Heather Murray

Narrative Revision

The Rope

I was seventeen years old and three months into a year-long therapeutic program for young women. Life was a constant struggle. I had been taken from my home, where I lived with my mother who loved and cared for me and thrown into a harsh environment. I had no control over myself nor my decisions. The atmosphere of the place was cold and ridged. Performing the long list of daily chores that were demanded of me was a long and tiring process, but at least I was trying. I knew it was by no one’s fault, save mine, that I wound up in this situation. I needed help, but my idea of help was drastically different from theirs, as I would soon learn.

Upon entering Vista I struggled. A time of adjustment was normal, although it was a bit more difficult for me than most. This was mainly due to the fact that the other girls had already completed a three month wilderness program prior to coming here. They were ecstatic to be free of daily ten mile hikes and diet of rice and beans. I, on the other hand, skipped wilderness. Needless to say, my opinion of Vista differed greatly from others. This put a wedge between myself and the other residents. With time I became more acceptant of the situation and the rules, and I had resigned myself to the fact that I wasn’t leaving until graduation. I swallowed my pride, let go of my stubborn rebelliousness, and tried my best to fit in. *What else do they want from me?* I thought I was making progress, I thought I was doing what was expected… I thought wrong.

We were all dead silent; talking wasn’t allowed unless a staff member could listen in on every word you had to say. Privacy was nonexistent. It was after dinner and we were all tired from cleaning the kitchen for the third time that day. *I’ve had it with this Cinderella crap!* The day was almost over and we were finishing up with study time. We had just sat down when staff called my name along with two other girls. They informed us that Karan, a therapist in our center, wanted to speak with us. It was well after the time all the therapists should have left for the day. It was unusual for one to still be hanging around, but it wasn’t unheard of. I became tense. *It’s something bad! They wouldn’t be calling for us if it were good.* I could feel the rush of anxiety in my stomach.

We were guided to the intake office. I became more uneasy when I saw that it wasn’t just Karen, it was my therapist, Melissa, as well.

“Go ahead and have a seat girls,” Melissa cooed. Her already high pitched voice now sounded nearly squirrel-like. She was nervous. *This isn’t good.*

The girls often referred to the therapists as “gods,” and honestly, it wasn’t too far off. They dictated every aspect of our lives and had license over every decision that was made. They determined if you got to see your family or if you got to make a call. They even had the authority to revoke permission to speak, sometimes usurping your voice for weeks at a time. They took privileges from you that you never knew existed, let alone fathomed could be stolen from you. This created an environment built on the cornerstones of fear and betrayal. In a situation like this, there was no such thing as friends.

As I sat there looking at the faces of all those around me, I noticed the wide eyes of my house mates, Liza and Regina. They were as afraid as I was. *Calm down Heather; everything’s okay.* Karen and Melissa were standing in front of us on the other side of the intake desk. Karen eyed each of us in turn; the sly smirk on her fat mug said it all. She was loving every minute of this. My heart raced faster.

Karen sat up and rested her elbows on the desk as she began, “as you girls know, when we ask you to do something, even if it isn’t easy or if you don’t understand, we do it for your benefit.” *What a crock!* “Each of you know that you’ve been a little stuck lately.” *Stuck? I’m not stuck.*  “We have been discussing how to best help you and we’ve come up with a plan that could give you girls the push need.” *I’m doing everything I’m supposed to!* I screamed in my mind as my hands clenched into fists.

Melissa cut in, “the three of you are very similar. You’ve all had behavioral struggles and Karen and I think you could learn a lot from one another.” *Are we switching rooms? Please don’t make me go in Regina’s room, she farts!* “There is a technique called mirroring,” she continued. “It’s when you are shown what your own behavior is by seeing it in someone else, behavior that you might not be aware of or know that you do.” *I’m so sick of this place! I can’t stand this, just get to it already! “*That’s why we are going to try this out for a little while. *You girls* will decide how long this lasts. It can last a week, or a month, or longer depending on *your* behavior.”  *Get on with it already!* Melissa pauses and we all know that whatever “it” is, it’s bad.

Karen couldn’t wait to deliver the punch. Without skipping a beat she hits us with the stunning news. “You three will be put on a rope,” she said in an unemotional, cold, and apathetic voice. I wanted to gag. I felt my face grow hot. Melissa looked worried, Karen looked sickly happy. Tears welled up in my eyes. I was only able to speak one sentence before crying became so uncontrollable that I began to hyperventilate.

“I don’t even put my dog on a rope!” I was disgusted and angry with the whole situation. *I’m done with this place! They can all go to hell. I’m not letting them tie me up.* I was disgusted and enraged. Thoughts of escape, violence, and revenge flashed through mind faster than I could keep up with. Melissa looked shocked, Karen looked pissed. I didn’t care. I stood up and began to storm out of the room. This was not allowed.

“Sit down!” Karen bellowed. I stopped but didn’t turn around. I closed my eyes and put my head down. *Just turn around, Heather.* It took all I had to force myself to turn around, but I didn’t sit down. “If you, or any of you for that matter, do anything to damage or destroy property, or if any of you girls use any kind of violence, not only will your stay at Vista be lengthened but your probation officers and judges will be contacted. *I wish I could contact them myself and tell them what you’re doing to me; this is inhumane!*  I was still sobbing and could barely breathe.

As soon as Karen delivered her little speech neither her nor Melissa could be bothered with us anymore. They carted us out of the office and back to the classroom with the rest of the girls. Melissa tried to reassure us that we would have time to talk about it tomorrow in group. It did nothing to soothe the fear, frustration, and overwhelming victimization that was brewing within me.

I went on to live the next eighteen days of my life tied on that rope with Regina and Liza never more than a foot and half away. And while I don’t know if the experience of it affected them the way it did me, I do know that it was extremely difficult for us all. Not having freedom to move about on your own accord, as annoyingly difficult as it may be, was nothing in comparison to the sadly demeaning realization that I had so little control over my own body as to be forced to allow adults—adults that were supposed to help and guide me—to tie me with rope in the name of therapy. I experienced many other hardships, harsh punishments, and needlessly revoked privileges while I was a client at Vista, but none so traumatic as “the rope.”

I’ve spent hundreds of hours journaling about, pondering on, and discussing with others the events in my life that have caused me pain. With time and a willingness to move on from those events, I have been able to forgive nearly all who have wounded me. Sadly, the therapists at Vista have not yet found their way onto my list of the forgiven. I believe this is due to the intention of the therapists that day. In nearly every other situation in which I found myself the victim, the perpetrator wasn’t intentionally malicious in their actions. And, if they were, it was usually because they had deep wounds of their own. I can empathize with that. I can relate to that. I can forgive that. What I can’t understand nor forgive is the rope.

I didn’t do anything to harm those therapists. I never attacked them nor spewed hateful words at them. I never really knew them, and yet they desired to hurt me. Although many years have passed and I still have yet to find it within myself to forgive them, I’m still searching. The pain has grown less intense with time, but whenever I speak aloud what took place the tears always find their way from within and I cannot help but become emotional once again. I rarely think of the rope, and even rarer than that do I tell the story to others. I suppose in getting it out for all to see now is another step towards healing and moving past the pain that was inflicted that day.