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(W)hole

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(W)hole

Anonymous

My ears burned as we entered the waiting area of the family counseling center. The room was thick with the tang of a floral plug-in air freshener, and was too small for us to avoid eye contact with the other patients. After roaming the beige carpet and paneled walls, my eyes landed on a stiff couple and the space between them on the loveseat. I pegged them “marital discord.”

When an office door opened and a woman invited us in through a smile, I swaggered in with a hard face, but Mom jerked and fidgeted like a marionette. We went through introductions, and then the counselor asked us to tell her about our “situation.” Once Mom got through her description of my cold stubbornness and elaborate illustrations of our alternating silent treatments and screaming matches, her voice fizzled out. The counselor thanked her for sharing her perspective. Neither had included me in the conversation.

“Now, would you mind having a seat out in the foyer? I’d like to talk to Elizabeth alone.” It only took Mom three steps to cross the claustrophobic office. She closed the door behind her. I looked down at the heavy Oriental rug covering the entire floor of the office. I searched for the edge with the toe of my Vans, but the bloated armchairs pinned down the rug with finality. The counselor looked at me from behind the echaugette of her desk.

“Have you ever been sexually abused?”

My shoe stopped short on the rug. Before my mind could process the reality of the attack, my body responded: blood retracted from my limbs and bolts of adrenaline charged my brain. “Why are you asking me that?”

“It’s okay to tell me. It can help to talk about it.”

I felt heat sear my crown, then race down my scalp and behind my ears. I flexed my jaw and made my eyes slits. “No. I don’t know. Where do you get off?”

“You’re displaying many of the signs of sexual abuse,” she started. “Your fights with your mom show your aggression. Your promiscuity. Your denial. The clothes you’re wearing—how many shirts do you have on—four?”

“It’s a cold day! I always wear layers.” The room held my words in the air between us. I folded my arms tighter against my chest as I realized my mistake. Her eyes seemed to flash with mild pleasure at my unintentional admission, but her voice remained distant and unaffected.

“Being a victim of sexual abuse is a difficult thing to cope with. How about you think about it, then come and see me next week?” She was already reaching for an appointment card. I didn’t wait for her to hand it to me, but immediately pushed away from the deep armchair and cut across the office. I pulled open the door. I could feel my mother’s leeching eyes on me from the couch in the waiting area but I kept going. I pulled open the front door. And kept going. I pulled open the Camry door and climbed inside. My chest expanded and deflated inside the sheath of my four shirts. I snatched my coat from the backseat and wrapped it around the front of me, pulling it up to my chin. I felt completely naked. My teeth started to chatter.

In calculus, a function is *continuous* if it can be drawn without lifting pen from paper. When graphing values, the plotted points are often connected with an uninterrupted curve to show what the function’s values most likely would have been at the points that weren’t expressly measured. The continuous curve represents all of the potential points of that function. By connecting those points, it is assumed that the function in question is a continuous function, or one whose outputs vary continuously with the inputs: what you give is what you get. The curve is predictable, reliable. Conventional.

I had been Matt’s girlfriend for almost a year. We were seventeen and wouldn’t admit that love could exist with anyone other than each other. I clung to him, needing him, despite knowing it would never work, not wanting it to work, but choosing to be ignorant in order to pretend we loved and were loved. Our relationship vacillated between desperation and disgust; a convoluted case of needing what hurts. He was my ally, my propaganda, my reason in the war against my parents.

The way I saw it, I didn't have any options: now that this dark secret I had buried for almost a decade had been uncovered by the counselor with such ease, I thought it would hit the fan and fly like shrapnel. Her confrontation made me believe others could see right through me, and that the point in my life had come when I was to root up my past in order to be rid of it. And I wanted to be rid of it.

Matt and I weren't allowed to see each other; my parents' assault on our relationship was through siege. He wasn't allowed in the house, so I called him. I remember pacing as I told him over the phone about what had happened with the counselor and a sweeping history of the events in question. I stopped pacing at his response.

"You're *used*. I know I shouldn't think of you that way, but I can't help it. I feel like I've gotten second-hand merchandise."

I was staring out the window overlooking our half-acre pasture. Two horses leaned against each other, heavy and motionless, facing opposite directions, only touching at the neck. Their eyes were fixed on the dirt they stood in. Gray clouds were charging the sky; a storm was coming. My very being seemed to retract into some deep recess inside of me. I could feel my arm holding the phone to my ear, but it was like someone else's arm, someone else's ear, someone else's body. I was far away, sucked into the center of this shell that I mentally understood was my body, but was no longer emotionally attached to. One word filled the rest of the newly hollowed caverns in my body, my soul: *used*. It was everywhere around me, repeating and increasing in resonance. Used.

One word filled the rest
of the newly hollowed
caverns in my body,
my soul: *used*.

My logic told me that if I were to uproot this issue and finally discuss it openly with a counselor, family loyalty should have first dibs. I thought my parents should know what happened in their family before I talked about it with a woman who only knew my first name by checking her notes.

"Mom, is it okay if Matt comes over? We need to talk to you and Dad about something." Surprising me, my mom allowed Matt back into our house for the first time in months. Two days later I was to appear before the counselor again, so I needed to get this off my chest quickly in order to feel free to make progress in the next counseling session.

Matt came over that evening, and we went into the library. I had been trying to remember how old I was when it all happened, using my photo album to help me remember. Matt sat on the carpet next to me and my mind wandered over old memories as my fingers turned each plastic page.

A picture of me at three, in a yellow church dress and too-short bangs held back by a lace barrette with a tiny pink rosebud. I remember the portrait studio, the photographer guiding me to lean in just a little closer to the decorative column until my cheek rested lightly against the smooth white plaster. My smile is small and shy, my eyes full under the soft lashes of a toddler.

I'm about five, and my cousins are visiting. I can tell someone told us to "say cheese" because I'm reaching out to put my arm around Sarah, even though we aren't close enough to make it look natural. My neck betrays the stretched muscles of a forced smile, and my freckled nose is wrinkled up to bare my teeth. I'm not even looking at the camera.

There. A picture of me at eight years old, standing on the blacktop in front of the house wearing a faded purple swimsuit. I am smiling in the foreground, my brother a few feet behind me, holding a black kitten to his cheek. I remember this day and many like it. I feel the fire on the soles of my feet from the blacktop. I feel the soft, thin fur of the kitten and its needle-sized ribs beneath. I feel my eyes squint as I smile for the camera.

I remember that this day, in the shed on the far side of the pasture, we hadn't been wearing our swimsuits.

My stomach heaved into my throat. The muscles drained from the arm I was propped up on and my elbow swayed, then buckled. Matt asked me what was wrong, and all I could do was point to the picture, "That day."

My parents opened the door of the library and sat down on the opposite side of the room from where I was huddled on the carpet. Mom's lips whitened and her crow's feet deepened as she looked from Matt to me. Dad had run his coarse hand through his hair. The white tuft by his left temple was a fluffy, uneven clump.

They are silent.

I shrink, hit by a wave of not wanting to be here. I realize that it is not so much telling them that their daughter was sexually abused, but that their son did the sexual abusing. This will hurt them. I can't say a word.

Finally my mother cannot wait on my silence any longer. “Well?”

In the end, it was Matt who said the words “Elizabeth was sexually abused multiple times when she was eight years old.” He told them it was my brother and pushed the picture album still showing the summertime photo toward my parents with three fingers. His voice was oddly calm, high-pitched, too smooth—the delivery of a sales pitch. He thought he was my hero. I remember thinking I shouldn’t have let him come; I felt an odd sense he had stolen something from me by speaking for me, but torn, glad at the same time to have a hiding place behind his words.

“We always thought there was something wrong with you.”

I only cried.

My parents’ faces didn’t change. They asked one question.

“Is this true, Elizabeth?”

I nodded and wouldn’t meet their eyes. My heart screamed *I’m sorry. I’m so sorry*, but they didn’t hear.

“We always thought there was something wrong with you.”

They stood up and left the room.

In calculus, the purpose of a limit is to discover what a function will do in relation to a certain value, a point that is of particular interest in relation to the function. Calculus provides the unique opportunity to illustrate what functions will do when that certain value doesn’t exist; finding the limits of a function allows for a precise definition of which values can be inputted in order for the function to exist. In order to find the limits of a function, the value must be approached from both sides. Limits determine exactly where there are points that make the function hold true. Limits also expose holes.

Thursday afternoon, precisely a week after I met the counselor for the first time, I was back in her office. Alone.

“Elizabeth. It’s so good to see you again. I’m glad you came back. How are things going with your mother?” The expression on my face showed her just how stupid I thought her question was. I clenched the paper in my hand a little tighter.

She nodded to the sheet in my hand. “What’s that? Did I assign you some homework last time?” I pushed a single sheet of notebook paper across her desk. The blue ink didn’t quite fill a whole page.

“You didn’t; I did. First of all, I don’t even know if it counts as sexual abuse. I thought you’d eventually want me to tell you all the things that happened, so I wrote them down so I could get it over with.” I slouched back in the leather chair and waited for her to respond.

She reached across the desk and delicately lifted the paper. As her eyes scanned my words, she pinched the paper with her thumb and forefinger, the rest of her fingers curling away from the page. A fly butted against the window behind her, bouncing a trail around the perimeter of the pane.

“Well, yes, from a legal standpoint, the experiences you’ve described here constitute sexual abuse, so have no fear of that.” My eyebrows gathered, lowering over my eyes.

“I’m not asking if I can press charges, I’m asking if it even matters.” I beckoned to the paper still caught between her two fingers. “I can’t even remember everything.”

At last she freed the evidence from her grasp, set it lightly on the glossed wood top of her desk, then pushed it to its final resting place at her elbow. She leaned toward me over her desk, the shoulder pads in her powder gray suit jacket slumping forward. “From what you wrote, it sounds like you’ve harbored this burden for quite some time. How do you feel about your experiences now?”

“I don’t think about it.”

“Victims are often unaware of the extent of the lasting effects past sexual abuse can have on their lives. Now that we’ve established the reality of your abuse, some things in your life since then make a little more sense, don’t you think?”

“No, I don’t think. I don’t think this comes up at all in my daily decisions. I don’t think it explains away me and my mom, I don’t think it’s the reason for me and Matt, and don’t even try and tell me it influences what I wear every day.”

She leaned back, pushing her palms against the edge of the desk to roll her chair across the plastic floor mat. “I think I have something that will help you.” She stood up and walked to a wall of books, tugged a paperback from its place, and brought it to me. I looked down at the cover. There was a bald man in a suit, grinning helpfully. *Self Matters*.

“What do you mean you’re not going?”

“I am not going back. How can she call herself a counselor when her idea of counseling is making me read a self-help book?”

“Well, did you read it?”

“I started to. I couldn’t stomach all the gushy warm-fuzzies about how the first step to improving yourself is believing you have worth.”

My mother sighed, put her hands on her hips. “How are you going to work through your little problem if you won’t go talk with the counselor?”

“She doesn’t want to talk with me and she doesn’t want to help me work through it. All I want is to be through this. I want to deal with this and be done. And she’s taking her sweet time.” I turned toward the stairs leading to my bedroom, but Mom trailed a few steps behind me.

“I guess you don’t have to go back if you don’t want to. But she suggested I make an appointment to get you a prescription for antidepressants. Your appointment is tomorrow.”

Calculus was developed in order to study the motion of objects, their speed and direction. Finding the velocity of a moving object requires the concept of a limit. Limits must be used to understand the potential changes of a function. If there is a hole, the function and its responses to various conditions are no longer comfortably formulaic. Approaching the hole from both sides to determine its limits aims to define the bounds of the hole, to identify precisely where the function ceases to be identical to an otherwise continuous function. Comparison reveals outliers.

I left the doctor's office with a few sample boxes of Lexapro in a brown paper bag. They felt like a shameful secret, stiff-armed at my side. As soon as Mom unlocked the car I dropped the bag to the floor. My mother settled into the driver's seat.

"I don't know why you had to be so rude to Dr. Williams, Elizabeth. He was just trying to help."

"I'm sick of people trying to help. They treat me like a mutant. And then throw medications at me like all I need is a pill, and then I'll be normal. Taking a pill to make me happy is a fake—it's not me. It means everybody wants me to be somebody I'm not."

As soon as we reached home, I went straight to the bathroom. I pulled each sample box of pills from the brown paper bag. I opened each box, my fingernails perforating a half-moon into the thin aluminum foil encasing each pill. I laid each pill in a growing pile by the sink, then gathered them up, a mass of white in my cupped hands.

I separated my hands and let the pills pepper the surface of the water in the bowl of the toilet.

A hole is simply a discontinuity in a function, or a place where the function is not defined. Some holes are removable—it just requires finding the definition. They are identified in a function by comparison to an associated rational function, or one that is clearly continuous. The associated rational function provides the map to define the function's limits. Once these holes are identified, they can be removed by simply cancelling all common factors. With the removal of the holes in the function, the function becomes whole, a rational function itself.

But other holes are infinite. All of the common factors from an associated rational function have been cancelled, but a zero remains in the denominator, signaling the need to divide by zero, which can never produce a real number. The graph of a function with an infinite discontinuity shows an area that will never reach an identifiable point. It is like the graph is trying to become a vertical line at a certain point, but of course it can't. From afar, the graph appears straight, but the closer the scrutiny, the more obvious the gap.

Infinite discontinuities cannot be inclusively graphed. Instead of a set script, they are only a guide to the function's behavior in the foggy area of the infinite discontinuity. With infinite discontinuities, the only way to graph the function is to indicate this taboo space with the semi-transparency of a dashed line. A blemish on a graph.

My brother had joined the Navy when he was eighteen. I hadn't seen him in nearly two years. But not long after exhuming these old memories, the Navy held Family Day, an event when all of the families of the sailors were invited to visit San Diego and tour the submarines. And this year, my parents decided our family would go.

I made excuses. I pouted. I yelled. I even tried simply asking if I could stay home. But my parents wanted a nice family trip. And I didn't have an option.

While touring the submarine, it was easy enough to keep my distance, keep quiet, and keep calm. I didn't know how I was supposed to feel, or act, or think. So I tried not to do any of those at all.

That afternoon, we went to Sea World. The California sun burned into the backs of our timid Idaho necks, a high-pitched female drone blared Shamu show times over the intercom, and the greasy smell of funnel cakes thickened the air.

Our parents herded us from attraction to attraction—Penguin Encounter, Turtle Reef, a choreographed dolphin show. I managed to hover on the outskirts, lingering a little longer when the rest of my family started moving to the next attraction. They gravitated to the exits, and I read informational posters, pretended to be absorbed in getting a closer look at the animals, or discovered a sudden need to tie my shoe.

I didn't realize my brother wasn't up ahead with the rest of the family when we climbed the ramp out of the coolness of the shark tunnel. My sister, Jody, was talking at me about the tiger shark, impressed with its speed. I squinted against the bright white of the sun and offered an "mmhmm." I heard Mom call for us to hurry up, and squinted harder to scan the crowd of beer-bellied dads and fanny-packed moms to so I could tow Jody toward the rest of the family. Without warning, my brother appeared between me and Jody, draping an arm around each of our shoulders.

“Almost makes me want to get a shark for my fish tank!” His arm became heavier on my shoulder as he turned to face me. “Don’t you think so, Elizabeth?”

My stomach seized, punched down like rising dough. I dropped my shoulder and twisted away from him. I turned and lurched toward the shark tunnel, but slammed into a twelve-year-old skater punk who was running right past me. He stumbled backward and clipped the elbow of a dad holding a video recorder.

“Hey—easy!”

“Not my fault—that girl just ran into me!” The kid pointed at me. My heart was a racehorse serrating my chest, but I was frozen, and people were staring. I mumbled something, and the kid walked away. Suddenly Mom was at my elbow, hissing in my ear.

“What is the *matter* with you? You’re causing a scene!”

“I’m causing a scene? Get away from me.”

I could see my mother’s eyes flit over the crowd, racking up a tally of each set of eyes on us, stopped in the middle of a sidewalk pulsing with tourists on the way to Shamu.

“Can’t you stop thinking about yourself and your problems for one minute? For *one minute*, Elizabeth! We’re here as a family. And you want to ruin it for everyone because you can’t stop being so damn selfish.”

We don’t talk about it anymore. I pushed the past aside, hoping for a day when people would see me, put pen to paper, and graph my function. They wouldn’t

I pushed the past aside,
hoping for a day when
people would see me,
put pen to paper, and
graph my function.

lift the pen, wouldn’t find the hole. The day when my mother, my counselor, my doctor, my boyfriend wouldn’t be coming at me from all sides, reaching by limits to the edges of where I cease to be continuous. No one would study my function, repeatedly inputting values and expecting to get the same answer they would get with a

standard function. On that day, I wouldn’t be given a pill to fill the hole, the gap, the void, the difference.

The shape of a function in a graph is determined by its properties, a visual product of a process of manipulating numbers. The shape of a function in a graph offers efficient categorization, judgment, labeling: linear, quadratic, rational, continuous, or housing an indefinite discontinuity. But the graph of the function merely represents the function—it is not the function itself. A shape is merely a facet of a concept. And an experience is merely one number in an elaborate equation that becomes *me*.