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Essay #2

Small Town Girl

As I sit here gazing out the window of my apartment unto the night sky, I think of how different my world is compared to two years ago. I am the same woman, yet I am forever changed. I have been re-shaped and molded into something new by this city. This city breathed life into a once desolate body deficient of life. Milwaukee is not necessarily a city of wonder and amazement. Nevertheless, for me, a woman of twenty years, it was a new way of life. Moving to Milwaukee was my escape, my chance to prove those who doubted me wrong, and my chance to embrace and fulfill my dreams. Milwaukee gave me a new pair of eyes to see the world and allowed me to see myself in a new light and realize that I did belong not only to the Marquette University and Milwaukee communities but also to my hometown community.

My fifth floor apartment is not much, but for now it is what I call home. I look out of my window and watch the cars speed pass on Wisconsin Avenue and as I stare out into the distance I can see the cars wrap around I-94. I watch them. I begin to wonder if they too came here to escape. The scene of Milwaukee and the University of Marquette's campus has become familiar to me, yet it is a scene which every once and a while still shocks me. There are times while walking to class I think to myself, "Am I truly here?" *The surroundings I wake up to every morning are complete opposites to the surroundings of my hometown.*

My hometown, well it is actually more of a village, consists of a little over nine-hundred people. We have one school, one grocery store, a meat market, two gas stations, a bar on just about every corner, a lot of open land and fields, and a bunch of cows. That's Valders for you. If

you blink while driving through, you might just miss the whole town. Valders is a town which you either love or hate. There is no in between. I always hated it. The community of Valders was something I never truly felt connected to. I could deal with it, but there was always this longing inside of me for something more, something more grandiose than graduating from high school, marrying the first guy I meet and settling down. Valders is a strange little town; people seemed to stay entrapped in it. It reminds me of lyrics from the song *Hotel California* by the Eagles, “We are all just prisoners here, of our own device.” People could leave, but they don’t. The heritage there is undeniably stronger than a granite countertop. A select group of individuals who I graduated with will live in Valders just as their parents did and their grandparents did and their great-grandparents did, and this vicious cycle will continue with their future children. I saw this unrelenting cycle throughout high school and decided to remain unattached to anything which involved that town. I was going to escape and become something more than just a cashier at Christel’s Piggly Wiggly.

In June of 2005, I graduated from Valders High School. While many girls cried and seemed to be holding on to the memories of the past, I was overcome with joy when I realized that I would not have to see half of these people ever again. My graduating class consisted of ninety-one people. I had known a majority of these people since kindergarten and thirteen years later, I had my fill of them. These ninety-one people were never a community to me; rather, more of a cluster of people whose goals were to ridicule and judge. Sure, I had my select group of friends, but I was by no means “Miss Popularity”. I did not even go to my junior prom; I worked a twelve-hour shift instead. Some girls thought I was crazy, but I thought I was the logical one. Why should I spend hundreds of dollars on one night when I did not even have a date? I found the whole concept to be ridiculous, groups of girls going to prom without dates. My philosophy

was, no date no prom. Regardless of which dances I attended and who I talked to, this town began to suffocate me.

I allowed other people to dictate who I should be or who I could be. I did not give myself the opportunity to figure it out for myself. In the eyes of so many who surrounded me I wasn't good enough. I wasn't good enough to ask to go to prom, I wasn't good enough to talk to at lunch and I wasn't good enough to get even one scholarship from my high school. Despite the fact that I was graduating with high honors, had a GPA of 3.8/4.0, did community service, and was involved in many other extra-curricular activities, yet I still was not recognized. I was a small town girl. I did not have the right last name, and in Valders that is what defines you.

As I drive into Valders, there is a large stone plaque that has "Valders" written in bold black letters, followed by "We like it here. Enjoy it with us". I always pondered who this "we" was and if it included me. I certainly did not "like it here". I found it ludicrous to accept the fact that anyone else would want to "enjoy it with us". Enjoy what? A community filled with judgmental and prejudice people who live in the disillusionment that nothing exists outside the boundaries of Valders? I did not feel a part of this community. The people who existed within it rejected me. I thought I could run away from Valders and everything it stood for. I thought it was not a part of who I was, but merely an external condition. So, I ran away. I packed up my 2004 Pontiac Grand Am and drove off determined never to look back, never to return. Nevertheless, I would soon discover the cold, hard truth that you cannot run away. You cannot erase where you have come from. Your surroundings do define you, or at the very least are a part of you.

I was elated to come to Marquette, to be a part of Milwaukee. I had finally become an integral member of a city with energy that infuses your body and soul. I loved this new community, partly because it was something new and partly because it was the polar opposite of

everything I had ever known. I saw life in this city. I could look out my window and actually see people, a definite change from living out in the middle of a field and looking out your window to see yet another cow. I liked the hustle and bustle, the noise, the constant movement. In a few short days, I began to internalize this rhythm. I felt liberated and compelled to make Marquette University and Milwaukee “my community” and to leave behind my small town past.

Although I felt connected to Milwaukee more than I ever felt connected to Valders, I began to realize that the small town girl in me had not quite been destroyed. She still lived within me and began to recognize that Marquette University and Milwaukee were not the perfect fit I had created them to be. I saw the students around me and I saw myself. I began to realize that many had come from quite a different community than I did. They had Coach book bags, I had one from Target. They had three-hundred dollar Ugg boots, I had never even heard of them before. I started to feel out of place, financially and socially. Was this not the right community for me either? I first realized this in a history class I took my first semester at Marquette University. The professor asked who had traveled to Europe, and about eighty percent of the class raised their hands. I sat there in my desk, hand down of course, in astonishment. I began to feel as though every pair of eyes was fixated upon me. Europe? I had only been to Illinois, Washington D.C. and Florida, and I thought I was lucky. Wrong. I felt so out of place. Clearly my community background was a bit different from the average student in the Marquette community.

I have an immense amount of respect for both my mother and my father. Both have spent their lives striving to provide my brother, sister, and me as much as they possibly could. Most importantly, they gave us guidance and an abundance of love. My father is a farmer, managing an average size farm, and my mother was a stay-at-home mom for most of her life.

Concentrating on raising us was her central focus; we always came first in her eyes. Obviously, my parents are by no means millionaires. They, like many others, struggle to make things work financially. I am not compelled in any way to write them otherwise, that would be demeaning to them and what they have accomplished. I am undeniably proud to call them my parents, as they have gone through so much together and continue to face hardships. Sure, I could paint a “pretty picture” of my family, “my father is a neurosurgeon and my mother is a lawyer” but that would be to deny a part of who I am and where I have come from.

Escaping to Milwaukee and becoming a part of not only Milwaukee’s community but also Marquette’s community, I learned that I cannot after all escape my hometown community. Being a part of a new intellectual community in Milwaukee allowed me to re-evaluate the world around me and my place within it. To embrace my hometown community is to set myself apart from others in the Milwaukee community. Being a small town girl does not hinder or repress me in any way; in fact, it gives me an advantage. It allows me to appreciate the details of Milwaukee so many take for granted; the soaring buildings, the people rushing here and there, and the smell of coffee around every corner. This city is in a constant state of motion and has provoked me to join; forcing me not to just stand by idly and merely observe, but rather to engage, interact, and accomplish my ambitions.

This new community is what I needed. Not to replace my hometown community, as I previously had thought, but instead to complete who I am. Although sometimes I feel as though I do not belong and I am completely out of place, I suddenly realize that I am exactly where I am supposed to be. Every time I get another A on an exam, every time I meet a new friend for coffee or to study, and every time I go back home and realize I have become so much more than I ever dreamed. I have gained a sense of self-respect from Milwaukee and Marquette’s community that

has allowed me to function in my hometown community. I no longer let others define who I can or will become; I am the writer of my life story and no one else. Communities help shape you into who you will become and for me Valders, Milwaukee, and Marquette University are molding me into the woman I am destined to become.