

# Along the Perforations

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I'm home on leave from the Army and I open the door to my father's book closet. The smell of musty textbooks, spiral bound notebooks, and old, yellowed books, is a physical presence so I hesitate, half expecting to be yelled at for entering his study without permission. I pick up a random notebook from a shelf and flip through it.

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As kids, my siblings and I would crowd around my father's study, daring each other to enter to ask for television privileges. After a while of our not-so-quiet stage whispered arguments he would close the door and tell us to go play elsewhere.

My father took classes at Purdue and would take notes in various yellow legal notepads, spiral bound lab books, and leatherbound journals. His tiny handwriting was meticulous and any mistakes were annotated in the margins. Later he would type them into his computer, print them out, and put them in big three-inch binders. His study was always off limits but if we were quiet, he would leave the door open and let us watch TV.

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I set the notebook back on another shelf. My father and I had a fight. This would be the last time I talk to him and don't want a physical reminder. I grab a stack of my childhood books and go through the garage, to avoid meeting him and my stepmom. My younger brother is talking with them on the driveway, running interference as I make trip after trip, filling the back of the minivan with my book collection.

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After high school, I took a year of community college but couldn't afford tuition for a second year, so I returned home to help my mother care for my fourteen, all biological, siblings.

While in college, I enjoyed reading my papers to my mother who would correct my grammar or spelling mistakes. She would listen patiently as I read the rubrics to her, pondered over new material, or struggled to make friends with the wide variety of people and cultures I had never encountered before.

When she died of cancer I needed to escape and made the decision to leave home, possibly forever.

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I joined the military and writing became an odd mix of perfunctory flowery language for awards, meticulous annotations for medical documents, dry reports, work emails, and supply logs.

Writing was no longer fun, it was routine and boring. It was a simple fill-in-the-blank. Answer all five W's, who, what, where, when, and why, then submit for review. The only somewhat exciting writing was practicing sworn statements that we were graded on after fast paced training events. This was a chance to tell a story I had witnessed.

Several of my Military Police buddies assured me they became stressful or boring to write after a few months. Their accuracy for legal reasons had to be perfect, the events were either traumatizing to witness or very routine, thus the practice.

One of my Sergeants shouted for me to come into the platoon office.

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I'm trying not to cry as my second grade Catholic teacher scolds me for writing a short story about aliens eating people. I ought to be ashamed, it is un-Christian, unladylike, demonic, and I should be spanked. What would my parents say?

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I stammer to explain my actions were sanctioned by my Sergeant First Class, and my Second Lieutenant chuckles, asking what I was going on about. She just wanted me to help one of the Sergeants proofread his college paper since I was good at reading and writing. I should finish getting my associate's degree and become an officer, she says. You'd be good at it.

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My second grade teacher, who called my writing demonic, could not believe I was reading fiction years above my grade and believed me only after I told her the plot of Jack London's *White Fang*, a book for seventh graders. She confirmed this with the librarian who had honestly wanted to see if I would read it when I finished my Scholastic reading challenge early then had filled in more books on the back of the page, hoping for extra points for our class to win the pizza party.

The meeting with my parents and principal went much better than I expected as my principal expressed regret that there was not an advanced program I could be put into then expressed a desire to read any books I published in the future. I still got spanked for my aliens eating people story, which was taken down from the hallway display. Our class did not win the pizza party, which I blamed myself for. I should have read more books.

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Despite the mixed messages, I was destined for great things, a responsibility I didn't want, and so scared by my second grade encounter, I wouldn't write for fun again until high school.

Fanfiction became a safe anonymous way to write whatever I wanted. Criticism from strangers online was easier to take than from those who loved you.

Then one of my teachers introduced my class to journaling. I poured my soul into works I swore I would never share after my classmates laughed at my open prompt story about a frightening event from my childhood. I even told my teacher not to read them, writing in big letters at the top of my submissions that they were now private.

Finally, after years of guilt, long after my grade school had been closed down and my encouraging principal had passed away, I rewrote my second grade alien story to redeem myself.

The aliens were now vegetarians and ate carrots, not people. I should get an editor and publish children's books, my English teacher remarked. This is very cute.

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I load my journals full of fanfiction into the van, say a stilted goodbye to my father, and leave. It was a quiet ride to my brother's house and we reminisced about our mom. He grins at me and says he snagged her typewriter from the garage since our stepmom was throwing all of her old things away.

Teary eyed, I fish the heavy contraption from the backseat and hear her typewriter clacking away, as she meticulously pulls back the carriage bar as it dinged when it got to the edge of the paper.

Her Braille typewriter only made raised dots on paper, each of the keys creating a raised dot in a six matrix cell that corresponded with the Braille alphabet. The raised dots could be felt and read by our mother who was completely blind,

but I only ever learned to sight read them.

The real reward was waiting to pull the feed edge off the stacks of thick stock paper when she was done with them. The typewriter still has motes of fine white dust and the wonderful smell of cardstock in it. We would be severely punished if we tore the perforations before she typed on them, since the feed edge was needed to keep her sheets aligned in the typewriter. I inhale deeply.

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I am a kindergartener, placing a Barney sticker on the back of my mom's typewriter, wanting to help her with her work. I was scolded severely. She doesn't want the typewriter to be damaged but leaves the sticker on the back if I promise not to put more stickers on it.

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I start crying in the van. There is sticker residue where other stickers had been scraped off, since I quickly broke my little kid's promise, but the faded Barney one is still there. My brother punches my arm. He's driving and can't see the road through his tears.

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I'm in college, sitting at a computer and typing yet another paper, wondering if I will ever publish a book knowing those who encouraged me to have all passed. I struggle after years of being my own worst enemy to find my voice. Do I really want to put such a hidden part of myself on paper and share the pain with strangers? I'm three years into my English Major and still haven't decided yet.