

David Christopher Jones
Gwen Gets Published

After many attempts, Gwen finally published a short story in a literary magazine. A year-end list gave her an honorable mention, and an agent with a Manhattan PO Box emailed her for more. “Not yet,” she responded, totally unprepared, and obviously not feeling great about the rest of her work. But still: she got published. Yay. Even her family, who usually belittled her, started treating her slightly better, and for a while her friends viewed her as a moody artist, rather than a puffed-up state-college graduate with a shitty job. She was briefly popular.

Gwen wrote several stories at UMass the year before. Everybody loved the first one, but no one liked the rest of them, though she still coasted to an A, and that inspired her to keep writing. She had been journaling since she was a kid. She was good at this. After graduation she got a job as a copy-writing drone in a marketing firm, and spent the weekends woodshedding her fiction. But she forgot, or ignored, the advice from her writing instructor, who talked about being patient with a story, and finding your true voice, and telling the story that only you can tell, because, instead, Gwen just started five or six stories at once—all half-baked ideas, and spent 6-months going back and forth between them before finally convincing herself that they really weren’t that bad, though actually they were.

She sent the stories to lit mags, wrote cover letters, and referred to herself as an “emerging writer.” And most of the magazines replied immediately, saying her work didn’t really fit their style, though it certainly seemed like it to her. This went on for months.

Then a magazine took one of her stories. “Shout!” was about a teenage boy who got mad at his mother one night and yelled at her in a menacing way. The next day he seemed fine, but his mother never forgot it. That’s it. That was the story. The mother worried something was wrong with the boy, because this was her baby, her skinny 10-year old, and now her long-haired dumbass middle-schooler, suddenly yelling at her, after all the love she had given him.

So why did they choose this story? Perhaps it resonated with mothers—an irrational fear that no matter how much they loved their sons, that relationship could shatter in an instant. It also underscored that boys say and do awful things, leaving their parents to worry, their girlfriends to leave, and the police to finally arrest them. Basically, guys are stupid. That was the point of the story.

Gwen was a thin straight-faced brunette, somewhat owlsh, who liked short skirts and tights. She grew up in Everett, Massachusetts, a river town just north of Boston. Her younger brother was a quarterback in high school but fizzled after graduation, settling for a red-headed lap-dancer who put on a lot of weight after their first child, and then, so did he, both of them now balloon animal versions of themselves. Her older sister worked in a bank, and sang songs to elderly nursing home patients on weekends. Mom was mom, technically a widow now, all of them glad dad had died, sparing them the long-term expense and annoyance of his late stage colon cancer. That was the family. Gwen now lived in a claustro-

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phobic apartment in Brighton Massachusetts, a downtown bus commuter, glad to be on her own.

But after Gwen published her story, her family started sharing very personal and disgusting anecdotes from their lives, daring her to write them. Her brother said he cheated on his wife with a prostitute (not surprising). Her sister said she had sex with a minor when she was a substitute teacher (also not surprising). But Gwen shut all that out, because she always shut it out. They had bullied her since childhood, because, her theory: they were jealous of her intellect. They wanted to “take her down,” so they said she was ugly and had sex with animals. The first year she made the honor roll they pretended it was a sign from God, and bowed and prayed to her. But Gwen grew up without getting arrested or pregnant. She was not into guns, or drunk-fucking the neighbors, so leaving home was a grand victory for her. Goodbye shitheads.

She knew she wouldn't make big money as a writer, but she wanted to be really good at it, and that would take time, and practice, so she took a more professional approach to her fiction, working on one story at a time, polishing as she went, reading other writers, mostly young women, so she could steal from them if necessary. She began writing in her journal again, staying up late. She wrote a few poems, and started a novel.

And then one night she was visiting mom, who was unfortunately, but not surprisingly, drunk as shit, and who decided to lay into her, and criticize her, for no particular reason. Gwen was usually pretty nice to mom, definitely nicer than the other siblings, but this time they were talking about how mom's Bachelor #78 had skipped out, as if she expected a movie star ending with this guy, and Gwen said that you should be glad that jerk is gone, and mom went nuts and said What the fuck do you know about the guys I date, and when did you ever give a shit about anyone but yourself? You're just a snob, with a persecution complex, and you never check in on me, or call me, or give a shit about me, on and on, freestyling, Fuck and Shit, stalking the kitchen, jabbing with her cigarette, gulping her PBR. Wisely, Gwen turned on her phone and recorded all of this. Eventually mom talked herself out, and leaned against the sink and cried for a while. They hugged, and Gwen said goodnight and left. The next day, Gwen listened to the recording and started transcribing the best parts. This would be her next story.

Gwen needed a couple of weeks to shape mom's rant, but with repeated listens, she grew to appreciate her rhythms and her flow. Mom was a master of the dramatic pause. She could go from screaming to crying in an instant. Gwen didn't really have to do much. This would also be the perfect companion to her previous story, because the first story triggered some mother/son shit, but this new one was a stage for the despondent and reckless perseverating drunken mother archetype. Now Gwen could dig, and really peel back some skin, very painfully, and show the depths of mom's wounded world-hating rage, all of this not intended to hold up mom as some kind of icon of tragic femininity, like Maria Callas, or Dido of Carthage, because Gwen really just wanted to show what an annoying pain-in-the-ass mom had become.

But surely she would never send out such a hateful story.

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But what if she did?

What if she sent out the story and a magazine snapped it up right away—in Granta perhaps, triggering another ‘conversation’ about disgraceful parents, a cultural bubble.

So when Gwen decided to send it out, she told herself this was ‘brave,’ though actually it was ‘stupid,’ and ‘cruel.’ But then she cooled off about mom. She went over to see her more than usual and tried to be nicer. How was work? Meet any new guys? Really, none of the other siblings tried to meet mom on this level, so after a short time, mom started treating Gwen much better.

Until a magazine published the story. Then mom went crazy. She was actually violent. She threw lamps and books in her own apartment. She screamed at Gwen, and the neighbors knocked on the door, and mom said to leave her the fuck alone, and Gwen at one point actually feared for her life, but said, above all the noise, that she had quoted mom accurately, so yeah I’ll bet you don’t like it, but that’s what you said, that’s exactly what you said, on and on, until mom, after a long night, and lots of beer, finally seemed to slow down, and roll to a stop, her brain not functioning so well anymore, and eventually Gwen helped her to bed, and then they were square again, for a while, though a few weeks later mom got pissed again, but Gwen came back the next day, and then the next, and mom made her a sandwich, and joked about her day-drinking, and asked how Gwen’s writing was going, and Gwen said, Hey it’s great.