I am not who I was yesterday. I am not who I was the day before that, or before that, or five years before that.

Yesterday, my apartment was messy. Today, it’s neat with cupboards full of clean dishes. Yesterday, I was happily eating frozen yogurt with my best friends. Today, I’m locked in my room, studying for finals.

Yesterday, I was tired. Today, I’m taking exhausted to a whole new level.

All of these characteristics about me, no matter how minor, dictate who I am, what I am, and why I do the things I do. The reasons I read the books I read, eat the foods I eat, wear the shoes I wear – there are reasons. I have similar reasons for talking to certain people, forming friendships with certain people, falling in love with a certain person. A lot of the time, the reasoning comes from my past.

I am not who I was yesterday, but yesterday surely left an impact.

I currently have a boyfriend. Maybe you guessed. His name is Eric. He isn’t the focus of this paper. You’ll see.

We’re in love. The cheesiest, grossest, widest-eyed puppy love. Our conversations come easy, the laughs even easier. My little sister is absolutely enamored with him, and my parents are next in line. His older brother, Tim, once drunkenly confessed to me how excited he is at the prospect of me joining their Thanksgiving dinner table one day. At three months into our relationship, that was an interesting, reassuring, terrifying pill to swallow.

On paper, my relationship with Eric reads like every other: he’s supportive and funny and caring and honest and ambitious and respectful and so wonderful. But the depth of the feelings, the solidity of the bond, the purity of the happiness, the intensity of the love – those things can’t be captured. Not only are they incredibly personal, they’re also ever changing.

My relationship is not what it was yesterday. It wouldn’t be possible without a whole bunch of yesterdays.

Four years’ worth of yesterdays ago, there was a boy named Sutton. This boy named Sutton was my first boyfriend, my first kiss, my first experience with a romantic relationship.

Here, relationship should be used loosely. I thought I liked Sutton a lot. In reality, I liked to make out with him while we “watched LOST” on the worn-out couch in my basement. He took me on exactly one date in the three-month span we shared: we went to Arby’s. I drove. He ordered two roast beef sandwiches, a shake, and some curly fries, and I sat across from him and watched him eat. I said I wasn’t hungry, but in reality I was just nervous to eat around him.

We ran cross country together, so we crossed what I deemed a “big relationship hurdle” early on: he had seen me many times after early morning practice, completely covered in sweat and completely free of makeup. He had seen me at “my worst”. Yet I still wasn’t comfortable eating even one single soggy French fry in front of him.

We went to my junior prom together, probably only because my spot on the prom committee scored me two tickets and the most expensive picture package for free. We split the bill at dinner. I refuse to count that as a date.

Sutton never introduced me to his family. Considering we were in high school and both still lived at home, this was weird. I spent very, very little time at either of his parents’ houses –
and only when the parent was gone. I asked repeatedly to meet them, and he always just said later.

He knew my parents fairly well. The first time he came to my house, we were in the kitchen making cookies and joking around with my little sister. My dad, whom Sutton had never met, came home from work, saw Sutton in the kitchen, and yelled, “Who are you, what are you doing in my house, and what do you want with my DAUGHTER?” Sutton’s face instantly flushed. My dad, seeing that Sutton hadn’t taken the joke as well as it was intended, promptly went upstairs and sent me a text message: Sorry, hun. Plz let him know I was kidding. Xo.

After Sutton left my house the night of our so-called date to Arby’s, he broke up with me over a text message. He said he had feelings for another girl and hated to hurt me but didn’t feel right dating me anymore. In the tear-filled hours to follow, I learned three things:

1. Big brothers are the best at post-breakup distractions. Ice cream doesn’t hurt either.
2. I can be insufferably rational. I wanted to hate the “other woman”, Laura, but couldn’t. She had done nothing wrong; she didn’t even know about Sutton’s crush. Even the shards of my broken heart couldn’t poke holes in those facts.
3. I didn’t actually like Sutton that much. Forget broken hearts. Immediately post-breakup, I ushered in a beautiful era of abundant gas money and even more free time.

I started actually paying attention to LOST and fell in love with the show.

In a few short weeks, I was over Sutton.

Chris was next. Tattoo Boy, if you prefer, as dubbed by my more skeptical friends. His tattoo count matched his muscles: excessive. I was someone who had never been attracted to muscles or tattoos and certainly not bad boys, so Chris was something new for me. Our lives were exact opposites: his parents, while still married, hated each other. Mine were still very much in love and often pretended to make out in the middle of the kitchen, just to get a rise out of my siblings and me. His family had little money. Mine was very financially secure. Two of his sisters were single mothers, raising one child each, and the third had dropped out of college a few years prior to treat her methamphetamine addiction. My brother was on his way to a state university the next year with over $8,000 in scholarships; my sister was constantly scoring goals on both her hockey and soccer teams. Our political beliefs were polar opposite, our career ambitions were on entirely different planes, and while I had already applied to my dream school, he didn’t plan to go to college at all.

Our bond was entirely built on our lighthearted debates, I’m sure. We debated anything and everything: abortion (him: pro; me: undecided, but definitely not for me), presidential candidates (him: whoever was the most liberal; me: whoever aired the fewest television ads), if dance was a sport (him: yes – just for the sake of argument; me: absolutely not), if bears or killer whales were the most badass (him: bears; me: whales). Once we tried to go a week without any debates. It was the most boring, awkward week of my life. Were it not for our debates, I don’t know what we would have talked about. Ever.

Chris was not your typical bad boy. Every Thursday during the winter of our senior year of high school, he and his friends chose to spend open-campus lunch in the parking lot. They left jackets in the car and forbade any and all hot food. They called them Valley Forge Thursdays, a tribute to General George Washington and his army during the Revolutionary War. Most weeks, I was forced to participate too, or risk being playfully ignored by not only my boyfriend but also all of his friends. It was funny the first time – but only the first time.

He always brought three sandwiches for lunch, but only ever ate two. The third was used
as bargaining collateral with teachers to get extensions on assignments, test answers, or extra credit. If no one would take his bribe, he used the extra sandwich for a prank. On the coldest day in January, I came out of school at the end of the day to find a piece of bread slathered with mayo frozen to the side of my car. I had to defrost it with a hairdryer in my garage that night. Another time, he disassembled the sandwich, wrapped the ham slices around his best friend’s windshield wipers, and stuck the cheese under the driver’s door handle. We fed the leftover bread slices to ducks at the pond by his house that night. His sense of humor was something else.

Things were peachy for a few months, until one day he decided he was not only madly in love with me (which he expressed through a very emotional series of seven text messages) but also wanted to go to the same university as me and live in the same dorm. Flattering though it was, I was blindsided. And weirded out. And told him so. He didn’t understand my hesitation. There was no going back from any of those declarations, but I didn’t want to act on any of them, either.

That was the end of Chris and me.

Then, Dan. Danfro, they called him. Dan’s was the most emotionally difficult of my relationships and, even still, is the hardest to talk about. He was never abusive and didn’t cheat, but our relationship left me hurting in ways I didn’t know I could withstand.

We spent ten months together, most of them long distance during our freshman year of college. He lived three hours away, and though his roommate had a car and paid dozens of visits to his girlfriend at the same college as me, he only came to visit once. I met his family and many of his friends, but looking back, that was probably only so we had to spend less time alone. He told me he’d never felt for anyone the way he felt for me, not even his previous girlfriend of three years. I didn’t understand, then, why he “never had time to hang out” and refused to talk to me on the phone. We had one phone call during our entire relationship, and that was when he broke up with me. On the night before Easter. He couldn’t even say the words: We’re over, or I’m breaking up with you, or even a miserable It’s not you, it’s me. He walked himself right up to the ledge, and refused to jump. I ended up pushing him off: Okay, Dan, if this is what you want. If you change your mind or decide you want to talk or anything, anything at all, you know how to reach me.

I spent the next four months reeling. My summer job – alphabetizing and shelving books in a warehouse not too far from my house – required silence among employees. I spent the summer inside my own mind, berating myself, tossing scenarios back and forth, smashing some to pieces against the walls of my brain and begging for others to come true. Some days, I would find myself almost in tears among the bookshelves, thinking about something too painful or too hurtful or too real. I don’t know why I did that to myself. It was torture.

I talked to Dan exactly twice after the breakup. Once, to play the crazy ex-girlfriend card. You broke up with me over a phone call! How dare you. I deserved more than that, and we both know it. You were never invested in the relationship in the way you promised you were. The whole thing was a lie. I knew the moment I typed the words out on my tiny phone display that I sounded like a nutjob; I was too emotionally exhausted to care. The second time we spoke was far more civil. I apologized for being crazy, said I didn’t blame him for the breakup, said I wasn’t sad anymore. Said I hoped he was doing well. That was all true.

Some days I still miss him, in an odd way. I don’t miss the relationship – for there really wasn’t a substantial one – but I miss him. Some days I wish I had never dated him and never talked to him and never texted him that first time and never even met him. Not out of spite, but
out of a too-late effort to save myself from the stupid, bumbling pain he caused. Most days, though, he doesn’t enter my mind. Dan is finally a thing of the past. Part of what got me through the summer after Dan was another job I had just picked up at a nearby Jimmy John’s. The work was simple, and the hours were busy, but the crew was what saved me. My coworkers were hilarious and goofy and energetic and very close. I had unknowingly entered into a new family. We played pranks, shared stories, told jokes. I quickly felt accepted. Every Monday, I worked a closing shift with a particularly interesting blonde boy. He told me an abbreviated version of his life story – much more colorful than my own – and introduced me to what has now become some of my favorite music. We played practical jokes too. We repeatedly locked each other out of the store, mopped over each other’s feet, had food fights after closing, and ribbed each other endlessly for this or that embarrassing moment. This boy is Eric. To make an exceptionally long story short, I soon started to see things in him that I liked – a lot. I realize now they were traits that my past relationships had primed me to be vulnerable to: things that had been missing, or things that had been there that I wanted again. From Sutton, I learned the importance of openness and family. Since we couldn’t share the same pieces of our lives in the same ways at some point – especially our families – our relationship was doomed from the start. From Chris, I learned how much I value valid communication. The silly debates and endless jokes were great, but without at least occasional purposeful, deep conversations, we had no future together. From Dan, I learned the danger of trying too hard. I built that pitiful relationship into a beautiful love story in my head and mentally forced Dan to play the role I had assigned him. When he didn’t follow my script, I blamed myself. He never wanted to be what I so desperately thought I needed. He didn’t feel as if he owed me anything. I thought he did. Maybe we were both wrong. It took a while, of course, for me to realize all of these connections. I didn’t understand why Eric was so appealing to me or why I instantly valued our friendship the way I did. I see now, of course, just how much influence my past had. This is a common thread in all of my life: the shaping of my future by the events of my past. Even the most insignificant occurrences change some aspect of my life. Every moment is a domino, changing the future as it falls. Yet people are so eager to leave that past behind. Adages like forgive and forget and don’t look back and what’s done is done add a bitter flavor of finality to the past, but that’s so ignorant. The past is a wealth of information, suggestions, and coded directions about how to move into the present and future – to write that off is an egregious oversight. If we turned our backs entirely on our yesterdays, we would lose so much of the magic of our todays. I am not who I was yesterday – not entirely, at least, and this is why. Because I have learned from the events of the past and used that knowledge as a tool. Today, I am happy and strong and secure and confident, due in large part to what I’ve seen and done and been through. Today, I am made up of a beautiful mosaic of all of the best lessons of all of my yesterdays.