Traversing the East Coast in a Pair of Converse

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TRAVERSING THE EAST COAST IN A PAIR OF CONVERSE

What 20 Pairs of Shoes Can Say About a Person

Laura Stall
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The Back of the Poster in Front of Me

The idea to write about shoes actually came from my step-dad Jim, somewhere around ten or eleven years ago. He was helping my step-sister think of ideas for her college admission essays, and said that it would be interesting to write about life by writing about her shoes. I remember the scene exactly: he was standing on one end of the counter, she was sitting on the other, and I was at the kitchen table. I don’t really remember what I was doing at the kitchen table, but I was sitting there. And that idea stuck with me.

So in my third year of college, as I walked around with an American Flag high-top on one foot and the Union Jack high-top on the other, I knew what I had to write about: my life journey in a pair of Converse tennis shoes.

So I started carrying a pack of notecards with me everywhere. If I remembered a certain story regarding my Chucks, I wrote it down. Then I went back to my apartment and taped it where it belonged on my poster board.

Now the entire board is filled with notecards, and I get to organize them whichever way I choose. I took a picture of it for Instagram, a large tri-fold cardboard poster with index cards and paper taped to it. On a lined sheet of paper is listed every single pair of Chucks I’ve ever owned. It’s surrounded by four columns: Trips and Adventures, Civil War Reenacting & Me, Obsessions, and What the Future Holds. At the bottom, a section for my parents, and a card that reads Cleveland Sports, Lawson’s Chip Dip, College, and Everything Ohio. I was going to split this up by the columns of the poster, but I think it would be far more interesting to go chronologically with the pairs of shoes I’ve owned. Not every shoe may be included, because no one’s life is so interesting that they have something to talk about for every pair of shoes they’ve owned, but
enough will be said that one could easily follow my growth and development through the Converse sneaker.

The journey begins with a pair of pink low-tops…

My first pair of Converse All Stars were bought in fourth grade, and somewhat on a whim. My mom, my step-dad, my two step sisters Erin and Alexa, and I were on our way to my cousin Greg’s Hebrew School confirmation. Now, I had been asking my mom for a pair of Chucks for a while. My older step sister, Erin, had a pair, and she wrote all over them. And it was so cool. And I wanted to do it so bad. My mom didn’t want to spend that much money on me, because admittedly I had a problem with acquiring expensive shoes and not actually wearing them.

We had made it to Baltimore, where my cousin was being confirmed, early, so we decided to make a pit stop at the mall. The mall in this county was…questionable, at best…but we had nowhere else to go. The shoe store we went to was called Shoe Carnival, and to be totally honest, it was a little freaky. I didn’t appreciate the large, goofy clowns painted on the walls, or the cheesy color scheme, but it was also massive, and had a wide array of shoes; including my beloved Converse. Upon walking into the store, my step sisters and I made a beeline to the Converse section, and I stared in awe at the rows and rows of beautiful canvas. I don’t entirely recall what was so special about that day, but after weeks and months of asking, my mom approached us, and finally said the words that changed my entire life (it seemed like that at the time…):

“Well, how about you try a pair on?”
And that was how I wound up with my very first pair of low-top pink Chucks. I was seated in the back of our minivan as we drove to the synagogue, cradling the cardboard rectangular prism that held my new favorite things.

Since then, I have owned twenty pairs of Converse sneakers. They have carried me—albeit in a pretty unsupportive manner—through many stages in my life, and are now a staple in my life. My story begins in a pair of Chucks, and will probably end there as well.

**The Hershey Park Adventure**

My pink low-top Chucks were the coolest thing in the world, and I couldn’t wait to wear them everywhere. And one of the first times I wore them, I was going to Hershey Park for a field trip.

Spark M. Matsunaga Elementary School was known for a lot of things; it was a new school, it was originally built without a fifth grade, we had “portables,” which were just glorified trailers made to be classrooms outside of the actual building, it carried over a thousand students at any given time, and had a fourth grade field trip the Hershey Park. It was a rite of passage. For the first time ever, a field trip wasn’t going to be educational. It was what everyone looked forward to. My brother, who was a grade above me, told me all about it. You leave early in the morning, but then you get all day there, and come back after school is over (it’s a pretty big deal), and you spend the whole time with your friends.

“And make sure Dad’s your chaperone too,” he insisted. “That’s awesome.”

My dad promised he would be my chaperone the next year.

I told my friends all about what my brother said, and suddenly it was like the only reason we entered the fourth grade was to go to Hershey Park.
By the time the field trip rolled around, I was spending a lot of my time with my friend Miranda. She was part of a trio—one of the most popular trios in the grade—with two other girls named Alex and Kaitlin. I was an honorary fourth member of their group, but over time, had separated, bringing Miranda along with me. I didn’t do it on purpose; all of them were very nice. It just happened. My other best friend’s name was Lindsey. We had an on-again, off-again friendship. At the time, we were in an “on-again” phase. But I was spending most of my time with Miranda.

One day, the entire grade was brought into the auditorium to discuss the trip. There were large posters at the front of the group. It was time to choose partners and groups for the Hershey trip. Because my dad was chaperoning—always a man of his word—my name was already written up there. I just needed a partner.

It was a no-brainer. After waiting for what seemed like hours, Miranda was called up, and added her name right under mine. It was set, and I couldn’t wait. Me, my dad, and Miranda were going to have one of the greatest days ever.

A few days later, Lindsey walked up to me before class started. I was seated at my desk, searching through the awful mess inside, when she approached me, smiling.

“Guess what?” she asked.

“What?” I said, turning my attention from the paper wasteland over to her. She was holding her hands close to her stomach, as if concealing something, and she looked excited.

“So, my parents weren’t comfortable with who I was partnered with for Hershey Park, because her parents are deaf, and they’re worried about my safety,” she explained.

“Okay?” I asked. I wasn’t sure where it was going. I knew she was probably disappointed that we weren’t partners, but my young mind was not processing what was going on.
Lindsey opened her hands, and showed me a small slip of paper, on which was written, in my teacher’s familiar handwriting, your partner is now Laura Stall.

My initial reaction was confusion. What would happen to Miranda? Why did they immediately choose me? But at the same time, I was pretty excited. Lindsey was a close friend, and Hershey Park would probably still be fun anyway.

And then, after days spent anxiously waiting, Science classes dedicated to learning about roller coasters, history classes where we learned about Milton Hershey, and free time spent talking about safety, it was time to go to Hershey Park. I spent the night at my dad’s house the night before—which was pretty rare for a weekday, as that wasn’t the custody agreement at the time—and early the next morning, I woke up, laced my pink Chucks up, and my dad and I drove to the elementary school. School hadn’t started yet, so the only people there were those of the fourth grade class. I met up with Lindsey, and we discussed our day. She had this cute little purse that held all her money, she wanted a corndog for lunch, and didn’t want to go on any upside-down rides. I was totally okay with that, because I was nine and very afraid of the concept of going upside down. I had my two best friends at my side—yes, my dad is absolutely one of my best friends—and we all piled onto the bus to head out.

Our first stop—I think it was a requirement—was the Chocolate Tour. Attendees climb into these little brown carts, and are brought through a tunnel that explains the history of Chocolate, and Hershey altogether. You start with the cocoa bean, and end in Hershey Park. It leaves out the part where slave labor was probably used somewhere to help harvest the cocoa beans, and definitely leaves out the factory labor that goes into it; but it’s got singing cows, so my fourth grade mind was satisfied and entertained.
When it was done, it was time to move on to the rides. I insisted we go on rides like The Scrambler and The Pirate—the Scrambler is just one of those ‘always fun’ rides that my family and I love, and the Pirate was a huge swinging boat, so naturally it was awesome—but besides that, we had no real plan. Our only roller coaster that day was Wild Mouse. It was by no means the only roller coaster without upside down loops, but it was the only one I felt safe on.

Now why, you may ask?

Well, there’s a roller coaster called the Comet that has been with the park basically since it’s opening. It’s one of the last coasters to be made of wood. I had no real issue with this, until I brought it up with Lindsey.

“Hey, you know, the Comet isn’t an upside down ride,” I mentioned as we passed it.

“Yeah,” Lindsey said contemplatively. “But it’s made of wood. I don’t really trust that; you know? I mean, it has to hold all that weight…I’m not sure if it’s safe.”

That was never even really a thought in my head, but suddenly the idea of a bunch of people getting onto this wooden coaster, the coaster creaking and making all sorts of unsafe noises, and collapsing flashed in my imagination and I immediately decided that we were not going to go on the Comet. Everything else was way too scary—the Storm Runner, which was a new ride that had just opened, kept getting stuck—so we stuck to the smaller rides. One ride in particular that I remember is the Twin Turnpike: Classic Cars ride. There are some classic cars on a little course, and the attendees get to navigate it through a little course. I hopped in the driver’s seat, Lindsey joined me in the passenger’s seat, and we horribly navigated ourselves through a very simple path. It was hilarious, and half the time Lindsey had to be the one to tell me when to turn and when not to, but it was pretty pathetic at the same time. That’s why they make people wait until they’re fifteen, I suppose.
Lunch was a filling meal of Chinese food for me and my dad, and Lindsey’s beloved corndog. We had to search a lot of food places to find one that served them. But she needed her damn corndog. So we got it.

When lunch was over, we went on Wild Mouse again, and I was starting to feel slightly more confident about the Comet. Sure, it was a wooden coaster, but they wouldn’t have had it up for so long if it didn’t work, right?

I casually mentioned this to Lindsey. “Maybe we should try the Comet? Everyone else is going on it.”

Lindsey looked at me. “My stomach is kind of hurting,” she stated immediately. “The corndog is making me kind of sick.”

My dad was also feeling a little sick—amusement park Chinese food really wasn’t a good idea—so he was definitely not feeling like a big roller coaster like that.

I believe my dad. I still don’t know if I believe Lindsey.

I was defeated, so I let Lindsey rule the rest of the trip. We all went on the Scrambler, hit a few other rides that I don’t really remember, and then hit the gift shop. I walked out with a plush Hershey’s Kiss, and Lindsey bought some lip gloss that tastes like the flavor it is. She ended up giving me the Bubble Yum one while we were on the bus waiting to leave. I can’t really remember why, but it was really nice of her.

While we were waiting to leave, I noticed that Maurita, the girl Lindsey originally ditched to be my partner, was sitting in front of us.

Now, I don’t want to brag, but in the fourth grade, I was pretty good at signing the alphabet. I learned it from my days being a Girl Scout, and now that I knew of someone who could do it as well, it was my time to shine.
I popped up from my seat and looked over the back of her’s. “Maurita?” I asked.

Maurita looked up at me. “Yeah?”

“Um, I know the sign language alphabet,” I smiled.

Maurita just stared at me.

“Look!” I started to sign the letters, but got caught on F. “Um…what’s F again?”

Maurita did not look impressed. Clearly, she thought I was lying. She brought the tips of her thumb and pointer together, with the other three fingers straight up in the F sign.

“Right!” I cheered. I continued to the end of the alphabet, and then waited for her approval.

“That’s cool,” she said.

I felt validated, so I fell back into my seat just as the teachers climbed onto the bus. When everyone was accounted for, we left.

It was on the ride home that I realized just how bad my feet were hurting. My pinky toes felt like they were being squished, my heels hurt, and the backs of my ankles were stinging. I tried to ignore the pain as much as I could, but when we finally arrived back at the school, I sat on the platform where the flagpole stood and pulled off one of my shoes.

Blisters. Big, round, pussy blisters.

“Oh, did you get blisters?” Lindsey asked.

“Yeah,” I grimaced.

“Oh, those are the worst,” Lindsey commented. “And they’ll just hurt for a while, and then become big craters when they pop.”

I had never really had experience with blisters, but Lindsey was not helping the situation.
“You shouldn’t have worn brand new shoes to walk around an amusement park all day,” my dad mentioned.

“I didn’t know!” I insisted.

I would go on to experience many blisters and much pain brought on by Converse tennis shoes. But I would never stop wearing them. Eventually, I popped the blisters, cleaned out the ‘craters’ as much as I could, and then wore the pink shoes the very next day. Lindsey and I talked about how much fun we had together, and I even told her that I was glad I went with her instead of Miranda.

Eventually, Lindsey and I parted ways for good. Miranda and I remained friendly, but not close. Funny enough, the only person from that experience that I do still talk to is Maurita. But she didn’t come till a while later.

**Jewish Camp and My Acting Career**

I spent eight Summers attending a camp called Camp Louise. It was an overnight camp for young Jewish girls. Almost every Jewish girl has been to a camp like it, and many probably went to Louise. I went through about a pair of shoes every Summer, and much of it was due to the fact that I went to camp and got them messy and disgusting.

I started going when I was six, but nothing really kicked off until my fourth year. There was a choice, and kids could either stay for two weeks or four weeks, and I was finally there for four weeks, which meant I could start my career as the greatest actor to ever be in a camp play.

Maybe.

My first play was called *Monsters Under the Bed*, a show about a group of young girls at a sleepover who share their fears, which took the form of monsters. I played the Math Test
Monster. My friend Jennifer played the girl who was scared of math tests (weird that you’d be so scared of them that they’d take the form of a monster, but whatever), and she and I became buddies throughout the experience. As a matter of fact, the whole cast did. My little step sister Alexa played the younger cousin of the character Jennifer played, and was very afraid of monsters under the bed. Jennie and Maddie played twins who were scared of thunder (truthfully I don’t remember the name of the girls who played thunder…), Rachel played a girl who was scared of the Doctor (that was Dani!). Sara played the big sister who was babysitting all the girls, and set off the whole discussion on monsters when she teased the girls about them being under the bed. Carly played the bully monster, and Jamie played the creepy night noise monster. The girls would all talk about what they were scared of, and then each monster would come out and give a monologue. I was in a cabin with Rachel, Maddie, and Jennie, and we all went through our lines hundreds of times. I mastered the Math Test Monster’s monologue, and could probably still recite it to this day, if I wanted to. It was really a great experience. I got out of activities like swimming and outdoor hiking because I had rehearsals, and I got to wear a purple shirt-dress with numbers sewn on it and fuzzy things sewn on the hem. I was a sassy, purple dress-wearing manifestation of a math test, and I would have continued to terrorize my good friend Jennifer’s character if it weren’t for everyone else teaching her to be confident instead.

My second play was Pippi Longstocking, where I played Teacher Number 2. It wasn’t a character that was originally in the show, but apparently they didn’t like to turn people away, so I got a few lines. It was a crappy play. I didn’t even get a cool costume. I wore a black shirt with a black skirt and my black Chucks. What type of Teacher Number 2 wears that? When I found out, I stalked off to my trailer and demanded better accommodations for my time.
Okay, so I just silently seethed and accepted my crap role. Again, the cast was really
great, and I got out of swim and outdoor hiking by participating, so I wore my all-black costume
with pride.

Alexa played Pippi—she had red hair and freckles so she was obviously going to get the
role—and I love her to death, but she kind of sucked. She yelled all of her lines, and just
hardcore overacted. She was only eight or nine though, so you really couldn’t blame the kid. And
she wasn’t the only one who sucked. I sucked. I wasn’t nearly as good as I was in rehearsal.
Jennifer was back again as one of the kids who gets pulled into Pippi Longstocking’s
shenanigans, and she was good. But that was about it. The only fun part about the show was the
musical numbers, because everyone got to get involved in those. Otherwise, I wasn’t a fan.
Teacher Number 2 will always be a role I try to forget; the way Bill Murray tries to forget
Garfield.

My third play was where things got good; I was finally old enough to try out for the
musical. Jennifer was with me again, and we skipped swim testing that year because we knew we
wouldn’t be there anyway. So we signed up for the Red level, which was the lowest level in the
shallow end, and tried out for Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory. She, being talented, cute,
and a better singer, got the role of Charlie Bucket, while I was Augustus Gloop’s mother. My
older step sister, Erin, was in this play with me, and we even had a few boys from our
counterpart boys’ camp, Camp Airy. Matt played my son Augustus, and Scott played Veruca
Salt’s father.

Scott was my favorite human being on the planet. Erin and her friend Chelsea had known
him from previous musicals, but I just met him that year, and I loved him. But not really in a
romantic way. At the time, I wasn’t completely aware of the lifestyle, but I knew that Scott was
not into chicks. So contrary to every comment ever made by my friends, he and I were not going to be a romantic item.

But we were definitely a dynamic duo. We did literally everything together. We gossiped about the rest of the cast, we spent our time backstage together, and we even ditched rehearsal warm-ups together. Although that last time wasn’t exactly on purpose. We had all gathered for rehearsal, and our director was running late. Scott and I went with Erin and Chelsea to get some water, which was at a water fountain just steps away from the terrace theatre, and then spent some time around the water fountain just talking. I don’t know what we talked about, but it must have been interesting, because after Erin and Chelsea went back to the stage, Scott and I hung around and continued to talk. We talked for at least ten minutes, and by the time we made our way back to the stage, we had missed the usual warm-ups of shaking our bodies out and making weird noises to loosen up our vocal chords.

“Scott, Laura, since you guys weren’t here to do it with us, you get to warm up now while we wait,” our director, Carrie, informed us.

Scott and I looked at each other, shrugged, and did the usual body shaking in front of the rest of the cast, who all laughed at our stupid movements. I’m sure it was meant to embarrass us, and in a way it did, but in the end, we just shrugged it off. I was playing a chocolate-obsessed German mother, and he played a spoiled girl’s father, we didn’t have that many lines, so we really didn’t need to warm up that much.

In my second to last year at camp, I was in the play The Odd Couple. It had taken a while, but I finally managed to score a leading role. Granted, the cast was only about seven people, but even still. I was a star. I played Mickey, a cop. I’m sure, in the original play, Mickey was supposed to be a serious, no-nonsense cop; but my rendition made her seem a little more like
a crazy person who called herself a cop. I mean, my costume was boxer shorts, a cream-colored button down shirt, and a tan vest. I topped all that off with some green high-top Chucks that had been drawn all over. Nothing about me said cop, except for my prop, a walkie-talkie in which I would occasionally speak in a British accent, despite the fact that my character wasn’t British.

Clearly, this play deserved a Tony Award.

But there was something really wonderful about being in a cast of only seven people. Less drama, and more bonding. While in Willy Wonka, I only really got close with the other people who played parents of horrible children and my friend Jennifer, everyone in The Odd Couple ended up being great friends. Jennifer wasn’t with me that year, but it didn’t matter. Alexa was, and I knew the other cast members from my previous years at camp.

In my last year, I made a tough choice and retired from camp-acting. I figured, since it was my last year, I should experience it to the fullest capacity, which included attending all activities—even if it meant swimming—and seeing the musical that went on at the counterpart boys camp, which I had previously missed because of my own participation in the Louise musical. It really was a tragedy to the drama department at camp—everyone was in denial and only pretended not to notice that I was gone—but it was a decision I felt I had to make. But that didn’t mean my performing stopped, mind you. I was at the age where, instead of being assigned activities, I was able to sign up for activities. One activity I managed to squeeze myself into was Costume Closet, which took place in the famed costume closet at our camp, where usually only directors were allowed to be. I, and my friend Jennifer, were part of a small group of people who were able to get in and play around. We created characters, wrote stories for them, and dressed each other up in outfits they would wear. One day, we had some downtime and I, having been in
love with the musical *RENT* that year, decided to start a show. So me and a few of the other girls in the group performed such hits as *Santa Fe, Light My Candle,* and *La Vie Boheme.*

However, I eventually found my way back to the stage, only this time I was behind the scenes. My cabin counselor, a lovely British woman named Ashleigh, was directing the children’s play, *Sleeping Beauty.* Ashleigh was telling me that she needed some help and I, having great experience in the art of camp plays, told her I’d be happy to help. The entire cabin volunteered to get involved, and my friends Rachel and Jennifer (both of *Monsters Under the Bed* fame) got involved as well. Rachel actually had experience in working backstage on productions, but I ended up with most of the responsibility. I started as assistant backstage manager, and ended up as assistant to the director. I’m not going to lie, I was one of Ashleigh’s favorite campers, so that was probably why I got such a great promotion, but Rachel really wasn’t fond of it. But who was I to argue? I was a seasoned actor for heaven’s sake. I couldn’t help that I was more in demand than someone who stopped after playing a girl who’s scared of doctors. Besides, it’s a children’s play at a camp. If I hadn’t been writing about it now, it probably never would have come up again.

*Sleeping Beauty* was about as cheesy and underwhelming as one could expect. Of course, when you gather a bunch of six to nine year olds together for a big show, they’ll be great in rehearsals, and end up either overacting or underacting when the real show happens. But they were adorable, so the show was still a success. Just another thing that can be mentioned when I’m presented with the Emmy for my contribution to the arts.

In all seriousness, Camp Louise gave me eight amazing summers, and I couldn’t have asked for better ways to spend my time. I’m not sure I’ll end up in any hall of fames for my bit parts in the plays, but the destroyed cloth of my sneakers and the dirty, worn out rubber of the
bottoms were a constant reminder of the memories and stories that would last forever, even after I had to throw them out for being too smelly.

**Chucks and Other Things My Mother Gave Me**

When I was starting to write this, I immediately thought that I would write a long, revealing passage about the tumultuous relationship that my mom and I have had. I started thinking back to every fight we had, everything she ever said to me that hurt my feelings, and everything harsh that I’ve ever said to her. I thought of it all, and even started writing it down.

And then I deleted everything.

I am *so tired* of talking about my mom like that. I feel like the only thing I ever do when I talk about my mom is mention “well we have kind of a rough relationship.” It’s true; we have had a pretty rough relationship. But it hasn’t only been rough, and I haven’t focused enough on the good stuff.

This may be unhealthy to do, but I’m going to, for a moment, ignore the bad things and talk about all the things that my mother gave me and all she has done for me.

At the young age of 28, my tiny mother gave birth to a ten pound, nine-ounce girl. It was her third child, and she had been dying to have a daughter. So the first thing my mama gave me? Life, of course. And a family record. There are nine children in my extended family—me and my two brothers, and six cousins—but none of them came out of their mother any more than about nine pounds. No matter what happens in life, I’ll always have that.

I wouldn’t be a writer if it weren’t for my parents, I don’t think. From a very, very young age, my parents always stressed the importance of books. They read to us constantly; we read *Three Little Kittens* so often that I can still recite the poem about the kittens who lost, found, and
then soiled their mittens. My mom was never one to turn down a book if we wanted one, even purchasing me a stupidly overpriced book about a fish from my elementary school’s book fair. I needed to have the book, cried when I realized I wouldn’t get the book that night, but had to have it delivered to my house at a later date instead, but when it arrived, my mom read it with me. I still haven’t touched the two books I got from the Russian History museum gift shop; but I expressed an interest in Czar Peter and Nicholas the Second, so she bought them. There was never a time when she didn’t encourage me to read. Even when, at a parent-teacher conference, my fifth grade teacher told her that I had a tendency to pull out a book in the middle of class, while she was teaching, my mom didn’t get mad at me. She told me that I should consider being more respectful, but she was never angry that I read. So I continued to do it.

One time, when I was in second grade, we made up a story on our own. She would come into my room every night, and we told a story about a princess who was having a birthday party. So she and the Queen planned an extravagant birthday party with friends, lots of cake, and games. It was a very simple story, but it spanned over a couple of nights, and was one of the most fun things I had ever experienced with her, up to that point.

Whether it was reading actual chapter books, a book about a monkey who really loves spaghetti, or making up our own stories, my mother helped get my creative juices flowing at a young age. A tree makes about 8,000 pieces of paper, and she’s probably got three trees worth of paper that I wrote stories, poems, and plays on stored somewhere in our basement.

While my creativity and ability to write isn’t all nurture—I think I’m just naturally more of a right-brained person—the desire to actually put thoughts to paper came from the constant encouragement to read and seek out worlds beyond my own. I obviously owe both my parents that, but I’ll talk about my dad in his part. This is just about my mom.
The other thing my mom gave me was what this whole story started on: my very first pair of Chucks, and almost every single one since. She even helped convince my aunt to buy me a pair that were extra expensive because they were decorated with the Green Lantern, who happens to be my favorite superhero. My aunt and I were spending the day together—she was teaching me to drive and also buying me some things for my senior year of high school—and we wound up at the mall, where I saw the shoes. She offered to buy them for me, but was slightly hesitant. We called my mom later to ask if she wanted to do lunch, and we mentioned the shoes.

“Oh, yeah, she wears those things to the ground,” my mom assured my aunt. “It’ll be money well spent.”

And so I got myself a nice pair of Green Lantern Chucks.

Every few years my mom will ask if I need a new pair of Chucks, and then provide me with the money to buy them. She doesn’t control which ones I buy, and she lets me do whatever I want to them. So I drew on them, I wrote on them, and I painted them. People always used to ask her about it; why would you let her do that? Isn’t she ruining her shoes?

My mom’s response? They’re just shoes.

She handed me the markers half the time. She encouraged it. I wasn’t writing swear words, after all. I wrote lyrics. I wrote movie quotes. I drew pictures. So almost every pair of plain-colored Chucks that I owned was almost instantly covered in original drawings and fancy handwriting. “Let it Be,” “Here Comes the Sun,” and “This is Not Here,” all quotes attributed to The Beatles, are just a few things that showed up on the canvas.

My mother is a very caring person who gets very invested in people’s happiness, and this sometimes comes at the cost of her own.

This is, both fortunately and unfortunately, something she gave me as well.
I wouldn’t want to be too emotionally void. I don’t want to be someone that others feel they can’t confide in. I’ve hung around with people like that, and it doesn’t feel good.

However, on the other side, I probably shouldn’t be so invested in other people’s problems. Are you feeling sad? I will literally drop everything going on in my life to listen to you and make sure you are okay. I may be having issues of my own—such as crippling depression and massive anxiety—but dammit if you need help, I am there for you. Even if you don’t initially tell me what it is. I will search for an answer. I will allow it to literally take over my life, distract me from my own shit, and I will say nothing as you take complete advantage of me, only calling on me when you need something from me.

This is my biggest weakness, and it’s something I get from my mama. And I would never admit this to her in person, but I should have listened all those times in middle and high school when she told me to just let shit go. I stayed so wound up in other people’s crap and it was probably the unhealthiest thing I could have done for my psyche. It took years before I was finally able to take a step back and prioritize what I actually needed to get involved in, and when I could just throw my hands up and say “can’t be bothered.” I’ve always been commended for my empathy, sympathy, and willingness to listen to others. And I owe that to my mom.

I asked my dad “what do you see in me that’s just like my mother?” My mom says she always sees my dad in my brother, and there are occasions when something I do or say reminds her of him as well. But I never hear my dad say anything about my mom.

His only response was “you are both stubborn. Once you form an opinion, it can be very difficult to change your mind.” Other than that, he didn’t see much.

But that is no small feat. It’s probably why she and I have spent about ten out of my twenty years alive butting heads. Because we just can’t let go. There are times when I am
positive we both know that we’re wrong; it’s just that we started the argument with one stance, so we may as well finish it that way. I wish I could pick one moment in particular, but honestly there have been so many useless fights, it all blurs together.

But you know, in the long run, it’s not terrible being stubborn. Being stubborn gets you places. Being stubborn wins arguments.

When I was eleven, my mom, my brother, my aunt, and my aunt’s friend went to Disney World. I wore a brand new pair of Christmas-colored Chucks (I literally never learn) and we spent the entire day walking around the park, standing in lines, and exploring the shops. By the end of the day, not only was I exhausted, but my feet were absolutely killing me. My brother was in the same position—though he had worn the proper shoes for walking—and my mom could really tell this as we were walking back to the bus that would take us back to our hotel. The only problem was, we were running late, and we were going to miss our bus. And if we missed our bus, we’d have to wait almost two hours for the next one. It was dark, we were tired, and my brother and I were not in the mood to wait any longer.

So we ran.

My mother literally said, “let’s go,” and started running towards the bus stop, where the bus was pulling up. Eddie and I ran alongside her, my aunt was behind us, and her friend was bringing up the rear. Our goal was to at least be seen by the bus driver so he would wait for us. We booked it to the bus stop, and actually made it in time to jump on. We rode home and got to sleep at a semi-reasonable hour, and it was lovely. I had never experienced anything as sweet as pulling my low-tops off that night. We later learned that my aunt’s friend was really, really upset with what we did, because she didn’t like to run and didn’t like being forced to, but my mother never apologized or even really acknowledged her feelings. It was either get to the bus or wait
too long for the next one, and she chose the former. Her kids were tired, her mama bear instincts kicked in, and she got us on that bus. A fierce, stubborn woman, my mother is.

And if I weren’t such a stubborn bitch like her, the chances of me being as comfortable in my life as I am now would be slim to none. I refused to let shit like depression and anxiety cripple me, and though I still struggle some days, I am where I am because I’m stubborn.

I’m not going to say that the good completely outweighs the bad in the relationship between my mom and me. But the scale of good and bad is definitely more even than I usually let on. The good doesn’t erase the bad, but the bad doesn’t have to black out the good.

Whether it’s a pair of Converse, or feet to firmly plant them on the ground with, much of my life has been influenced by my mother; a small Jewish mother who insists on wearing furs, animal prints, and big jewelry everywhere she goes.

And for that, I suppose I thank her.

**Everything Ohio: The Pistol Club**

The view from the top of the hill of flags at Fort Benning in Georgia is a lot stranger when you know that it’s your last time there. And as I walked down the hill with my coach after taking pictures in front of the Maryland flag, I could only say one thing:

“So, that’s it?”

I joined pistol club on a whim. I had no prior experience shooting a gun—save for the blanks I’d fire out of a Civil War-era rifle at reenactments—but I knew that I needed to get involved, and I didn’t want to join a sorority. So, with zero knowledge of competitive shooting, I signed up to try out for the University of Akron Competitive Pistol Club. The tryout was more of
a “let’s see if you can listen to directions and hold a gun properly” thing than an actual, competitive situation, and after one night, I was invited back. In all honesty, I was almost certain that I’d end up quitting. I had come from the fairly liberal world of Montgomery County, Maryland, and I was suddenly walking into the world of guns in good ol’ semi-conservative Ohio.

Well, I didn’t quit, and four years later, I’m about to leave one of the greatest things to ever come out of attending school at the University of Akron. In fact, if it weren’t for the pistol team, I probably wouldn’t even be at the University of Akron anymore. But that’ll come later.

The team first qualified for the NRA Collegiate Nationals when I was a sophomore. The team that went down included me, Mary Lee, Hall, Dana, and Bryce. Jess came down with us, but it was because she was a senior and she just wanted to see what it was all about. We were all kind of unsure about the situation, but she offered to up her car and said she would drive, so she came. It was a real bonding moment for the rest of us though, because we had to band together to survive the week with her. She was a little unbearable that week, but we dealt with it.

I was a nervous wreck on the base. Up until about junior year, I went through a phase where I really distrusted the government. I mean, I still don’t trust the government, but sophomore year was the peak of the distrust. So being on a military base where anyone could probably access any of my electronics at any time was not fun for me. Aside from that, it was regular nerves; I was in a place that I really didn’t belong, because my shooting was not up to par with the rest of the students there. I bombed during the practice session for the event I was shooting, and it took a serious lecture from my coach to bring me down to a point where I wasn’t shaking. So the next day, I laced up my near-broken Batman Chucks and shot with as much confidence as I could muster.
I know it’s hard to believe, but there wasn’t a huge improvement. I was still nervous, my hands still shook, and I ended up shooting what was probably one of the lowest scores of all the students there. If it weren’t for the fact that Bryce, Mary Lee, and Hall were decent shooters, our team would probably have ended up in tenth place. Out of ten. So, there’s that.

However, being at Nationals was what Dana and I still consider the moment that she, Bryce and I all became official friends. During a week where you’re really relying on no one else but each other, it’s impossible not to. We suffered with a pretty temperamental Jess, and joked our way through an award ceremony where we won absolutely nothing. Well, actually, we did get something, but not because we placed first in anything. Someone donated a really nice air pistol as an award for the “most deserving team,” and because our air pistol team placed tenth, we were the most deserving. Dana always takes the credit for that one, bringing the team score down with her not-so-amazing score. They announced our team members, we all ended up on stage for some reason, and we took our pity-standing ovation (like seriously, people stood for our ‘most deserving’ award?) with pride. When it was over, we got milkshakes. And I got to shoot the super-new air pistol when we got home.

Nationals in my junior year were a little different, and a lot more frustrating. Because of a last-minute change in roster, I was assigned to the Standard Pistol team (the team I shot for the year before) for Nationals. So it was me, Bryce, David, David Squared (we needed to tell them apart somehow!), and Hall. Hall spent basically the whole week separated from us (that’s a can of beans I really don’t feel like getting into anymore) so I got to spend my week with three boys.

That was…that was interesting.

I love the boys. I really do. But sometimes spending an entire week with nothing but boys gets really, really tiring. They’re not super sympathetic, they’re brutal with their insults, and they
never really let up. But, I love them. And I’m also pretty good at insults, so it was a level playing field.

Junior Nationals was a really interesting nationals. Despite the fact that I had worn high-top Chucks the previous year, halfway through my match, I was approached and told I wasn’t allowed to wear them. I had noticed that a small group of officials had materialized a few feet behind me, and in between strings of fire, the head range officer appeared over my shoulder.

“Excuse me, miss, it’s come to my attention that the shoes you’re wearing aren’t legal for this match.”

Um, excuse me?

“Yeah, the NRA rules state that you can’t wear shoes that have ankle support while you shoot.”

Canvas high tops count as ankle support? They stopped wearing them for basketball specifically because they didn’t provide enough ankle support.

“Can I see the rule?” I asked. “I looked through the rules, I didn’t see anything.”

“Do you not trust me?”

No, it’s just that I’ve already worn them once so what’s the actual difference? Why are you catching me now?

As it turns out, the rule really did exist, and I was in violation of it. So what to do then?

“Well, you can just take them off for the rest of the match.”

After making sure that my score wouldn’t be affected because I was wearing the illegal shoes, I slipped my one American Flag shoe and my Union Jack Shoe (Revolutionary war, get it?) off and set them next to the metal chair I was sitting in. When the next string of fire was
announced, I stood up next to one of the top shooters in the country and shot in my black socks that had flying pigs on them.

Sometimes, life is funny that way.

I ended up shooting one of my best scores that day, and we all joked that I should shoot in my socks more often. I considered it, but decided that maybe I’d just invest in a pair of low-tops for the next year, if I made it.

Luckily for me, I did make it. I was once again on the Standard Pistol Team for the University of Akron, and we were going down to Nationals. This year, we had a new member, Bryce’s brother Brett, and Hall was gone. In my car on the way to Nationals was me, Bryce, Brett, and David Squared. First David met us there. The ride down was boring, aggravating, but also really fun. We left campus at 5:30 AM, drove for about fourteen hours, and made it there by seven. We made First David drive us to dinner at Applebee’s, then went back to the hotel and slept.

My event was on Wednesday, and for the first time ever, I wasn’t feeling nervous. I wasn’t nervous about being on the base, I was completely happy with the people I was down there with, and I had a really cool pair of clear low-top Chucks. Everyone always loves them because you can see whatever socks I wear underneath, and I wear pretty cool socks. On that day, I wore some Hulk Hogan-themed socks that I had found earlier in the month. I loved them, and I was ready to shoot.

Apparently, being confident is not a way I should have started the match. I bombed. I didn’t do terribly, but I really didn’t have a good day. The nerves hit as soon as I stood up and grabbed my gun to shoot, and instead of being able to shoot through them like I usually did, I shot total crap. I’m talking freshman-level shit, here. And then there were a whole bunch of
delays and malfunctions that made it hard to focus, my gun jammed two times, and nothing I did made my scores any better. It was pretty damn depressing. So depressing, in fact, that I actually started to tear up on the line.

One the line. At nationals. Twenty-one years old.

It wasn’t much, and everyone said they hadn’t even noticed that I was doing it, but I knew what was happening. And I shoved my palms into my eyes to stop myself, and could not have gotten out of the building fast enough.

“Did you enjoy it, at least?” my coach’s wife asked after I hugged and cried on the shoulder of a shooter from Ohio State (we knew each other, though, so it wasn’t creepy).

“Not one damn minute,” I stated, laughing. It was all I could do at that point. Laugh. Make jokes.

I walked outside to go to First David’s car; the others were gathered at Coach’s car, packing everything up. Bryce happened to catch me as he was walking from First David’s car to Coach’s.

“That was some bullshit,” he laughed.

It really was. It was complete bullshit. All I could do was throw my hands up and say “I’m ready to drink.”

My mom always told me that I could never be upset longer than it took for me to do the thing that upset me. So I had two hours to be angry about shooting, and then I had to let it go. That’s a little easier said than done, but with the help of some hard soda and some late-night Family Guy and other cartoons with adult themes, I eventually got to a point where I was able to calm down and feel slightly less crappy about the whole thing. And like my mom said when I
cried to her on the phone that night: I’m not a “gun toting Jew” anyway. Good old Jewish mother.

On the final day of Nationals, after the final event, every shooter gathered on the hill outside the range. It’s a fairly steep hill, and at the top, in a long line, are the fifty state flags. Our team took pictures in front of the Ohio flag, and then I walked with my coach and his wife to the Maryland flag to take some pictures. My coach and I took a few pictures together, and then started walking down the hill, so I could meet my team at the car to go back to the hotel.

“So, that’s it?” I asked.

“That’s it,” my coach said. “How do you feel?”

“I feel good, I think,” I said. “I’m happy. I’m glad I got to be here for my senior year.”

“I’m glad you got to be here, too,” my coach replied. “I’m happy you joined the team.”

“I’m just happy that I didn’t transfer home like I wanted to…”

I am one of about five new recruits in 2012 to actually make it all the way to senior year. In my freshman year, the recruits were me, Amy, girl PJ, boy PJ, and Clayton. For whatever reason, none of them made it to the end of the year. It was kind of sad, and because I wasn’t having much of a good freshman year anyway, I began second guessing myself about my decision to move out of state for school. But I decided to stick it out. And honestly, if it weren’t for the pistol team—Nationals especially—I would have transferred back to Maryland. Dana, Bryce, the Davids, and even recruits who didn’t make it to Nationals like Maggie and Grace became some of my closest friends (even if they don’t want to admit it). You know that really cheesy saying that everything happens for a reason? I think the fates made me come to Akron, so I could join a club I’d never be able to join otherwise, and become friends with people that I
probably never would have even met otherwise. We’re all different majors and vastly different people, so I’m beyond grateful that pistol brought us all together.

But I’m also happy that I don’t have to deal with the stress and aggravation that is shooting at Nationals again.

**The Mindset Behind the Shoes**

In my mind, Chucks were the ultimate symbol of rebellion. Or, at least, coolness.

I grew up watching all sorts of old television and movies, and in all of them, the cool kids wore Chucks. The T-Birds from *Grease*, the kids from *Freaks and Geeks*, Allison from *The Breakfast Club*, Ted from *Bill and Ted’s Excellent Adventure*, the Sweathogs from *Welcome Back Kotter*, and Chachi from *Happy Days*. Call me crazy, but half the reason I wanted Chucks was because of the type of person I felt they’d make me. I know this probably makes it sound like I shape myself based on the people I watch on TV. In some ways, this is true. But not completely.

My two favorite fictional characters ever are John Bender from *The Breakfast Club* and Holden Caulfield from *Catcher in the Rye*. Neither are included in the above paragraph, as John Bender wears biker boots, and it’s never really specified what shoes Holden Caulfield wore. But I can almost guarantee that that tall, graying-haired lanky boy with a deer hunter cap and long jacket wore black Chucks. It only makes sense.

When I first watched *The Breakfast Club*, I was in middle school. I was sitting in the basement on a day off from school, and it came on TV. The Simple Minds were singing the now iconic “Don’t You Forget About Me,” and the princess, jock, nerd, and basket case all filed into the detention room. And then he walked in.
Tall (at least, that’s what it looked like), wearing black pants, biker boots, one of those long jackets that looks like it’s supposed to be for fancier occasions, long dark hair with one streak of grey (Lord only knows why a high schooler would want a grey streak, but who cares? He looks awesome), and sunglasses. He makes the nerd move out of his seat—even though there are no actual assigned seats in detention—and then takes his place, removes his jacket to reveal an even cooler outfit underneath: a plaid shirt over a white thermo shirt and a jean jacket on top of it all. A Jean jacket! John Bender became my spirit animal. My emotionally wrecked middle school self sat on the too-stiff couch in the grossly-carpeted basement and watched as he back-talked Mr. Vernon, sat stone-faced as all the emotional crap went on around him, and I thought, “Yeah, that works. I could do that.”

I sulked, I didn’t care, I made it blatantly obvious that I didn’t care, and I was rude to everyone that I didn’t consider my friend. I told teachers off. I was sent out of the classroom a few times. I started high school with every intention of getting my teachers to hate me, and I succeeded. It was easier that way. Push people away before they can push you. And I didn’t give two shits what people thought about me. Because I felt badass. And my wardrobe almost always included a jean jacket and a pair of high-top Chucks.

I was a junior in high school when I decided to read Catcher in the Rye. By now I had been sleeping in most of my classes, providing terribly rude comebacks for teachers when they tried to call me out for not listening, and had succeeded in becoming the student that made teachers roll their eyes. The summer before my senior year, I finally decided to introduce myself to Holden Caulfield: the epitome of a closed-off, isolated, “I-hate-the-world” hermit who only really cared about one or two things in life.
And man, when I was reading about Holden’s trip to New York, and seeing how he saw the world, I just felt it. I just knew what he was saying. I got it, you know? If Holden Caulfield could be an isolated hater-of-the-world and still be so cool, then so could I. Not that I assumed I was cool or anything, but ‘cool’ was such a relative term anyway. And damn, all the cool kids were just the annoying fake kids. And I wasn’t a fake person. I was Holden effing Caulfield, dammit.

While I have relaxed dramatically since high school—I’m not rude to teachers anymore, and I think some of them actually like me—I have kept the more rebellious countenance. I still don’t give two shits what people think about me. I’m still fairly antisocial, I don’t have many friends, and I still live pretty closed off to the world.

And I used to think it was a bad thing. But people are people. Some suck up to teachers and some have loads of friends; and then there are those who isolate themselves and would prefer to stay in on their computer rather than go out and associate themselves with the world around them. You act on what’s inside, and sometimes that means being a total a-hole to the people around you, and shutting the world out.

I like defiant people; the ones who act without caring about the social repercussions. I mean, the T-Birds and the Sweathogs cared about reputation, but their reputation was cool rebels. Chachi even got in The Fonz’s face once. And no one gets in Fonzie’s face.

But they also have something else in common; loyalty. Fierce belief in friendship. Yes, John Bender started off hating everyone, but he ended up taking the fall for the other kids when they snuck out of the library. Danny Zuko drove in the race for Kenickie after the latter suffered a concussion. Holden Caulfield really did care about his sister. My characters are damaged, but with hearts of gold. It’s a defense mechanism, really, being stand-offish and rude.
In the end, I wasn’t trying to be John Bender or Holden Caulfield, or Allison, or part of the T-Birds, or Chachi. I didn’t admire them so much that I decided to become them. I just was them. And they made it okay to be them. I can be an isolated freak for some of the day, but if my friend calls me to come get her because she’s scared of her boyfriend, you can bet your ass I’ll make the hour-long drive to help her move out. True story, by the way.

I was once discussing books with a friend and brought up *Catcher in the Rye*. Now, she despised the book. She hated reading it, and she never wanted to read it again. I told her how much I loved it, and she looked at me and said, “But you’re…you’re one of those Holden Caulfield people, aren’t you?” I smiled. Yes, yes I am one of those “Holden Caulfield” people. And that is just fine.

I still watch all these shows. On repeat. I can recite all the lines to *The Breakfast Club*. I can be a smartass to authority, avoid people when in public, but still be there to sit up till midnight with my friend who was oddly convinced that she was going to die. We made it to midnight, and she was fine.

Once again, true story. I am what I am. And I’m always equipped with a pair of Chucks.
Lemony Snicket and Annie Dillard

Lemony Snicket, the penname for Daniel Handler, is an author of both children’s books and novels for adults. Annie Dillard wrote memoirs, and stories about her life growing up in Pittsburgh. While they both have had fairly different writing careers, they both have found success in their areas, and have come to be influential writers. Lemony Snicket approaches children’s books with a unique perspective, using language and structure to write a depressing and unfortunate story riddled with mystery that has the overall theme of hope and perseverance. Annie Dillard writes a non-fiction narrative that focuses heavily on her own thoughts and her relation to the world around her, using little dialogue, and a very honest, creative way of looking at the world. Even in speaking about her childhood, she writes in a mature manner, detailing everything she felt about the world she lived in, creating meaningful and significant moments from seemingly insignificant situations. Both authors have found their success in writing like this, and both have been influential to me as a writer. Lemony Snicket inspired me to write more, and Annie Dillard has helped me in writing my own nonfiction memoir.

Lemony Snicket became a popular children’s writer due to what can be viewed as his “anti-author” writing. The very first line of The Bad Beginning, the first book in the A Series of Unfortunate Events, asks his readers not to read his book: “If you are interested in stories with happy endings, you would be better off reading some other book.” The entire first paragraph explains that the story will not be a happy one, and that the three main characters, Violet, Klaus and Sunny Baudelaire, are three very unlucky children put in unfortunate circumstances. He opens all thirteen of his books like this; warning his readers that the story is only going to get worse the more they read, comparing the story, in the thirteenth book, of the Baudelaire children to an onion, that one peels to reveal a thing layer, “and that layer reveals another, and another,
and before you know it you have hundreds of layers all over the kitchen table and thousands of tears in your eyes” (*End 1*). In a literal sense, this type of writing is supposed to turn readers off to the book; make them reach for something else on the bookshelf. However, as Handler likely planned, this has the opposite affect. It piques the reader’s interest. What story could be so horrible that even the author is warning the readers that they should put it down? This in an of itself was interesting to me, and inspiring, because he used a writing technique that I had never read before; blunt honesty. The stories are entertaining and interesting, but he’s right; they are not happy. The orphans in the story are incredibly unfortunate. This type of writing makes Snicket appealing to audiences, and contributes to what makes him a successful and influential writer.

Another thing that Snicket does in his writing that can be considered interesting and unique are the small, mysterious themes that runs through the series. There are two mysteries that run through the series. The first is the V.F.D. In almost every book, the Baudelaire children come across the initials, and very rarely is it related to what they think they’re looking for, which is a group that their parents were apparently part of. If the Baudelaires found the initials, they would seek out whatever they were related to. This includes the Village of Fowl Devotees from *The Vile Village*, Very Fancy Doilies from *The Ersatz Elevator*, and soon it was revealed that it really meant Volunteer Fire Department in *The Penultimate Peril*. V.F.D, while just three letters, was the center of many conflicts that the Baudelaires face; their parents are killed as a result of a schism within the organization, and many of their investigations started with the reveal of the initials. Throughout the series, it isn’t clear that the reader will ever find out what the three initials mean, but they provide a reason to keep reading; a mystery to unfold. The second of the mysteries comes less from the story itself, and more from the author; the mystery of Beatrice
Snicket. On the dedication page at the beginning of every novel, Snicket writes a dedication to a woman named Beatrice, whom he clearly loved. In *The Bad Beginning*, it’s “To Beatrice—darling, dearest, dead” (*Bad Beginning*). Throughout the series, it is never specified who Beatrice is. The only hint the reader gets comes at the end of the final novel, *The End*. The Baudelaires come across their parents’ handwritten journals, *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, they learn that if Violet would have been a boy, she would have been named Lemony. They assume Lemony is a dead person, as the family custom is to name children after people who have died. Then narrator Lemony Snicket says in a different paragraph that although death rumors crop up, they are rarely true. So who is the Lemony that the parents speak of, and why did they think he was dead? But before the story ends, the Baudelaire orphan’s new ward—a baby they rescued, revealed to be narrator Snicket’s niece—utters her first word, her name, *Beatrice*. This led to mass speculation about who Beatrice actually was, a mystery that would clearly not be solved by simply reading the novels. There have been books published after *Unfortunate Events* that pertain to the subject, but if one were to only read the series would just be lost in the mystery. Keeping the mystery of Beatrice Snicket outside the narrative until the very end of the series is just another example of Lemony Snicket’s way of writing outside the box, and another reason he can be considered successful and influential as a writer.

The hope that Snicket supplies in his books also make the series more appealing to its intended audience, and has helped lead the series to the success it has achieved. Despite the horrid positions that the Baudelaire orphans find themselves in, and the amount of people in their life that they lose, the three continue to move forward, and work together to work their way out of harm. When they could find themselves hardened against the world due to their circumstances, the orphans continue to take the high road whenever they can, and make
decisions based on their good morals. Between Violet and her ability to invent something out of nothing, Klaus’ immense knowledge through the constant reading of books, or Sunny’s willingness to just bite into anything handed to her, it’s clear that the Baudelaires’ perseverance is something to be admired. In the final chapter of *The End*, the Baudelaires have the option of staying on an abandoned island where they had been living and thriving with all the necessities, or leaving and re-joining society. The choose to rejoin society, despite the troubles that they had been facing for so many years. Klaus points out that they’d “would have had enough treachery for a lifetime…but there’s more to life than safety” (*Chapter Fourteen* 3), so they got into their boat and made their way to the normal world again. The fact that, despite everything they had been through with society, and all the evils they had faced, they chose to join the population anyway, showed their persistence to still find good in it; or at least be the good in it. Snicket writes the Baudelaire orphans as some of the most moral characters, proving that light can always be found in the darkness of the world. Having protagonists that face so much and continue to push forward make Snicket’s stories appealing to readers, and has led to the success of his series.

In *American Childhood*, Annie Dillard writes about the world around her and describes is in great detail and honesty, really pulling the reader into her life. Dillard is able to portray her childhood in a meaningful and wonderful way, providing insight into how significant it was to her. The first instance of this is early in her story, when she describes Jo Ann Sheehy skating under the streetlight. While Dillard herself was told she wasn’t allowed to be in an open street like that, she watched from her house as Jo Ann skated. Dillard describes her outfit, and her “red knitted cap below which her black hair lifted when she turned” (Dillard). Under Jo Ann, the snow on the street “shone; it illumined her from below, the cold light striking under her chin”
Dillard later describes the situation as “beauty and mystery outside the house, and peace and safety within.” The description of Jo Ann Sheehy in the street portrays something simple as something wonderful; which, in the eyes of a young girl, would make sense. What is usually seen as dangerous has become beautiful, and she is filled with wonder by this fact. It’s as if it opens up an opportunity for her to view things differently. Creating such a meaningful moment from such a small action shows how significant the moment was to Dillard, and the ability to write in such a detailed manner is what makes Annie Dillard such a successful writer, and an important one in memoir canon.

Another significant childhood experience that Dillard describes in vivid detail is the chase; when she and her friend ran from an angry driver whose car had been hit with one of their rogue snowballs. Dillard brings the reader into the story by describing, in great detail, the path that her and her friend Mikey ran to try and get away from the man. The fear she felt over being caught is portrayed with long sentences describing how they “smashed through a gap in another hedge, entered a scruffy backyard and ran around its back porch and tight between houses…ran across Edgerton to an alley and up our own sliding woodpile to the Halls’ front yard” and how, despite all of it, the man was still chasing them. The use of the word ‘smashed’ indicates the panic that Dillard and her friend must have felt, and the many details added to the description portray a hurried tone of voice, giving the reader a sense of the panic and the impending trouble as well. However, the enjoyment she got while running is also apparent, as she begins to turn the situation into an adventure for her and her friend. In the line “He impelled us forward; we compelled him to follow our route” (Dillard), it is clear that for Dillard, it’s no longer about getting in trouble for hitting a car with a snowball; it’s running for the sake of running. Once they were finally caught, she says she “had some difficulty at first recalling why [they] were
there” (Dillard). She admits that getting in trouble was no longer what mattered to her, and the lecture the older man was giving them was just a formality, and them listening to it was practically pointless. The point to her was that the man had just dedicated his time to chasing them for blocks, and that they had committed so much to running away. She concludes the description of the adventure by saying that if the man chasing them had cut off of her and Mikey’s heads, she would have died happy, because nothing had ever required so much of her before, or since. A seemingly insignificant moment—trying to get out of trouble is a common thing in one’s childhood—turned into a great adventure simply because of the amount of effort it required. It was an opportunity for her to implement the football training she had received, as she puts it, “Fling yourself at what you’re doing, you have to point yourself, forget yourself, aim, dive” (Dillard). The use specific details and lists when describing the chase, as well as the clear shift in motive creates a defining moment in Annie Dillard’s life, and her ability to do it in a short essay contribute to her successful writing career and her place in the creative nonfiction standard.

Both authors have influenced me as a writer, both in fiction and nonfiction. Annie Dillard can take small moments that seem insignificant to those who don’t experience them and turn it into something much bigger, and really portray the importance of the experience. I know that when I was thinking of stories to write about for my memoir, I had to find a way to make shoes significant. Dillard helped me discover that it’s not always about the subject, but the feelings and situations surrounding the subject. Jo Ann Sheehy wasn’t the focus of the ice skating scene; it was the idea that someone was going against what Annie Dillard had always believed, and opening her eyes to something new. The essay about the chase began with an explanation about learning about baseball and football, but turned into the re-telling of an experience that was so
significant to her, she claimed she’d never feel the same way again. After reading her writing, I realized that I could even make my sneakers interesting, as long as the stories that went with them were written in a way that portrays how significant that period of my life was. Because of Annie Dillard, I knew that I had to stay as honest and detailed as possible, and as long as I was, I would have a good memoir. With Lemony Snicket, I just learned to write a little more out of the box. In terms of nonfiction, this means more informal, as if I’m having a conversation with the reader. It’s not a new concept by any means, but it’s one that I personally hadn’t considered when I started writing. It wasn’t really until I finished the *Series of Unfortunate Events* books that I realized one of the reasons I loved reading about the Baudelaires so much was because of how Lemony Snicket told their story. There weren’t solid, bow-tied happy endings, and he addressed the reader throughout the books, which was an unconventional method. The entertainment value that comes with the unconventional writing helped influence my own writing, and make it uniquely mine.

Throughout both their careers, Annie Dillard and Daniel Handler found success with their writing methods. Handler writes with the identity of a mysterious man named Lemony Snicket, and writes mysterious and dreadfully unfortunate stories with admirably brave and persevering protagonists. In *An American Childhood*, Dillard presents memorable moments in her childhood that are detailed and structured in a way that makes it apparent how significant they were to her life as a whole. Both have found success, and both have been influential to me as a writer.
Works Cited


Writing a Memoir as a Non-Famous Person

In all reality, I have always felt weird calling this creative piece a memoir. In my mind, a memoir is written by a successful person; Annie Dillard wrote a memoir because she is a successful writer, and Keith Richards wrote a memoir because he’s a successful musician with a backstory people want to know about. What do I have? Twenty pairs of Converse and a whole bunch of unfinished novels. I should not be writing a memoir. But I found, throughout the writing process, that a memoir is just what I needed to write; not only was I able to share my life with others, I was actually able to learn more about how certain events and people have shaped who I am as a person today.

I took Introduction to Creative Nonfiction in my sophomore year of college. I needed a second introduction credit for my creative writing minor, and it was the only one available. I’ll admit, it was not my first choice. But everything happens for a reason, and I’m happy that it was my only choice. The instructor was one Robert Pope, who had rave reviews on the popular website Rate My Professor. No one I talked to was really sure what creative nonfiction was; I assumed it was like historical fiction, but creating characters and stories in history. I was thinking I’d be writing a Titanic-like story; a historical event with my own characters and storyline. And I was really into that idea. I was surprised to learn, then, that creative nonfiction has nothing to do with historical events, and that I would not be writing my own version of The Titanic. Instead, I’d be writing about myself and my life, which is something I had never done before. But I guess college is supposed to challenge you, so I was ready to do the work.

My first piece was called “Where Are You,” and we were supposed to find a place to sit and write. Naturally, most people wrote about where they worked, or a coffee shop where they liked to sit and do homework, or even a family event. However, being the anti-social hermit that
I am, I decided to write about my dorm room. I admitted to my fascination with *The Beatles* and serial killers, and basically opened my mind to the people sitting around the conference table in class with me. It was remarkably freeing; it wasn’t anything emotional, but it still felt good to put myself on paper. Throughout the year, I shared about pistol club, my mother, other stories I was trying to work on, my favorite television shows, and my own psychological problems (I was having increasingly disturbing dreams, and my thoughts were getting overwhelming) to a very welcoming audience. My final piece was called “The Character I’ve Become,” and it was all about my two favorite characters in movie and books, John Bender from *The Breakfast Club* and Holden Caulfield from *Catcher in the Rye*. I talked about the influence both characters had had on my life, despite them both being bad influences, and how I was proud to be the type of person that I was because of them. Dr. Pope said that this was his favorite piece that I had written that year, and I decided to expand it to include talk about my Converse for this project, because I enjoyed it as well.

Needless to say, Introduction to Creative Nonfiction gave be confidence to write more about myself and be less afraid to let myself be known to my readers. I had to wait a semester to take an advanced course, but when I got the chance, I had to take Advanced Creative Nonfiction. Dr. Pope suggested I do it, saying that David Giffels was an excellent teacher, anyway. He was write, of course, and I found myself finding my voice more in the advanced class. I wrote about the WWE (about which I was told I didn’t look like a fan because of my hipster glasses…), I wrote about Civil War Reenacting, and then I wrote more about the WWE. But the two papers that affected me the most were the Cemetery piece, and the “Place” piece. For the first piece, we had to visit a cemetery and write about it. I wrote, for the first time ever, about my grandma. She passed away when I was really young, and I had been carrying around the guilt of never getting
to know her and not visiting her as much as I should have throughout my time in college. I read it aloud in class, and actually had difficulty finishing it. This piece struck a chord with me, because I had never really told anyone about my feelings about my grandma, and it was a piece that I didn’t really realize was being written until I was finished with it. I said things about not being a good grandkid, and I talked about how much I wanted to apologize to her, and how I had never really touched her while she was sick, and how now all I could do to touch her was touch her headstone. It was a really eerie situation I found myself in, because I wasn’t sure what I was writing until it was over. But it ended up being one of my best pieces, in my opinion, and I guess that’s how it’s supposed to work.

The “Place” piece was supposed to be about Akron, but because I am not a native Akronite, I wrote about coming to Akron from Maryland. This was another piece that I didn’t really find the theme of until halfway through, when I basically lost my mind. I had officially come to terms with the fact that even though I spent so much of my time in Akron, I never felt like I was at home; however, even when I was in Maryland, I didn’t feel at home because of all the time I had spent away. I was a drifter. I think I even said that in the paper. In class, I told Giffels that it had taken me two weeks to write the paper, and that it was the worst experience of my life, and he laughed about it. He was happy to have given me the experience. And, despite the fact that it stressed me out and probably gave me premature grey hairs, I had to admit that it was probably one of my strongest pieces. I turned it in as my final paper, and I wish I had expanded it more before I did. Giffels commented that there’s always more to add and explore, and I had to agree with him. Maybe I’ll get back to it someday.

The idea for this project, as I have mentioned before, came from my step-dad. I had had the idea in the back of my head forever, and I was excited to finally get the opportunity to use it.
Listing all the pairs of Converse that I had owned had turned out to be a really easy task; it was how to write about them that got tricky. I wanted to write about big parts of my life—including the struggle of middle school and high school, all my parents, and going to an out-of-state college—in relation to my shoes, but I realized quickly that that wouldn’t work. I couldn’t choose the topic and then write about the shoes; I had to choose the shoes and write about a topic. So maybe people wouldn’t hear about middle school, but they would hear about how my friend and I only became friends because of Converse. I wouldn’t write about my whole college experience, but I would write about the different pairs of Chucks that made the twelve-hour trip with me to Georgia for NRA Collegiate Pistol Nationals. If a pair of shoes came with an interesting story, then it would be considered. Of course, this meant that some shoes were left out, and some people were left out (only one of my parents got their own special written piece) but that’s how it had to be written. It’s not one long story; it’s multiple stories pieced together, written in parts.

I think the hardest part about writing this has been deciding exactly where to focus myself, which I mentioned earlier. I wanted to write an essay about my various obsessions, because some of them had influenced the shoes I chose to wear or how I chose to decorate them. But there wasn’t enough story behind them, and they all ended up sounding the same: I have an obsession, I bought the shoes, people make fun of me, but I don’t care. Everything could be summed up in a few sentences, and that wasn’t enough for me. So I couldn’t write about my obsessions like I wanted to. I also had one line that I knew I had to include somewhere: “In my mind, Chucks were the ultimate symbol of rebellion.” It was something I had said to a friend before I started writing, and I had to include it. Unfortunately, I didn’t really have much to say after it. I knew why I considered them to be that way, I just didn’t know how to expand on the
idea. But then I remembered the piece I had written about Holden Caulfield and John Bender. Both were rebellious kids, as I wrote about, so I decided to expand the paper to include talk about Chucks. I think it’s one of my funniest pieces, and I think it’s one of the most revealing pieces about me. I may be getting older, but the fact that I will always feel just a little bit cooler wearing a pair of Chucks will probably never change. In the piece, I come to terms with my anti-social self, but also with the positive side of my personality as well; something I don’t really focus on all that much.

The most personal part of this project is the essay about my mother. She and I have had a rough relationship ever since I was in middle school, and although I knew I had to write about her, since she got me my first pair of Converse and everything, I really didn’t feel like ranting about our relationship. And writing about her in a positive light was actually remarkably difficult. It sounds bad, and I kind of felt bad about it, but it also presented a new challenge for me, and as a writer, I’m always ready for a new challenge. It also led to a revelation about the nature of the relationship between my mother and me, which was something I came to appreciate more than I disdain. I even read it to her over Winter Break, making it the first piece of my writing I’ve ever actually read out loud to her. I think she liked it enough.

If I had a few years, I would probably be able to find and write stories about every pair of shoes I’ve owned, and have a long, complete piece of work. But for right now, considering how difficult it was to write some of these pieces, I think I’m good. I really pushed myself with this project, because I was putting into practice something I had only really done for a combined year, as opposed to fiction writing, which I’ve been doing since I could put pencil to paper. I had to convince myself that what I had to say about the different facets of my life was both interesting and important, and worth being read. I may not be a successful published writer, or
famous in any way really—though I have been retweeted by celebrities before, so that’s something—but my experiences are interesting and even humorous enough to be written about. I hope that one day, when every pair of shoes that I deem important enough are written about, I will be able to publish this. And if I can’t, I at least have a set of work that will remind me to appreciate my life and the little things in it, even if it’s just a pair of shoes.