

# EndInsight

BY SARA O'BRYAN

## In the Mean Time

When I was in elementary school, grown-ups used to tell me all the time that whatever doesn't kill you makes you stronger. Those words had extra pertinence for me because I just wasn't like my classmates. I read constantly so I didn't even speak like them — my vocabulary was much bigger than theirs. I was quieter, shier and scored better on tests. And worst of all, I had big, dorky Sally Jesse Raphael glasses.

A snapshot of my preadolescent years could be best summed up with the caption "REJECTED" in big red letters.

There is something profoundly important about rejection that occurs before you can drive, vote and legally drink. It's not your everyday, garden-variety brush-off.

When you're a girl, and you're young, it's somehow very different from other forms of scorn. Hollywood makes movies about this kind of derision. (Anybody catch *Mean Girls* this summer? The scriptwriters weren't exaggerating.)

The high-water mark in my own grand History of Rejection had to be 1987, when I was in fifth grade. Besides being shy, quiet and bookish, I didn't have The Right Stuff, materially speaking. I didn't have the right hair (a perm was de rigueur), the right tennis shoes (Tretorns) or the right clothes (Coca-Cola shirt, Woolrich jacket, Liz Claiborne purse). I also wasn't very pretty and I didn't "go" with a boy. (I didn't even talk to boys!) Somehow that made me different in a *really bad way*.

Beyond that, I'm not really sure why I went from an OK-to-hang-out-with girl to a make-as-much-fun-of-as-possible girl.

It was like a bunch of girls in my class got together and decided my fate. These were girls I'd known my whole life. We'd been in ballet recitals and Christmas pageants together. I'd been to their houses and giggled on their den floors while watching *The Muppet Show*. And now they were following me around on the playground, shouting made-up gossip about me in *Mean Girls* fashion. (It wasn't cool to admit you played with Barbies in the fifth grade, and, among other things, they'd told absolutely *everybody on the planet* that I played with Barbies!) It was a daily production featuring that unholy trinity of

adolescent female behavior — Teasing, Torturing and Taunting.

I would like to say that I bounced back easily from this. But it took a very long time for me to forgive those girls, and a long time to erase those mental audio tapes.

And now for the part where I return to grown-up mode: Whatever doesn't kill you *does* make you stronger, and I am actually kind of grateful for the lessons I learned back then. Rejection makes you careful with people in a way that lifelong social acceptance simply cannot duplicate. It's the kind of thing you can only appreciate in retrospect — like when you're 28 and intent on being a paragon of calm, cool collectedness.

But don't think I escaped all threat of rejection; it just doesn't have blond hair and a parochial school uniform anymore. For instance, some of the high school students I now teach regularly reject my ideas about the value of homework and actually *reading* Shakespeare. My short-story submissions are regularly dismissed by literary publications. My hair sometimes rejects attempts at a style.

What's changed is not the presence of the rejection but my reaction to it. I suppose it might be some kind of emotional callus covering those spots rubbed raw so long ago. Mostly, I think, I just got used to it. I understand now that

life and rejection are a package deal. But the life package also comes with some rather nice features like pretty sunsets and homemade chocolate cake and baseball games.

I read something once about birds needing the rough, strong winds of early spring to migrate home for the summer. I don't know if that's true, but it's a nice metaphor for my life anyway. I need a few rough times to get me where I'm going, to give me momentum to soar, prepared and ready, into whatever is next.

I still see those girls from the playground around town now and then. They're different now — even friendly. I doubt that they ever ponder those days when they circled me like lions on the weakest zebra, with their messy ponytails and disheveled skirts, accusing me of all manner of things unbecoming in a cool fifth grader, things they'd never dream of saying to me today. ■

