Life Partners

By Kelly Coyne Volume 2//Essay

Whatever it was I saw in her that day twenty years ago still baffles me, because it put me on a path for the rest of my life. We were in the first grade, I had just moved from another state, and I noticed Lizzie from afar. The draw might have been the fact that she possessed a sense of self that I envy even today, or that she seemed to have figured out a way to laugh at herself and assert herself at the same time. Or it could have been that she was different in ways I didn't have the words for at the time, even though she was always—intimidatingly so—surrounded by friends: rambunctious, articulate, calling attention to herself, as self-deprecating as she is today. I haven't felt that kind of pull towards someone since and I don't know if I ever will.

But she didn't see me. Although we were in different classes I noticed her everywhere. She was in the line going to lunch, she was swinging on the monkey bars during recess, she was waiting for her mom to pick her up after school. She wore her short dark ringlets in pigtails and she looked like a real-life version of Lucy, from the Peanuts cartoons. Her favorite color was purple and it manifested in what she wore. Purple corduroy skirt, purple headband, purple tights, purple clogs.

It took a month of joining her Girl Scout troop, befriending her friends, registering for the soccer league—doing anything my five-year-old brain could concoct to get closer to her—before she saw me too. By the end of elementary school she had quit ballet to join me in gymnastics five days a week. I remember our chalky hands and our itchy leotards, eating dinner at Lizzie's house before practice each night, going through our routines in my backyard on weekends under the lights.

In the fourth grade, when my parents announced that we would be moving to San Francisco for a semester, Lizzie and I spent a day sobbing in panic as if our basic rights were being rescinded and she wrote a long, anxious letter begging me to not turn into a California Valley Girl. “It’s most likely you won’t,” she wrote, “but I want you to promise me anyhow.” That letter and its envelope—which she embellished with doodles of us in colored gel pens and encouragements like “KELLY COYNE: Remember! You get PIZZA on your last day of school,” “Remember! You are coming back”—still hang in my childhood bedroom, a reminder of the person I have always been.

She too was moving away that semester—in with her grandparents. She included her grandparents’ phone number in the letter, and after school, in my plaid jumper and prickly blue sweater, I’d climb up on a chair to reach the tan plastic telephone mounted in the kitchen and call her. I’d anxiously wrap the coiled cord around my finger and we’d discuss the girls in my class at Catholic school. There were only fourteen in total, compared to the oversized public school Lizzie and I went to in Connecticut. They took me in only because they wanted to be cheerleaders in middle school and I could do gymnastics. They all talked about boys, and they were wearing bras, and I felt like I was in a foreign country. You are all that is good for me, I’d plead to Lizzie, clutching the heavy phone.

Although California was lonely, I came back reeling from the excitement of the city compared to our suburban lives back home. “We didn’t have a car!” I’d say to Lizzie. “I could watch TV in the window across the street when I was supposed to be sleeping!” I spent the next ten years trying to convince her to move there with me after college.

As Lizzie and I got older, we did our best to find separate activities because we spent so much time together, fearing too much overlap would prevent us from developing into fully-formed humans. But we kept on bumping into

each other, like two people making their way across the country on different roads at the same time. In high school, we did soccer in the fall, track in the winter and spring, and ended up unintentionally enrolling in the same class schedule two years in a row. We went on our college tours together and I remember overhearing her mom talk to mine. “Those two are going to end up together,” she said. But we didn’t. She ended up in Ohio and I ended up in Maine. Even so, we had the same summer job in college, leading bike tours for high school students. We requested that we lead different trips and both ended up biking across the country, but on different routes.

One of my friends from college has a theory that treacherous fights among straight women are usually due to men, but that hasn’t been my experience. The other girls who followed Lizzie around in elementary school—I soon found out during that first year of friendship—were the daughters of her mother’s best friends. They had been in a playgroup since they were toddlers, and Alex’s mom and Lizzie’s mom had been friends since they were in high school, the same high school we attended. When the mothers got in arguments with each other we all heard about them. Years later, when Lena Dunham’s television character silently confirmed that “a friendship between college girls is grander and more dramatic than any romance,” I thought of that group. Dunham’s character hid under her bed when her best friend came in and saw the declaration written on her laptop, which—looking back on it—I now realize suggests how vulnerable that statement is, even though it had never seemed that way to me. Because the playgroup was the template upon which my first friendships were formed, the beginning of college was confusing, seeing women drop their friends the moment a romance came along and then come dashing back once it was over. I could understand why my college friend had her theory. In the playgroup though, that hasn’t been the norm. There are quarrels, and there are jealousies, men just aren’t the subject of them.

To this day, those families behave as if they are one extended family. When Lizzie's parents aren't home we'll walk to Amélie's if we need a car; as teenagers, we'd congregate at Madeline's house before practice for snacks because it was so close to school. When I lost the ability to talk to Lizzie during a particularly crippling panic attack in high school, she got scared and called Olivia's mom, who is a social worker, to figure out what to do. Such behavior extended to disciplinary practices—I had twelve sets of eyes on me instead of just two. I've been reprimanded by most of my friends' parents, and it was rare that I spent time with my friends without their parents there. The worst fight Lizzie and I had, which lasted almost a year when we were juniors in high school, was because I was jealous of her history with the playgroup and felt left out. Men just weren't worth a fight, especially because, unlike teenage romances, we knew our friendships weren't fleeting; they were steadfast, just like we had seen in our mothers. "School and friends," my mom would say, "that's what you girls need to focus on."

In an ironic twist of fate, I wasn't the one who ended up moving to San Francisco—Lizzie was. One of the bike trips brought her through the city and she fell in love with it just as I had a decade earlier. After college, when a summer internship offered me a job in New York, I looked for an apartment in Brooklyn while Lizzie planned her move to San Francisco, alone and without a job. But our relationship didn't change. During those first days as a twenty-two year old—anxious and lonely and disoriented, feeling as though there was a guidebook to being an adult that everyone but me had received—she drew me out of the darkness. Toni Morrison exquisitely captures this feeling during a scene in Sula. The protagonist is trapped in a dim house, alone and confused after overhearing that she is loved but not liked, and Nel's call "floats up and into the window, pulling her away from dark thoughts back into the bright, hot daylight." Lizzie is, and always has been, my Nel.

Each year since college, I have saved up my meager publishing salary to visit

her for our birthdays, which are within three weeks of each other's. I slip into her life in San Francisco as if I have been there all along. When I see her friends it is like being with the playgroup again: we speak the same language, their energy gives me energy. It's the opposite of New York, which at times feels like being trapped in a fish tank without knowing how to swim, like trying to understand the girls from Catholic school. Visiting her feels like home.

There's a pattern in photos of us from those early years. We are in a group: eight six-year-olds preparing to carry a banner with our Brownie troop in the Memorial Day parade; a line of girls on our first communions, all in little white wedding dresses, nervously fingering the crosses around our necks; socks-and-braces clad seventh graders sprawled out on a parquet floor at a bat mitzvah. In all of them, Lizzie and I seem to be in a world of our own. In the first communion photo, Lizzie's mouth is open as if she's whispering something to me and I'm leaning in towards her. In the bat mitzvah picture, we are in the back corner: I have a confused look on my face and she is staring up at the camera with wide eyes and a frown. In the Memorial Day photo, she is twisted away from the camera, one hand gripping the banner, but her cheeks—puffed out like a squirrel—indicate that she is smiling. I am facing her, we are talking, and she is animated, gesturing with her free arm. Lizzie's mom stands behind us, and I imagine her gently pushing us along, reminding us to focus on where we are going.

That's kind of how our lives have been, a distinct duo in a pack of women, fusing our disparate experiences into a collective narrative. It's like we're two people on two different bikes, riding on parallel zigzagging roads at the same time. We struggle up hills, but different hills, and coast down passes, but different passes. Sometimes we get lost, but we always find our way. We come back together with our separate stories, and we grow like two twisting trees, stronger and with more lines of life than if we were alone.


Brownie Troop 659