

Or Emily,  
You write really well - I like your self-deprecating voice. Very honest too A

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The (Abridged) Autobiography of Emily Lerman

nice beginning!

I grew up in a bubble. Don't get me wrong; it was a nice bubble, but a bubble nonetheless. My hometown of Potomac, Maryland is about as ethnically diverse as Chinatown, if you replace the Chinese Americans with Caucasian Jewish lawyers. But of course, when you're young, your world is your world, and you have a hard time believing that people live any differently than you do. As far as I was concerned, it was normal to have only one African American student, if any, in each of my classes at public school. It was perfectly legitimate to make plans with all my friends on Christmas Eve, just never on Rosh Hashanah, because naturally *everyone* is celebrating that night. I could also discuss my warped sense of reality regarding BMW's and weekly manicures, but I'm only going to delve into the absurdity of upper middle class rituals when I deem it necessary.

I grew up comfortable. I am fortunate enough to say that so far in life, I have never known the feeling of deprivation. I live in a lovely, three-story home on a cul-de-sac in the suburbs. My father is a partner in his own law firm, and my mother is a real estate agent, when she feels like working. I have three siblings; one older sister, a Penn graduate turned paralegal now living in New York City, and two younger brothers, one a freshman at Penn, the other a sophomore in high school, who will no doubt pursue a college career at dear old Penn in two years. You can probably see a pattern here. My father went to Penn, as did his father, as did my Uncle, Great Uncle, and two cousins. So

Bill bet!

I suppose you can say that we Lerman children felt slightly pressured. My father denies this, though he can't deny wrapping us in Penn diapers seconds after our departure from the womb. We have pictures.

Coming to grips with my identity was a long and arduous struggle. Growing up among what I still consider to be the snottiest concentration of children in America, I can easily admit that I was a pretty horrible person when I was younger. I take pride in the fact that I can now recognize this. Being the second of four children, one would think I'd have suffered from the middle child epidemic. But no, somehow, despite having three siblings, I managed to contract a horrendous case of *only* child syndrome. Between the ages of 6 to 13, I was often compared to Varuca Salt from *Charlie and The Chocolate Factory*. You know, the one who sings the song "Give It To Me, Now?" That was me. I'm not quite sure what made me think I was entitled to anything I demanded, but I'm positive being "Daddy's little girl" didn't help matters. Plus, my sister never asked for a thing, so I suppose I felt it was my right to ask for enough things to cover the both of us. That seemed logical. Unfortunately, my tendency to be a horrifyingly obnoxious brat wasn't even my worst quality. I was disrespectful to my family, and thinking about some of the things I used to say to my mother now makes me ill.

Want it  
Want it  
Now!?

Fortunately, my behavior improved slightly with age, and by the time I was a junior in high school, I was what most would consider a respectable human being. I think part of this had to do with my developing a sense of self worth, as I had little to no self-esteem growing up. I was definitely the awkward child—I was too tall, a little chubby, wore braces, had acne, and spoke with a terrible lisp. I don't think I would have been quite so upset about my awkward phase had it not seemed that everyone around me was

interesting

perfect. Potomac is a very unforgiving place. If you're not slender and attractive, you're done for. Picture a smaller-scale Hollywood. In fact, Darren Starr, the producer of *Beverly Hills, 90210*, went to my high school, and based his television series on my town. Have you ever seen an episode where the 90210 gang is hanging out at West Beverly High, with kids driving up to school in their Mercedes, fresh from the plastic surgeon's office? Welcome to Potomac. The constant pressure to be thin, pretty, and popular was excruciating. Not to mention the intense academic pressures. When every kid in town has twelve tutors and inevitably goes to an Ivy League college, the competition gets tough and the pressure is on. The more I looked at my less-than-perfect self in the mirror, and the more I watched my grades slip from straight As to occasional Bs, the more angry and bitter I became.

As I grew older, my body became somewhat more proportional, my raging hormones calmed, and speech therapy helped turn my horrible lisp into only the slight speech impediment you hear today. My physical growth led to mental growth, and I slowly became a morally better person. The first groundbreaking incident came one day in 11<sup>th</sup> grade, when I got into a screaming fight with my mother. I couldn't even tell you now what the fight was about, although I'm sure whatever it was, she was right and I was one hundred percent wrong. Regardless, it turned nasty, I said some things I shouldn't have said, and I stormed out of the house. When I returned, I witnessed my mother crying hysterically. I couldn't believe I had inflicted that kind of emotional pain on someone I love. I vowed then and there to at least attempt to be a better person. However, given that I was an extreme creature of habit, it was going to take some time for me to change. I made a concerted effort to be nicer to my family, but I would often slip and throw one

that's what happened to your self! extreme!

Some pretty big stars converted speech impediments into pluses! eg. Gloria Graham (the blonde in "It's a Wonderful Life")

of my ridiculous tantrums. It was easy to not completely transform my habits, because no one ever forced me to. I could be a brat, hurt people's feelings, and then be forgiven with a quick, obligatory apology. In my book, that meant no harm done.

Penn changed who I am. While the skeleton of my personality has remained intact, I can honestly say that I am almost a completely different person now than I was in Potomac. It started freshman year, when my parents drove away from Hill dormitory and I looked around to see nothing but my reflection in the mirror. I was terrified. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] It had never been necessary for me to make friends before. And now that I had no other choice, I completely doubted myself; if I didn't even like myself, how could other people possibly like me? I hit a brick wall my first two months of college. I slipped into a severe state of depression. I cried every night and slept the entire day away. I had never felt so low in my life.

Then, seemingly out of nowhere, I met someone who would not only be my first friend in college, but who continues to be my best friend in life. Her positive attitude and warm personality inspired me from the second we met. And through this friend, I developed a group of best friends who are so incredible, I find myself questioning how I ever became so lucky, and what I did to deserve such an amazing support system. My friends at Penn completely changed my outlook on life. When I started to connect with these people, I made a conscious decision to become a better person. I wanted to have the kind of influence on them that they had on me, but I knew that until I was happy with myself, I couldn't offer that. I called a therapist and got help. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] I went out of my way to compliment people, if only to see them smile. All simple things that most normal people do, but that I had never thought to do before. It began to dawn on me that, despite what Potomac tried to make me believe, being happy is not about how you look or whom you associate with. Happiness with yourself comes from bringing happiness to others. That is, without a doubt, the most valuable and life-altering lesson I've learned in my 21 years.

In terms of my awareness of my demographic qualities, I would estimate that from the time I was born to the time I was arrived at college, I had absolutely zero conscience knowledge of them. Or perhaps I should rephrase, and say that I didn't *appreciate* my demographic qualities, nor appreciate the diverse qualities of others. I'm not going to make excuses for my ignorance; I will only defend myself in saying that it is hard to appreciate people's differences when not one person you encounter is significantly different than you are. My childhood consisted of Hebrew school, bat mitzvahs, Jewish sleep away camps, and Starbucks. Not much room to become an ethnically or religiously cultured individual.

When I came to college, my roommate walked in the door and I knew right then it was going to be an interesting year. Even when I looked past the fact that she was wearing a tight black halter dress as I sported a white tank top with gym shorts, I could still tell we were very different people [REDACTED] was from a small town in California, and I knew this because, being the stalker I am, once I received my roommate's name and location over the summer, I immediately typed her town into a yahoo search. I can't even

remember the name of the town now, but I'll always remember the population number: 4,000. About the size of my high school. Kim was half-white, half-Mexican, and she had never met a Jew in her life. I discovered this on Kol Nidre, the holiest night of the Jewish year. I was getting dressed for synagogue services when [redacted] walked in the room and said, "Ooooh, hot date?" My response was, "Yes, with my rabbi." She looked confused. "What's a rabbi?" I waited for her game face to crack, but no, she was serious. I tried to think of a way to explain what a rabbi was in terms she could relate to, so I responded with "rabbi is to Jewish as priest is to Catholic." She looked at me, eyes wide, and said "you're a Hebrew? I've never met one before." Well, this was interesting. It was the sixth night of school and my roommate was calling me a Hebrew. I was fairly taken aback, because until then it hadn't really dawned on me that there are people in the world who not only haven't met a Jewish person, but who might not even know what a Jewish person is. And this was my first experience with anyone who fit that description, given that anywhere else I've traveled in life, (I've had a trail of at least fifteen Jews behind me.) And I'm not going to pretend that Penn is the most hugely diverse population, because compared to most colleges, it's not. It becomes particularly less religiously varied when you date an orthodox Jew for half your college career and are a member of the Sigma Delta Tau sorority. However, that aside, the Penn community is certainly more diverse than that of Potomac, and I suppose you have to start somewhere.

As my college career progresses, I continue to meet new people every day, each with a different story to tell, many with completely different backgrounds than myself. That being said, my best friends here are mostly Jewish girls from the east coast, as I

Ha!

nice  
turn of  
phrase  
look out  
wooly  
allen!

suppose there is validity to the concept of comfort among familiarity. But I am certainly now more aware of different cultures, backgrounds, and ethnicities. I have acquired an immense appreciation for those who are different than I am, whereas before, different just meant strange. I suppose my culturally homogeneous childhood was a major incentive for taking this class. Though I am now more sensitive to and aware of all forms of diversity, there is an immeasurable amount I can still learn about other people's lives and backgrounds. I am particularly interested in hearing the autobiographies of the students in this class, because I am certain people will have fascinating stories which will be in no way comparable to my own upbringing. I'm just happy to now be appreciative of that notion, rather than being ignorant to it.