

It Happened to Me

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THE ARTICLE IS ABOUT AN EARLY NINETIES METAL BAND. I READ IT ON A summer afternoon by the lake when I am thirteen. The name of the group is lost in time now, but I suspect it makes reference to a dangerous animal or a lethal substance. I do remember hair, a lot of hair, possibly curled by a permanent, as they called it, and definitely teased at the bang. There are headbands. This is certain. The headbands punctuate a look that includes acid washed jeans, sleeveless t-shirts, and puffy high-topped sneakers.

It isn't the impressive heights of their hair nor the dangerous band name that catches my attention; it's the journalist who covers the story. In my memory she is blonde-haired (an older version of my pubescent self), and she smirks confidently into the lens of the camera that captures her backstage at a concert. Her arms are wound about the waists of the metalheads she's been paid (paid!) to write about for *Sassy* magazine.

The article reads like an adventure story or the pages of a personal diary. On Day One she boards the tour bus and meets her subjects. The bus smells like stale cigarette smoke, whiskey and hairspray. Ok, maybe she didn't record *all* of those details for a teen-appropriate article, but I'm certain she jotted them down.

The band members are incredibly messy, or perhaps they are surprisingly clean. I can't remember now. They eat hamburgers every night, and steak and eggs for breakfast (which usually happens after noon) and their bus is always equipped with fresh papaya. No, I'm making this last part up. This is bad, I don't write fiction. I can't because the fact-checkers would catch me. I know, I fact-checked everything from lipstick shades to murder while working for *Chatelaine* magazine in Toronto.

But my memory of the metalheads article is a sort of fiction. It is an imprint, an outline, the details informed by the years that have passed since that summer by the lake.



What I do remember clearly is my reaction. Fiction had always been a part of my world and I understood the realm of the imagination, its lack of boundaries. The *Sassy* article helped me understand the limitless aspects of writing about real life. Distilled: You can live and record the private lives of others and get paid for it.

It would take me another eleven years to return to that thought. I studied art, moved seventeen times, worked in dirty European kitchens and hotels, fell in and back out of love, sold overpriced furniture, jewelry, and clothing to American tourists, and spent a summer in L.A. working as a personal assistant and lurking around the edges of photo shoots and film sets. Then, I moved back to Canada and went to journalism school. I did not cite *Sassy* magazine as an inspiration in my application nor did I bring it up in classroom discussions.

For those who never read *Sassy*, the name alone conjures images of fresh-faced pre-rehab stars and starlets, and girlish tips on maintaining a trim figure and finding the right prom dress.

This was not the case. Each month the magazine showcased new fiction and music and addressed issues like drugs and abortion. There was a reader-generated section called "It Happened to Me" in which young women recounted personal and sometimes horrifying life experiences. I desperately wanted to submit, but at thirteen, nothing *had* happened to me. I had not contracted a venereal disease, nor had I conducted an illicit affair with my gym teacher (a disgruntled and displaced Quebecois woman who often dismissed class due to period cramps, no wonder.) I had frequent contact with Mennonites in the town where I grew up, but they were a kind and pleasant group who could not, no matter how far I stretched the truth, be likened to a cult.

Other young girls fantasized about their wedding

day while I dreamt of being mistakenly incarcerated. In this situation I would befriend my fellow inmates, stage a rally, and, without reprise, escape under a starry night sky. At a greasy roadside diner, on paper napkins and with borrowed pen, I would recount my tale and post it immediately to the offices of *Sassy* magazine in New York City.

Of course, I never get the chance to write for *Sassy*. The magazine folds by the mid-nineties. The journalist who (I believe) wrote the metalhead article goes on to work for a more mainstream teen magazine and is eventually sacked for her insistence on including plus sized models and the grit of life on its glossy pages.

Almost a decade later, two young Ryerson University journalism graduates co-found a magazine for teenage girls and they call it *Shameless*. It is more subversive than *Sassy* in many ways although comparisons between the two magazines are ubiquitous and inevitable. In the Winter/Spring 2008 issue they address student loans, nipple hair, and freedom of speech. It is the first time I appear as the magazine's food columnist, and I write about my conflicting opinions on the Newfoundland seal hunt. I don't conduct interviews on an ice pan but I do share tea and cookies with a sealer, and for an hour at least, I peer into his world. It is so far removed from my own.

I have not toured with a rock band, not yet. But while writing for magazines I have found myself pretending to be a weight-loss customer at a clinic in Toronto, dodging wild boars in Chernobyl's nuclear ghost towns, and perching on the gunwale of a dory during a blustery photo shoot in Tors Cove, Newfoundland. I enjoy the chameleon-like transportation into new and unknown territory. I think that these experiences are what my younger self sought out and wished for so desperately. Now I can say, not that it happened to me, but rather, that I made it happen.