped. With some constant rubbing, that would fade. For my mom however, he neck would be screwed up for days. Getting one of those ever popular neck pillows only helped so much. Those things are goofy anyways. There's not enough padding there to make anything as comfortable as a real pillow. Lame invention there, Mr. Cracker Barrel.

"No! I don't want to go outside. You can't make me!"

By this point, I am puzzled at how Jenna is sleeping. Stephanie's volume level is stuck at one point: 10+. It doesn't waver, nor does she believe she is being loud at all.

Obviously awake now and not wanting to miss a single moment, I'm clutching the covers as my head bobbed, going back and forth from watching my sister scream at my dad and looking at Jenna, tossing and turning. It is very much like a sitcom, with tad-da, Stephanie staring as the main problem child.

"I'm trying to sleep!"

Finally, my angry youngest sister sits up, fully awake and pissed off to the extreme. When it comes to Jenna and her sleep patterns, it is strictly her way. Jenna is slightly OCD, and getting eight hours a sleep a night is a must, so nothing was going to get in her way of that.

"Stephen, I mean it, get outside now. I'm tired of hearing her scream like a maniac. Now she's woken up both of them."

Being the man and determined to handle the situation, he would have dragged her out by her hair if he had to. Luckily, she glanced in my mom's direction, and knew by the look on her face that she better move quickly.

"You two, go back to bed."

The destination for Jenna and me was inevitable. We would not get to see how the argument ended. Maybe Stephanie would keep my parents up all night. That would not be good considering we still had a decent drive ahead of us the next day.

Even though they were outside now, we could still hear as loud as day their bickering as well as a probing question from a bystander. Forgetting that they were at a hotel and that the point of being there was for sleeping, they not only were they keeping Jenna and I up, but probably others in the hotel as well.

“Is there a problem up there?”

Stopping the arguing and practically freezing the look on my dad and sister’s faces, was a deep, male voice of none other than a legendary biker man. Turning to face the man over the railing, my dad and sister see a group of bikers, leaning against their bikes, as if waiting on a phone call to ride off into the night. The only thing missing was a biker chic. I’m sure all of us would have volunteered Stephanie to go with them just so we could get some sleep.

“I said, is there a problem up there?”

Still having not answered the simple question, my dad laughs all of it off with a snarky reply. Hoping that these men would not be calling the police, my dad just wanted to get the hell back inside the hotel room.

“Yeah, this one is keeping the other two up!”

If only we had known that embarrassing her in front of biker men would have shut her up, it would have happened minutes earlier. Luckily, the men chuckled to themselves, and went about their way, leaving Stephanie with the look of shock plastered to her face. Seconds later, as she stormed into the hotel room and fell right into her roll away bed. I couldn’t help but silently laugh underneath the sheets.

The rest of vacation we talked about how she would end up with a biker man one day. He was so concerned for her life that night, that is was destiny. To this day, at twenty-years-old, she still doesn't live it down.