

## EXAMPLES OF PERSONAL NARRATIVES

***Amy, the author of this personal narrative, effectively uses voice to convey the fear she feels as she ascends a path to an area above a 100-ft. waterfall. Her expert choice of words helps to paint a beautiful picture of her surroundings.***

### The Climb

I have this fear. It causes my legs to shake. I break out in a cold sweat. I start jabbering to anyone who is nearby. As thoughts of certain death run through my mind, the world appears a precious, treasured place. I imagine my own funeral, then shrink back at the implications of where my thoughts are taking me. My stomach feels strange. My palms are clammy. I am terrified of heights.

Of course, it's not really a fear of being in a high place. Rather, it is the view of a long way to fall, of rocks far below me and no firm wall between me and the edge. My sense of security is screamingly absent. There are no guardrails, flimsy though I picture them, or other safety devices. I can rely only on my own surefootedness—or lack thereof.

Despite my fear, two summers ago I somehow found myself climbing to a high place, while quaking inside and out. Most of our high school had come along on a day trip to the Boquerón, a gorgeous, lush spot in the foothills of Peru. Its prime attraction is the main waterfall, about 100 feet high, that thunders into a crystal clear pool feeding the Aguaytia River. All around the pool and on down to the rushing river are boulders large and small. The beach is strewn with rocks. On both sides of the fall, the jungle stretches to meet it, rising parallel to it on a gentler slope.

After eating our sack lunches within sight and sound of the fall, many of us wanted to make the climb to an area above it. We knew others had done so on previous trips. A few guys went first to make sure they were on the right path. But after they left, my group of seven decided to go ahead without waiting for them to return. I suspected we were going the wrong way, but I kept silent, figuring that the others knew better. We went along the base of the hill until we reached the climb. It stopped me in my tracks.

The climb ascended steeply above us. Along the right edge the jungle hugged the rocks; passage through its trees did not look feasible. The majority of my view was filled with rocks. Looming high to the sky, the boulders rose in a tiered manner. Peering back down toward the river, I saw a steep slope of rocks all the way to the water. All I could think about was how far it would be to fall.

My tense thoughts were interrupted by the realization that my friends were already beginning to climb! My anxiety increased as I watched them.

*Do I turn back? My whole being shouted, "Yes!" Will I regret it later? I really want to get to the top, but...*

I voiced my uncertainties to my friends. They dismissed my fears and encouraged me to stick it out. Questioning my own sanity, I decided at least to attempt the climb.

I chose a path that seemed easiest. My friend Tom was ahead of me. Then, suddenly, he slipped and slid backward about 10 feet! I watched, paralyzed, until he stopped himself and assured us he was all right. My heart was hammering.

Now those who had tried the other way came back; it had not worked. Consoling myself that my friend Seth would be right behind me, I shakily began the ascent. The "path" led up a narrow area between boulders. In it, we reached a place where there just were no good handholds. Seth braced my foot, and those above sent down words of encouragement. I was soon past the first challenge safely, but not feeling much better about the rest of the climb.

The difficulties only increased from that point on, with scary spot after scary spot. Though I knew I should not look down, I could not always ignore the long drop to the boulders below. My breathing sped up, but my heart pounded even faster, growing loud in my ears.

My friends kept right on climbing. But they did not forget me. Someone was always behind me to help hold my feet steady when necessary, and someone else was always ahead to offer a hand up. I trusted them more than myself; I knew my feet could easily slip. With friends supporting me by words and actions, I slowly gained ground.

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Finally we came to the worst section yet. To me the slope looked very close to vertical. The slight handholds were few and far between. Being short, I knew the stretches would be difficult enough in normal conditions. In my current panic, it would be much worse. The alternative was to go back down. Which was more difficult? I didn't want to go either way, but obviously I had to go somewhere.

The trouble was, we were not getting any nearer to the falls. By now, we realized that this route was not the way most frequented! But knowing this did not get me any closer to safety.

Since getting up this next part was next to impossible, and waiting for a rescue helicopter was not an option, with fear and trembling I decided to go down, but not by myself. Melody agreed to go with me, earning my eternal gratitude. She paused to pray for safety; I did not trust my voice enough to pray aloud.

Now, with our backs to the rocks, the drop was continually in our line of vision. It seemed even steeper than before. The song "Angels Watching Over Me" ran through my head as we began, Melody going first. I kept up a steady stream of chatter, my trembling voice betraying my fear.

One of the first tough places we came to gave us trouble. Cautiously stretching one foot down, Melody could not reach the bottom of the boulder. A slip would mean an extremely long drop. So we tried a different route where a fall would be shorter. It was somewhat wet and would entail a short slide to reach the bottom.

Melody made it safely. I hesitated, unsure of my footing, and picturing myself at the bottom of the cliff, bones broken and pain wracking my body, if I still lived.

"You can do it! I'm right here," Melody called. She waited patiently, not pressuring me to hurry.

Inching carefully to the edge, I could see in the corner of my eye the boulders and river far below. As I started down the rock, my foot slipped! My heart jumped into my throat as the terror I had held just under the surface swept over me.

*I'm gonna fall!* I inwardly shrieked.

It had been only a small slip, however; I was not in midair! I took a few calming breaths, and my heart repositioned itself where it belonged.

With no further mishaps, we came eventually to the last troublesome spot, the stretch between two boulders that had given me problems on the way up. Thankfully, the rest of our friends had given up climbing to the top and had now caught up to us. There were two possible descents from here. One way included a short jump down. I decided to check out the other way. Seth was working his way down this second route when he fell a few feet and bruised himself! I again looked over the first option.

*Do I want to jump? There's a big drop if I jump wrong or don't stop on the ledge! But the other way...!*

I knew if I was to get down, it would have to be Seth's way. He was willing to help me however he could. I inspected the "path" he had taken. There was some low vegetation, matted down and sloping slightly toward the edge. Then came a drop down to a narrow inlet between rocks. That was not so bad. The hitch lay in the fact that there was no handholds or footholds, and my short legs would not reach to the rocks.

"Uh, I don't know about this. I don't like the looks of it!" I said, my voice quavering.

"You can make it, Amy! I'm right here. I won't let you fall," Seth promised.

Slowly, painstakingly, I backed over the vegetation.

"I'm coming down," I warned, my voice unsteady.

"I'm ready," answered Seth. "I got you."

His assurances gave me the strength to go on. I trusted him implicitly. Flattening myself onto my belly, I edged my feet into midair. Seth held them tightly and slowly lowered me, guiding my feet to a firm place as I let my body slide over the leaves, twigs, and rock. When my feet made contact with the solid rock, I heaved a huge sigh of relief. I could feel the fear draining out of me.

My arms and legs were scratched up; I was dirty and sweaty. But none of it mattered. I was at the bottom!

"Yaaaaaaahhhh!" I yelled. I never felt so alive, and so thankful for that life.

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*This personal narrative by eighth-grader Alicia presents an engaging voice. Read the essay and notice how Alicia's personality comes through; she obviously cares about her subject. Her use of details gives the reader a clear picture of the characters and environment in this account of Alicia's first encounter with racism.*

### The Racist Warehouse

It was a beautiful August morning. The sun was brightly shining on my sunglasses while my mother drove the U-haul truck to a warehouse in Santa Ana, California. As my mother drove down the streets of Santa Ana, I looked out the window and began to realize that the mixture of people was no longer a mixture; there was only white.

When we arrived at the warehouse, I had to peel my arm off the side of the hot door like a burnt sausage off a skillet. There were not many cars in the parking lot, and I could see the heat waves. As we walked up the boiling pavement, it felt like we were walking through a scorching desert. When we walked into the warehouse, there was a variety of electronic appliances to choose from, and about three-fourths of them were white (of course).

About every 15 minutes, a salesperson followed us around and asked if we needed help, as if we were retarded or ex-cons. My mother really dislikes it when salespersons constantly ask if we need help; she feels if she needs their help, she'll ask for it. Finally, after about two and a half boring hours of looking for any scratches or marks on the dryers and refrigerators that might fit best in our new apartment, my mother picked a dryer and refrigerator that were just right. She then let the salesperson know, and he replied with a smile, "All right, you can pick up your items in the back in about five minutes." My mother said, "Thank you," in a nice, friendly voice and walked across the scorched pavement to drive the truck to the back.

When we got to the back, there were about three open spaces for picking up appliances. My mother chose the first parking spot she saw, which was by a white family's car. Then she showed the employees the receipt for the appliances she had just bought. They said, "All right, we'll be with you in just a minute." While I waited for my mother, I looked over and smiled at the white lady in the next car, but instead of smiling back like a nice young woman, she frowned at me like I had something hanging from my nose. At first I thought, "Well, maybe she is having a bad day." Then a few minutes later the people working at the warehouse started to look at my mother and me in a mean way. Then I figured that maybe something was on my face, but when I looked in the mirror, I saw nothing. At the time, I had only spent nine years and some months on this planet. I didn't know racism was still around; I thought that situation had died along with Dr. King.

Five minutes passed, then ten, then fifteen. We sat there watching people get their appliances and leave. We seemed invisible to them. As I sat in the car, burning up and listening to one of the most boring radio stations my mother could possibly like, I was thinking, "We'd better leave or else I'll go ballistic!" After 30 minutes had passed, my mother got frustrated and politely asked to have our items loaded. Five more minutes passed, and she asked again with an attitude. They replied, "We'll be with you in a minute, ma'am." I could tell she was beginning to get upset because she started to get that "don't bother me" look. Five minutes later they finally packed our appliances on the truck.

When we left the warehouse, I described to my mother what the other people were doing. She explained, "They were racist. They didn't like us because we have different skin color."

That was my first encounter with racism. It was just a small slice of reality—that everyone isn't going to be as nice as you, your friends, and your family might be; and that just because you look nice and politely smile at others, it doesn't mean that others will treat you the same. This situation made me feel very out of place and confused. I didn't expect those people to react as they did. We are all civilized, intelligent, caring, peaceful people . . . or at least that is what I had believed.

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*Gracie Webb wrote the following personal narrative as a senior at Norman North High School and with it she won the national Gold Key in the Scholastic Art and Writing Awards, 2008.*

### **. The Slow Dance**

*by Gracie Webb*

The gymnasium was transformed. A dry ice machine sent an ocean of fog across the glossed floor so lights glinted like strands of opals off CO2 waves. The DJ's booth was tucked in the darkest corner. Music boomed from the shadows. A hundred seventh grade hearts were set to rhythm. Even the walls seemed to pulse with energy as I made my way towards a familiar figure. My new jean skirt was too small. It crept up the back of my thigh as I walked so I kept one hand securely on the bottom seam; step, tug, step, tug.

"Hey," I said.

"Hi," Katie answered.

"How long have you been here?" I inquired, desperate to calm my nerves with conversation.

"Only like five minutes."

"Just to be safe," I whispered, "I think we should stay together tonight. You know, so we're never alone."

"What?" she bellowed. "It's too loud. I can't hear you."

"Oh, it's nothing," I said.

"What?" she yelled.

"Never mind," I said.

"Okay," she replied coolly before looking towards the center of the dance floor.

Then I saw them, in a single cluster, the perfect girls. Their clothes clung to their skin in all the right places, their delicate features emphasized with mascara and lip-gloss. Their hair flowed behind them. The colors were luminescent and appeared as a distant afterthought of having it all. They were careless, beautiful, together and untouchable.

The boys stood clustered around them. They were the eye of the storm. I felt like a piece of debris.

*How is it possible to feel so alone in a room full of people?*

When the music stopped the consistency of the air became as thick as stew with anticipation. I pushed my ankles against the wall and felt my spine stiffen. I could hear my mother's voice in my head, "Shoulders straight, back arched, eyes forward. Then he was there, all of him only a foot away from me. His name was Josh. His features were plain but kind enough to spark some admiration. We'd only talked twice because boys like Josh only spoke to me when they needed answers.

"So, uh, do you, like, wanna dance or something?"

My teeth felt like they were covered in flour.

"Sure." I sputtered.

The moment he took my hand is the moment I learned how to breathe underwater. We were closing in on the perfect girls. Through the florescent fog, that infamous epicenter was coming into focus. *How dare he be so brave?* We stopped suddenly.

"Uh, is this cool?" he asked.

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I nodded my approval.

The saccharine chorus began and I felt his arms against my sides. There was so much heat radiating off his skin that I thought his hand would singe my new shirt. This close he smelled like pizza and sweaty remnants of Old Spice.

“So you’re in my English class or something, right?”

I was too excited to answer. I was, at least in that moment, one of them. I was one of the girls.

I could hear snickering from behind me, barely audible over the rattling bass of the song. The choppy laughter became louder. I craned my neck in the direction of the encroaching voices and saw three boys I recognized as Josh’s friends. I smiled shyly and turned back around to face Josh. His eyes were muddy pools and I could see him gesturing behind my back.

“Guys, stop. Not yet,” he hissed to his posse.

*Not yet?*

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“Nothing. Look, thanks for the dance,” he said as he broke away from me and placed his body like a shield between me and his friends.

“Dude, I can’t believe you actually went through with it!” one boy exclaimed.

“Shut up, man, she’s standing right there,” Josh whispered.

I looked at my shoes.

“Is it cool if we pay up tomorrow, Josh? I left my wallet at home,” the same boy shouted. Their cackling echoed inside the cavernous gym. I continued to watch my feet as I ran towards the bathroom. A white hot storm filled my throat. *It was a dare.*

I stared into the bathroom mirror. It was cracked in one corner so my reflection appeared in unfamiliar fragments. Black clouds of mascara stained my cheeks. My hair looked like scorched straw. My skirt was still too small. *Who was this girl who spoke like me but dressed like them? Who was this girl whose eyes were my own but were disguised by their make-up? Who is she; herself or an imitation?*

I twisted the squeaky faucet. Water poured into the porcelain sink. I pulled my hair back into a bun. I dipped my hands into the water and lifted my fingers to my face, splashing cool drops onto my cheeks. Again and again I lifted my hands up and saltwater was replaced with fresh water. As make-up stains disappeared, my freckles reappeared, a familiar cluster of constellations across my nose. I was blotting my forehead with a paper towel when I heard Katie’s timid voice.

“I saw what happened.”

“Heh, yeah, you and everyone else,” I said trying to smile.

“Are you okay?” She asked.

“I will be after I change out of this skirt,” I replied as I tossed the soaked paper towel into the trash.

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*Ms. Durham wrote several drafts of the following personal narrative as a Fellow of the OWP Summer Institute. The following story began as a Quickwrite from elementary school.*

### Kissing Jail

Shelly Unsicker-Durham

“Are you ready to kiss him?” *Now what was I going to do?*

It all started on the girls’ merry-go-round. The recess bell had rung and 27 first graders had lined up and filed outside as orderly as six-year-olds could manage. I had been counting the moments until I could find a good spot on my favorite playground toy. Oh... I loved the monkey bars and the tall metal slide, and even the teeter-totter, but my favorite, my all-time favorite, was the merry-go-round. The merry-go-rounds at B.C. Swinney Elementary were BIG. At least they looked big to my six-year-old self. There were wooden boards for standing and wooden boards for sitting and six places for grasping metal bars and pushing – with all the might and strength that elementary students could muster.

Once I crossed the boundary from the indoor quiet of Mrs. Gail’s classroom and neat rows of desks into the outdoor noises of children and scuffling feet on a gravel playground, I ran. I ran as fast as my black patent MaryJanes could carry me, heading straight for the girls’ merry-go-round. It was late September in 1969 and most of us, first graders, had mastered the playground rules. Well, at least the one that segregated the girls from the boys. The merry-go-round closest to the fence line was designated for girls – the one closest to the school building was for boys. No one ever crossed that boundary. Not ever.

But that day would be different, that day with the autumn blue sky and the sun shining like maybe it was still summer... that day, someone dared to cross the line. I had just leapt onto the six-sided merry-go-round crowded with squealing girls twirling and giggling round and round and round, when I looked up and found myself almost nose to nose with a boy. Yes. George Schultz, first-grader and male, had leapt onto the girls’ merry-go-round, as if he’d been dared to. Maybe he had, but it didn’t matter. I would not stand for this kind of injustice and clear violation of the playground rules. “You’d better get off the girls’ merry-go-round, George.” I demanded.

“Yeah?! Shelly Kay Gerber Baby Food, what are you going to do about it?” Ergh! I couldn’t believe he was making fun of my last name... again.

“Ger-big. I’m Shelly Kay Gerbig,” and then I added, “Georgie Porgie.”

George didn’t care, he just continued to taunt me in a sing-song kind of voice, “Shelly Kay Gerber Baby Food! Shelly Kay Gerber Baby Food...” With my brow deeply furrowed and my blonde hair blowing with the swirl of the merry-go-round, I gave George my best scowl. And I thought about his challenge. What could I do about it? Think, think, think as the merry-go-round twirled and twirled.

“Well, George, if you don’t get off the girls’ merry-go-round, I’m... I’m gonna...” Really, I had nothing. George’s face curled into a sneer matching the waves of his thick, chestnut brown hair. Behind him whirled the school’s beige cinder blocks mixed with the colors of blue sky, green grass, and rest of the psychedelic playground. I began to feel dizzy and adjusted my grip on the cold metal bar.

Then, George just started laughing at me, “See, I’m on your merry-go-round and there’s nothing you can do about it, Shelly Kay Gerber Baby Food!” His taunting laughter and the injustice of this clear boundary violation infuriated me. Something had to be done about this boy.

“George, you better get off this merry-go-round. I have a secret weapon and I’m not afraid to use it,” I declared with the greatest of confidence.

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“Yeah... what secret weapon?” I knew he didn’t believe me, but George’s sneer began to fade. Fighting back the dizziness, I inched closer toward him, carefully maintaining my footing and grasp of the metal bar.

I was close enough to whisper, “If you don’t get off this merry-go-round, right this very minute, I’m going to...” Leaning right into his face, I shouted, “KISS YOU!”

“Kiss me??!!! Arrrggghhhhhh!!!!”

George leapt off the girls’ merry-go-round running as fast as six-year-old legs and knobby knees could carry him. The chase was on. I could feel the power I suddenly held over a boy, and that sudden surge of energy propelled me to leap off the merry-go-round and run after Georgie Porgie, while peals of little girl giggles twirled round and round behind me.

Fast and wiry, George fled from my reach and I just could not catch him. Round and round we ran and laughed and laughed. When I finally ran out of breath, I found myself back at the merry-go-rounds and ready to give up. I turned to see if my spot on the merry-go-round might still be there, and a small posse of first grade girls swarmed all around me. Some of them I knew from my class, but others I did not know by name. Everyone seemed to be laughing and pretending to be outraged at the grave injustice of a boy jumping onto our merry-go-round. “We’ll help you catch him!”

I couldn’t believe it. Three girls charged George and caught hold of the little boundary violator. Flanked by militant six-year-old females on all sides, George was still trying to catch his breath. They marched him right up to me and asked, “What do you want us to do with him?” Huh. I had not exactly thought this out.

“Are you ready to kiss him?” *Now what was I going to do?*

The girls looked at me expectantly. I didn’t want to disappoint my new merry-go-round allies. But I wasn’t sure I really wanted to kiss Georgie Porgie either.

“Um... what if we put him in jail, and... then we can kiss him later?”

Silence.

I wasn’t sure they were going to buy into this plan, but the more I thought about kissing George Schultz, the more certain I was that I didn’t want to.

“Jail?” inquired Cynthia with her soft brown hair and big, brown, eyes. She was in Mrs. Gail’s class with me and while she wasn’t as tall as me, she always seemed to know about things and the way they ought to be.

“Yeah, Cynthia, like a kissing jail,” I explained.

“A kissing jail! And if any more boys jump onto our merry-go-round, we can put them in there too!” Everyone agreed it was a good idea.

And that’s how it began. For the remainder of the autumn months, first grade boys jumped onto our merry-go-round and ran from first grade girls who caught them and put them in kissing jail. I don’t remember actually kissing any of them, but I’ll never forget the laughter as we chased those boys round and round and round.