

The Fates and Why I Left Them

Madeline Ketchem



When I met Elizabeth Romano, I was the shortest girl in our fourth grade class – my mother always said “petite.” Elizabeth always said “mousy.” When I met Elizabeth Romano, I still went by “Marilyn” and played with a chemistry set that I had received for Christmas one year. Every morning, I woke up, brushed my long blonde hair that fell straight across my back, and chose a uniform jumper with matching Mary-Jane buckle shoes. My bedroom was always neat, my books alphabetically organized on my shelves, everything in its prescribed place. I loved my routine. I loved that nothing in my life ever changed.

But for fourth grade, I was transferred to a new school, Westlake Elementary. I did not have any friends in that class, and I resented the idea of starting over in a new place. On the first day, I picked up my go-to outfit: a pink, argyle sweater vest and a navy pleated skirt. I spent five extra minutes brushing my teeth, double-checked that everything from the school’s supply list was in my backpack, and left for the bus stop across the street.

In Mrs. Graham’s fourth grade class that day, I met Elizabeth Romano for the first time. She was tall and thin, wearing a t-shirt with “Green Day” written on the front (*what is a ‘green day’? I had wondered*), a pair of black jeans, and black converse tennis shoes. She had the palest skin I had ever seen with bright blue eyes and straight platinum-blond hair that was chopped short at her chin.

She saw me staring at her across the classroom. She smiled. I smiled. I waved. She walked over to me.

“Hi, I’m Elizabeth.” She crossed her arms, and I noticed a choker around her neck with a turtle pendant dangling from the black cord. Her fingers were long and bony, and she had chewed fingernails painted with black nail polish. I was suddenly very aware of my tongue, which felt like lead in my mouth.

“I’m Marilyn,” I managed to choke out.

“Well, I have a seat already. It doesn’t look like you do. Want

The Fates and Why I Left Them

to sit at my table?”

That simple. At the time, I felt lucky that someone had noticed me and asked me to join their group of friends. In hindsight, it seems that all childhood friendships were this easy to establish. On the playground, in the classroom – everyone had a common interest in finding somewhere that they could belong.

Over time, Elizabeth and I grew very close. I traded in all of my sweater vests for skinny jeans and t-shirts that said things like “hug a tree” or “give a hoot, don’t pollute.” I traded my chemistry set for a series of miniature stuffed animals. I often spent the night at her house since we lived in the same neighborhood and I would study for these sleepovers, memorizing obscure alternative rock lyrics so that I could sing along with the other girls. Eventually, Elizabeth and I joined the same club swimming team and attended the same Girl Scouts group, Troop 477. She was my best friend; I was hers. I even had a colorful woven friendship bracelet to prove it.

I found a unique comfort and security in being friends with Elizabeth. As the group grew larger with more girls seeking membership into Elizabeth’s circle, a definite hierarchy was established. One day the following year in Miss Cook’s fifth grade class, Elizabeth and I were sitting at lunch with the rest of the group. The third girl in our group was Alaina Stevens. Alaina was tall and thin with bony fingers like Elizabeth but she had straight brown hair to her shoulders, full lips, and a very pointed nose. The fourth and final member of Elizabeth’s clique was Candace Jackson. Candace had coffee-colored skin with dark curly hair and long eyelashes.

On this particular day, as Alaina bragged about dating a boy in our class and removed the artificial crust from her (crust-less) peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich, Elizabeth interrupted her.

“Is that Meg Weber?” Elizabeth asked the lunch table. We all turned to look. Meg Weber was the deaf girl in our class. She was beautiful, with long, blonde hair like mine but with a fairer face and smaller nose. She had an air of gracefulness from her years of classical

ballet training, where it was rumored she could sense the rhythm of a song through the wooden beams of a dance studio floor. It was common knowledge (to our group, at least) that Elizabeth did not like Meg. I was never sure of why Elizabeth felt this way, though I suspected that it had something to do with her generally positive attitude or attractiveness.

At this moment, Meg was approaching our lunch table, smiling brightly. Her steps were bouncy and cheerful as she reached our group. She signed, *Hello! Seat – open?*

“Sure, go ahead,” I nodded, making sure to maintain eye contact so that Meg could read my lips. Meg had always been kind to me, so I helped her pull out the last chair at our table in the space between Candace and I. As I turned back to my lunch tray, I caught a glimpse of Elizabeth glaring at me. Very slowly, just slightly – she shook her head. No.

I shrugged at Elizabeth, indicating my potential indifference as Meg sat down next to me. Elizabeth looked away, stabbing a sprig of lettuce. Alaina hesitated then cautiously continued her story about the boy in our class. The rest of the lunch period was filled with palpable tension thicker than cafeteria ketchup – Alaina, Candace, and I knew that Meg was not truly welcome at Elizabeth’s lunch table.

As lunch concluded, Meg asked, *Recess? With you all?*

Again, I responded, “Sure! We’re playing hide-and-seek today in the field area. Would you like to come?”

She nodded enthusiastically, pointing to the restroom and her wrist to indicate that she just needed a minute before we all went outside.

“What. Were. You. Thinking.” Elizabeth spat at me, punctuating each word by jamming her finger deep into the soft tissue below my collarbone. I winced.

“I’m sorry, Elizabeth. She asked if she could come, I didn’t want to be mean.” I could feel Alaina and Candace holding their breath.

“Well, since this is your mistake, you are going to fix it.

The Fates and Why I Left Them

Alone.”

“What do you want me to do? I already told Meg what we’re doing at recess today.”

“I’ve already thought of something,” she said.

“It’s more fun this way!” Elizabeth had coaxed. Elizabeth had told Candace to use the turquoise bandana from her hair as a blindfold on Meg, assuring Meg that we always played hide-and-seek with a blindfold so that the seeker couldn’t cheat and find the others. Meg was trusting, so she had simply smiled, allowing Candace to cover her eyes and tie the blindfold behind her ponytail.

“Go.” Elizabeth jerked her head toward the back fields behind the trees. Her mouth was a straight line, unwavering. She pushed the other girls away from me, then the three of them headed across the playground.

I paused, then reached my hand out to let Meg know that I was next to her. I led Meg past the playground and the fields, holding her steady with my outstretched arm. We passed through the tree line separating the school grounds from the back fields. We reached a tall pine tree, where I started to let go of her hand.

“Wait!” she called out to me, her voice muffled like she was speaking with marbles in her mouth. “Don’t hide too well,” she smiled. I squeezed her hand as a gesture of reassurance then backed away from her. She started counting out loud, laboring for each word in an attempt to enunciate, “one... two... three...” – I continued backing away past the tree line, looking over my shoulder one last time at her before crossing back into school property and joining the other girls to line up to go back inside for class.

Elizabeth was waiting on the sidewalk for me, a smug smile spread across her face. “Good work,” she said.

About ten minutes later, Miss Cook heard knocking on the classroom door. She opened it, and Meg was standing in the doorway with a school administrator. Meg was covered in scratches with pine needles tangled into her hair and mud stains on her clothes. She still

had the turquoise bandana in her hand.

I avoided eye contact with her as Miss Cook helped her cross the classroom to her seat. I looked up at Meg about an hour later to find her already staring at me. She signed, *Why?* Her face was pained with the expression of betrayal.

When I returned home that night, I told my mother that I did not feel well, and I went straight to my room without dinner. I closed the door to my bedroom softly, as if it were made of porcelain instead of wood, and I let out a heavy, strangled sob. I looked at my friendship bracelet, and I wondered if Meg was at home crying in her bedroom, too.

The next day, I couldn't go to recess. I didn't want to go back to the fields where I had left Meg the previous day. I pictured her lost, confused, alone. I pictured her taking off the blindfold to realize that she was no longer in the schoolyard. I pictured her panicking, trying to call for help. I pictured her falling into the mud, scraping her hands, standing back up into the low-hanging pine tree. I pictured the school administrator discovering her crying outside, trying to communicate with her and ask what had happened.

I couldn't stop picturing it. I couldn't go outside. I couldn't go outside. I stayed in the classroom, reading a book at my desk alone.

Several hours later, as I boarded the yellow school bus that Elizabeth and I rode home each day, Elizabeth turned toward me and blocked my path to the bus steps.

"Why didn't you meet me at recess today?" I caught a glimpse of her teeth just slightly baring themselves over her pale lips.

"I had to make up a vocabulary quiz in Miss Cook's class," I lied quickly. I watched her eyes shift. Her teeth became more pronounced, menacing milky squares on pale, pink flesh. I should have stopped talking. I should have smiled and avoided eye contact with the blue beads below her blonde bangs. Instead, I pictured Meg asking me, *Why?* Instead of folding like a cheap lawn chair, my blood boiled. I pictured Meg's mother asking her about the scrapes on her

The Fates and Why I Left Them

hands, the mud on her clothes. The hairs on the back of my neck stood up.

“Although, I really don’t see how that’s any of your business, Elizabeth,” I tested, my fists clenched. Her cold stare washed over me. I was vaguely reminded of a pit viper just before it strikes: head down, flattened, fixed gaze.

Suddenly, she smiled. “That’s okay! Why don’t we just catch up on the bus? We can sit next to each other.”

Her words seemed genuine and, despite the warning signs of her impending serpentine attack, I assumed that she was letting it go because I was her friend. A member of the group. A chosen girl. I nodded.

As we boarded the school bus, the familiar humidity of recycled air flowed past us, mingled with the occasional breeze from the open windows. Elizabeth picked an open section in the back of the bus, perfect for gossiping and discussing issues that could not be overheard. The bus seats smelled like sweaty rubber and old bubble gum. The faded gray material was ripped in several places, dandelion-yellow foam seeping out of the splits in the fabric.

One by one, the other children on the bus filed out at their designated bus stops. Ten, twenty, thirty minutes. Mid-conversation about extra credit on the environmental science project, Elizabeth looked up at the bus driver, Cheryl, and the empty bus seats. Since Elizabeth and I were the last stop, the bus was no longer busy with chatty students – witnesses.

Elizabeth elbowed me sharply in the gut, shoved my head into the metal wall of the bus, and forced me to my knees in the space on the floor between our bus seat and the back of the seat in front of us. My eyes watered. My stomach churned. My head throbbed.

“Don’t you ever lie to me again,” she threatened, her voice a growl. Her expression remained motionless, stagnant in its dangerous glare. She turned away from me, slinging her khaki messenger bag over her shoulder and exiting the bus without a second glance back at me.

I staggered off the bus, avoiding eye contact with Cheryl and staring at the uneven concrete pathway from the bus stop to my front porch. As soon as I walked through our front door, my mother immediately noticed the bruises forming on my face from the metal siding of the bus. One of the screws beneath a window had caught the skin of my cheek, tearing a small red river into the defeated expression on my face.

My parents called me downstairs from my room before dinner.

“Look, Marilyn,” my father began, interlacing his fingers on the kitchen table in front of him. He adjusted his stance in the chair, then held up two fingers, “I’m going to give you two choices. You either pop this bitch in the mouth, or you end your friendship with her. I get it, you girls are good friends. But this is bullying behavior, and you’re not sticking up for yourself.” I looked at my mother, who pursed her lips down in an expression that I always imagined said, “I’m sorry, honey.”

My father had always encouraged me to stick up for myself physically, though I was always the smallest person in any given scenario. Besides being small, I was also generally a pacifist. I didn’t want to shake the status quo; I didn’t want anything to change. He probably expected me to protest, make excuses for Elizabeth’s behavior. Instead, I nodded slowly. “Okay,” I agreed.

The next day, I picked up my lunch tray and approached a new group of girls at a different table in the cafeteria. The table contained some of the superstars from Miss Cook’s class: the popular girls with name-brand jeans and fitted tops. These girls smiled at everyone, passed notes to one another in class, and had folders with photographs of horses on the front. When they laughed, the genuine and fearless sound filled the room. But I was intimidated by them. These girls were popular and had the power to humiliate me if they chose to do so. They were intimidating because they were elite. But they were the kindest and most welcoming girls in our class; even

The Fates and Why I Left Them

though I hadn't fallen in with their group at the beginning of fourth grade, I felt that the name-brand, popular-girl table was the best option for me. I prayed for a fresh start as I walked toward the girls: Kelly Baker, Sydney Stanford, and Victoria Holmes.

"Can I sit with you guys?" I asked, feeling my heart jump into my throat. To my profound relief, all the girls at the table smiled at me and nodded. Kelly stood up and found a burgundy chair from across the cafeteria, dragging it across the linoleum tiles to add to their lunch table. Sydney and Victoria scooted their lunch trays over, making room for my tray of mixed vegetables and tomato soup.

I felt dazed for the rest of the lunch period. I had forgotten how easy it was to make friends. I had forgotten the kind girl who wore sweater vests and played with telescopes. At several points during that lunch period, the table erupted into the laughter I'd always heard from across the cafeteria while I sat solemnly at Elizabeth's table. I felt lighter, liberated.

I only looked over my shoulder at my old lunch table once. Elizabeth was staring at me, but I didn't recognize the expression on her face. Years later, I would understand her expression after I attended a sociology seminar where I learned that all bullies experience the same emotion when they are finally confronted: shock.

Several months after the incident with Meg and my departure from Elizabeth's friend group, I approached Meg to apologize. Her tone was cool, hesitant. I knew when I approached her that I had broken the trust that might have led to deeper friendship. That was never mended.

Elizabeth and I haven't spoken in a long time. Several years, I'm pretty sure. I wish I could say that I transformed, completely leaving behind Elizabeth and the person that I was when I was with her. But I can't. I have struggled with toxic work relationships, abusive romantic relationships, and failed friendships since I parted with Elizabeth. A part of me will always be the little girl in the pink sweater vest. Even as an adult, an imminent part of me will always

Madeline Ketchem

hunger for the validation I felt under Elizabeth's influence.

Sometimes I still wake at night drenched in sweat with visions of Elizabeth cutting my thread of life with her teeth, the shears of fate.