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Evans: Don't Forget Where You Belong: How I Found Myself Through One Dir

DON'T FORGET WHERE YOU BELONG: HOW I FOUND MYSELF THROUGH ONE DIRECTION

RAFY EVANS

Before high school, I wasn't known for any distinct characteristic. Most people are known for being great at a sport, or being a great musician, or for an obsession. But not me. I wasn't particularly above-average at anything.

I was making the jump back to public school after three years of plaid skirts and white button-up blouses, and the freedoms of a public high school were overwhelming. The only area in which I thought I excelled was writing, but I had spent my time in Catholic school writing about censored topics in English class and about my parents' recent divorce in private. At the Catholic academy I attended, I had been the only new student amongst two hundred kids who had been inseparable since preschool. In times of middle school exile, I turned to my diaries to write about my daily struggles and the secret truths about my peers. But eventually that turned into filling journal after journal with stories of my unrequited love of my eighth grade crush, Casey, so I decided to stop my traditional nonfiction approach and switched to writing from my imagination.

Right around that time, I had stopped listening to Top 40 pop hits on my local radio station. My suburb's airwaves were controlled by what parents wanted—until the repeat of the British invasion by One Direction. The emergence of a new boy band halted my dreams of writing the second coming of teenage memoirs when I discovered the much more popular sub-genre of fan fiction.

Within the pages of a Sharpie-colored, wide-ruled, 180-page composition book, my high school popularity rose and fell. At the time, I was fourteen, in love with a boy band,

and had yet to understand the components of award-winning fiction. And when you're fourteen, in love with a boy band, and believe you're meant to be a modern-day, best-selling author, you think it's a great idea to create a concoction of the three.

One day after JV volleyball practice, in my high school's pungent locker room, my friend Veronica timidly asked me if I had seen the band on the blogging site Tumblr. When I told her I had seen them on the site, I tested the waters to see if she was about to start a rampage.

"Do you...like them?" I remember asking.

We were both nervous talking about One Direction at first, as if the band were a taboo subject. She cautiously admitted that she had spent the past few nights looking at everything she could find about them online. From then on, Veronica and I became the One Direction-crazed freshmen of Lake Brantley High.

Every morning, we would meet in the back corner of that locker room to discuss anything One Direction-related. We'd scroll through our phones to find the latest photos, swoon over how good the boys looked, and dream of the day when they would tour in the United States. The group consisted of four English boys and one Irish boy, all three to four years older than we were. They sang textbook bubblegum pop and were cuter than any boys I had encountered in high school. Much of my infatuation with them was the true and honest belief that I would date one of them. Realistically, I hadn't yet been involved in any interaction, let alone romance, with a boy when I was fourteen, but somehow I imagined that my love life would all change if I met the band.

In the meantime, Veronica and I created

fan Twitter accounts to help us keep up to date with our boys—their entire fan base called them “the boys.” We had blog names based on them, things like “week-knees-for-1D” or “i-m-t-0-r-n”; I couldn’t have gotten more middle school if I’d tried, considering that the letter “O” was a zero. We had Twitter usernames that were based on them, too; my first Twitter username was @spyin-gonstyles, after my favorite band member from day one, Harry Styles. We had certain themed days on which we would dress like One Direction members did, Malik Mondays and Tomlinson Tuesdays (which involved wearing stripes and cuffed jeans because Louis Tomlinson wore them). In the mind of a fourteen-year-old fangirl, none of this seemed ridiculous.

In January 2012, I had an unwavering motivation to start the new year by combining my love for One Direction with my new quest to write fiction, creating the Frankenstein product of *Butterflies for Harry*. Fan fiction seemed like a logical place to start my fiction career. According to the rules of fanfiction.net, I was allowed to use real people as my starting characters and build plots around them. What that meant for me was I was going to write every aspect of my fantasy relationship with the dream boy of my teen years, Harry Styles.

It’s no coincidence that the main female character in my story had the same middle name as I did, or that I named her after my favorite poem by Edgar Allan Poe, the dreadfully morbid “Annabel Lee.” I was clearly the most creative writer out there, as I used my best friend, Veronica, as the model for my Annabelle’s best friend, Veronica. Things that were occurring in my real teenage life

were subconsciously affecting my fictional life. My story line didn’t contain a father character, probably because my relationship with my dad was at a standstill, though I did write in a role for my mom. But the difference between writing about my real life and writing about my fake one was I didn’t have to know Harry Styles personally to write an entire novel about him. That was the point of the project. I was able to make up a completely false character based on a person that actually existed. My Harry was romantic, compassionate, caring, and much less busy than the real Harry. (I’d like to think that my version of him was similar to the real version of him, but unfortunately I haven’t been given the opportunity to test that hypothesis.) And along with my version of Harry, I created the best version of myself in that story. I wasn’t the awkward and shy teen trying to fit in at a major public school. I was a confident, charismatic girl who had her life figured out.

Though there were lapses in time and one-dimensional characters in my story, none of that seemed to matter to my audience. Up to this point, I had never written publicly under my real name. I had used pseudonyms in order to write about my parents without getting in trouble. I was constantly worried that people would find what I wrote and poke fun at it or, worse, expose me based on things I was saying online. But One Direction fan fiction was what I chose to be my perfect writing debut. And the best part was that people loved it. I didn’t realize the response it was getting until one day at lunch in the cafeteria: My friends and I were discussing what my plans were for the next chapter when Homecoming-Court-but-Never-Queen Kendall approached my table. We had never had a conversation in our

brief history together, so I was thrown off by her visit.

“Hey, Rafy, do you think you could put me in your story? It’s early, and I think it’s the best thing I’ve ever read, so...I want to be in it.”

Me? Put Kendall in my story? Umm...no?

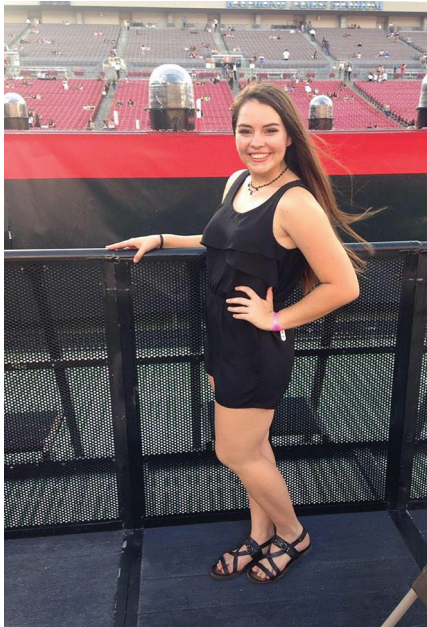
I think I said something along the lines of my having already written the next ten chapters and having no need to create another female character—which was a complete lie, considering the fact that I later wrote one of my other frenemies, Delaney, into the story when I desperately needed a mean girl character. I said thank you somewhere in there too.

The views on my website were hitting a couple of hundred for every chapter I posted. Because I was my own social media

and public relations manager, I would create hype by posting statuses that were teasers, and surprisingly it worked. In the year I was writing my fan fiction novel, I acquired over 250,000 loyal and loving readers. I had readers from all over the world following me on Twitter, letting me know they were constantly reading. I had a Facebook page on which people could comment after reading a new chapter, make predictions about what was going to happen, and meet other people.

Boys in my English class would make fun of me as I scribbled in my composition book, dreaming up situations to put Annabelle and Harry in. They’d call me insane and scary while saying that what I was doing was stupid. In one instance, my teacher, Mrs. Jucker, stepped in to say, “If a quarter of a million people are reading it, it’s not stupid.”

Most people thought my One Direction obsession had reached its peak during my writing of the story, but I hadn’t even seen the band live yet. Veronica and I had expanded our fangirl partnership to include one more key member, Jillian. The three of us had bought tickets almost six months in advance for the band’s Orlando tour date in June 2012. When the summer finally rolled around, we sat in section 110, row 5, seats 6-8, and we didn’t stop screaming the entire time the band was onstage. There was a revolutionary moment during their cover of “Use Somebody” by Kings of Leon when Harry decided to change one of the notes and I actually passed out, in the middle of making a recording on my phone. We piled into Veronica’s mom’s car after the show with no voices and fresh tears. Shortly thereafter, the three of us had our parents drive us two hours away to another venue just to see



Photograph on this page and the one on the following spread are courtesy of Rafy Evans.

the show again.

It became a summer tradition to see One Direction, no matter the distance. I would buy tickets over a year in advance, against my parents' will. The summer before my junior year, the three of us, along with seven new girls and two parents, drove four hours to Fort Lauderdale to see One Direction's 2013 Take Me Home Tour. My seat was in the last row of the stadium, and if I reached my hand straight up, I could touch the roof, but it didn't matter where I was standing in the building as long as I was breathing the same air as the boys. And just as we had the summer before, the other fans and I bought tickets for the next night in Miami, because seeing one show wasn't sufficient.

Arguably, One Direction's prime was during the tour for their third album, *Midnight Memories*, in the fall of 2014. It was no longer socially acceptable for a rising senior to like them. But instead of letting my love for them die as my age advanced, that October I decided to follow their tour again. My group of friends spent our time outside school planning how we would drive ourselves to their shows, pay for hotels and tickets with our own money, and meet up with friends we had made online through Twitter. Along with our own lodging information, we'd try to figure out what hotels the band members were staying in and what highways they'd take to get from show to show. The hardest part was actually getting into the hotels they were staying in once we figured them out: If there was a Ritz-Carlton in a given city, that was where they were staying.

I spent countless hours in lobbies of hotels I wasn't really staying in, telling only a handful of lies to hotel and security personnel

to execute my elaborate plans. Lying about room keys, room numbers, where my parents were, how old I was: all an intricate web of master-planned stories to achieve the goal of seeing the members of One Direction.

Those plans worked on one occasion, when my friends and I went back to Tampa for our first show in the Where We Are Tour. A lovely member of the touring crew gave my friend Soph and me free floor-catwalk tickets for letting her borrow Soph's charger while we creepily sat in the lobby of the hotel One Direction was staying in. Shortly thereafter, I was in front of the man himself, Harry Styles. My eyes brimmed with tears at the thought of how close we were to the stage and how incredibly lucky we had been that day. He waltzed down the 100-foot catwalk with carefree skips and hops. He had his hair French-braided into two braids, the first time he'd ever been on stage like that. He wore a loose white T-shirt, charcoal grey jeans, and brown Chelsea boots—a typical outfit for him. He sauntered and twirled down the runway, singing feel-good songs that made you forget how old you were and where you were in the world. I frantically started waving as he passed by, my hand making a peace sign after a few waves. He stopped when he saw the peace sign and gave me a thumbs-up followed by a peace sign and a smile. This was the first interaction between real-life Harry and real-life me.

Afterward, we made the familiar drive to Miami, following the band's bus on highways and through tollbooths on the small chance they'd stop for gas somewhere. We sang their songs in the car to stay awake and talked about the little interactions they'd had with us while they were onstage. And

though it could be argued that they never remembered us after those nights, we vividly remembered them.

The summer before my freshman year of college, the boys didn't tour anywhere south of Maryland. Our summers of chasing One Direction on tour seemed over. But we didn't let that stop us. Four of us planned a road trip to Baltimore three days before the show there. I remember asking my dad if I could go. Usually I had planned my concerts on weekends and asked my mom, because she had been quite the concert junkie in her teen years. My dad, on the other hand, was the type to say no before I even asked to do something, but this was One Direction, so I had to build up the courage to ask. I originally lied and said that the show was in Washington, DC, because Baltimore was in the news every night due to riots and protests. I knew that if I told the truth, he'd say no, so I thought it would be better to lie: "Dad, One Direction is playing what

could be their last tour this summer, and I'll be in college if they tour after that...so can I go to Washington, DC, to see them this weekend?"

I had severely underestimated my 70-year-old father's ability to Google, and when he realized the show was in Baltimore, there were plenty of obstacles in my way. After he called the Baltimore Police Department and asked about the hotel we were planning on staying in, the neighborhood Ravens' Stadium was in, and where the best parking lot was, he finally agreed to let me go. I also had lied and told him that I had bought \$20 nosebleed seats and that I was completely unfazed by having bad seats, but the real truth was that the four of us were driving fourteen hours on the slim chance that there would still be tickets to buy.

August 8, 2015, was the last time I saw One Direction—they went on an indefinite hiatus after that tour, so who knows if they'll ever come back. In total, I saw them in concert eight times, in five cities, in venues from small arenas to football stadiums. I waited nine hours in front of the M&T Bank Stadium box office before the woman behind the glass handed me four catwalk tickets in exchange for my credit card. Five years ago, my writing career began, all with a love story about a boy band member. In the midst of planning my next road trip or flight to see a live show, I was finding my place as a writer and a teenager. My fangirl days were concluded as I held the hands of my best friends on the football field where the Baltimore Ravens played, singing the line, "If you ever feel alone, don't/You are never on your own, and the proof is in this song."

