

COMPARE AND CONTRAST

I just read *The Diary of a Young Girl* by Anne Frank, about a girl who hid from the Nazis. There are many similarities but also differences between us: When she started the diary, she was thirteen, and I will be thirteen in August. We are both girls, and like her, I have many secrets and depressed emotions. I never hated my mom the way Anne hated hers, but last spring, I came close.

Anne Frank was born in Germany in 1929, but her family soon moved to the Netherlands, where her dad started a company that manufactured spices and pectin, which is a thickener used in jam. Although she was an immigrant in an unfamiliar place forbidden from going to the movies, leaving her house at night, or doing many other normal things just because she was Jewish, she found ways to be happy. She made many friends, interested many boys, and even charmed her teachers. Then her sister Margot got a notice assigning her to a so-called work camp, and her family moved to a “secret annex” above her dad’s warehouse that had rats, cat pee, and no bathtub. They shared

the space with another family they didn't especially like and a weird old dentist Anne nicknamed Mr. Idiot.

In contrast, I was born in the United States in 1983 and have always lived in Leechburg, Pennsylvania, a small town known for its stainless steel plants and Mickey Morandini who, as I'm sure you know, plays second base for the Phillies. I have not experienced Anne's hardships, and, unlike her, I do not have a good personality. If I were someone in her journal, I'd probably be Peter. He worries a lot, says little, and admits to being a coward. Anne couldn't believe his postwar plan was to never let on that he was Jewish, but I thought, *That's probably what I'd do in the face of real hardship, too.*

Before I go on, I would like to address the parents who complained about this book's "inappropriate content." I personally think it's good to learn where the cervix is located since I have one and didn't know, and despite what Jessica Hendrick's mom said at the school board meeting, I'm not convinced that the January 6, 1944, entry means Anne was gay. Yes, it does sound gay that she asked to touch her friend Jacque's breasts, and also in the part where she says, "Every time I see a female nude, such as the Venus in my art history book, I go into ecstasy." But Anne also kissed Peter and had crushes on other guys, and when you are just getting used to your new hormones, it's easy for them to misfire and confuse you.

For example, last year in seventh grade we had a new girl named Morgan Vietto who sat in front of me in geometry. She wore long shorts and high-top sneakers, and had the same haircut as Sean Mamros—short in the back with long curtains of hair on top. I actually thought she was a guy—I even thought I had a crush on him—until she turned around to introduce herself. Even after I figured out she was a girl, my body felt light and strange.

Another part I identified with is how hard it is to share close quarters with a man you're not related to, especially if that man is an idiot. In my case, the idiot man is my former stepfather, Wayne, who married my mom when I was in second grade and left three years later when

she discovered he was sleeping with his ex-girlfriend. You would think in that time I'd have gotten used to him, but I never did. He had opinions about what I wore, how I spoke to him, and all the extra chores I could be doing. Like Mr. Idiot, he was quick to help himself to treats in our house, like other people's Halloween candy and birthday cupcakes. His back hair and thick yellow toenails appalled me as much as Mr. Idiot's body appalled Anne. When we lived together, he tried to act like he was my father, but as soon as he left, that all stopped. If he sees me through the window when he picks up my twin brothers, he might wave, but that's it. If he takes them to Kennywood or the pool, I'm not invited.

As soon as Wayne moved out, my mom started making me spend time with Uncle Bryan. She said I needed an adult male role model, but I knew she wanted someone to watch me for free, so she could pick up extra shifts at Kmart when Wayne had the twins. Also she was using me to force herself back into my uncle's life. They had been close when they were young, but now, we only saw him at Thanksgiving and Christmas when he appeared at my grandma's house with a pie from Giant Eagle and then left after an hour.

"He always wanted to move away from us," my grandma said about him once. "And now he has."

"Away" was about forty minutes from us in a suburb of Pittsburgh: Instead of farms and homes people couldn't afford to fix, his neighborhood was made up of nearly identical redbrick houses with concrete stoops that overflowed with potted plants. He also had a garage, and this was where we spent a lot of our time.

Uncle Bryan never had any kid activities planned. It was more like, "Hey, let's go to AutoZone and then give this truck an oil change." Or, "Anybody ever teach you how to use a miter saw?" He didn't say much except to explain what we were doing, but he liked that I wanted to know how things worked, and he trusted me with his tools, which his roommate, Gary, told me is a sign of real affection. He also made delicious egg salad sandwiches with bacon and showed me how to use his

grill. The secret is using your meat thermometer. Just like Anne Frank eventually came to appreciate Peter, I came to appreciate Bryan.

Another similarity between me and Anne is that we lived in the shadow of big secrets. Her secret was being alive in a place where Jewish people were forced to flee or suffer. My secret was actually my uncle's secret.

One Saturday, instead of taking me to his house, my mom drove us to a hiking trail by the Kiski River and said my uncle had gotten some very bad news and was going to need his Saturdays free to deal with it. I was eleven and surely old enough to stay home alone, wasn't I?

"I don't get it," I said.

It was November, cold enough to see our breath in the air. We had gotten out of the car and she was making this big deal out of retying her tennis shoes. I got the feeling she didn't want to make eye contact.

"What?" I said. "What did I do?"

"What are you talking about? You didn't do anything. Bryan's sick."

When I asked if it was cancer, she sobbed and wiped at her nose with a wad of Kleenex. We took the yellow footbridge that always swings so fast it makes you sick, and then followed a muddy path along the river. Leaves were all over the trail. After about twenty minutes we got to a big outcropping of rocks on the riverbank, where we stopped to eat the blueberry freezer bagels she'd brought in her purse.

"If he's sick, though, maybe I should go over there and help."

My mom was wearing a striped Colors of Benetton stocking cap from the lost and found at Kmart. When she shook her head no, the puff ball on its top wobbled. "It's not that kind of sick," she said, a mouthful of bagel in her cheek.

I thunked a rock into the water, followed by another. Eventually, my mom asked if I could keep a secret. I told her okay. "Kayla Marie, I'm serious," she said. "I mean from everyone, including Heather."

Heather Slifko was my best friend and I had told her many secret things, such as the fact that my bio-dad was some old married guy my mom had slept with as a teenager who literally paid her to stay out of

his life, and about the night my mom had dragged me and my brothers out of bed to see if she could spot Wayne's truck at his ex-girlfriend's house, and how when we found Wayne's truck, she took out a bar of Dove soap she'd packed for this very purpose and drew a giant penis on his windshield with an arrow and the word *YOU*.

"If you tell someone, Bryan could lose his job," she said. "Are you ready for that kind of responsibility?"

At this point I got it—how many diseases are such a big secret?—but I still hoped I was wrong. Once, Wayne had pointed out a man on the sidewalk who had big reddish-purple spots blooming on his face. Wayne said the spots meant AIDS, and I pressed my face against the minivan window and didn't even try to pretend I wasn't staring. Knowing AIDS was just feet away felt like the most terrible and exciting thing that had ever happened to me. I couldn't imagine it would come closer.

"Just tell me."

There were another five minutes of warnings before she spit it out.

Obviously, Anne's secret was much bigger than mine but a similarity is how our secrets always stayed at the back of our minds. Anne worried an open window or flushed toilet would get them murdered, and I thought about how AIDS would kill my uncle. After my mom stopped taking me to Bryan's, I spent my Saturdays watching cartoons or sitting in Heather's bedroom, hearing how great it was we were in junior high with eighth-grade boys like Danny Piekarski who'd once held her hand on the bus. In elementary school, neither of us had been popular, but now that she had made the middle-school cheer team, her status was changing.

The power of my secret became nearly irresistible whenever I thought about the reaction I'd get to see on Heather's face, but then, my mother's voice in my head warned me to keep my mouth shut and not ruin Bryan's life. This turned out to be lucky because a few months later Heather found a fleet of LEGO starships I was building in the basement and decided I was too uncool to be her friend.