

# PERSONAL NARRATIVE/COLLEGE ESSAY SAMPLES

## PROFESSIONAL EXAMPLE #1

### Dishing Dirt

By Emily White

The day I hear the rumor I am 14 years old, enclosed in a bathroom stall. Its walls are light blue, exactly the color of mold. Through a crack in its door, I can see three girls enter: heavy metal girls with tremendous eyelashes. They stand in front of the mirror, speaking urgently:

"Did you hear about H.?" one of them says. "I hear she did it with Mitch and all his friends, like 12 guys at once!"

"Twelve guys?" says another. "She is disgusting!"

The last chimes in. "Oh, my God, she is such a slut!" she says, drawing out the last word for effect.

From my vantage point, I can see their faces in the mirror as they talk; the way their eyes open wide in amazement as they contemplate the horrors of what this girl has done. I'm thrilled by their outrage. When they finally leave the bathroom, I emerge, reeling with what I've just heard. Twelve guys. Impossible. So impossible I believe it utterly.

I have seen the girl they're talking about. She's dark and womanly, with an air of mystery about her that the kids in the hallway assume is sex. She is usually alone, but she always acts as if she's on her way somewhere, as if she's late. I'd never admit it in school, but I'm drawn to her. Everyone looks at her, while I'm a gloomy, invisible girl with a maximum of three friends, a girl whose name nobody can remember. Beer, parties and kisses are remote. I'm a Save the Whales activist, so antisocial I've convinced myself that whales are smarter than people.

But that day eavesdropping in the bathroom, I feel inadvertently included. As I listen to the girls talking in the mirror, my heart starts to race. The scandal works on me like a stimulant. Obviously the Night of 12 Boys is an event of vast importance, and the urgency in the girls' voices momentarily eclipses anything I've felt for H. in the past. Emerging from the stall, I know what I need to do: pass the rumor on.

Out in the hallway, it's lunchtime, and the three girls I usually eat with sit in a circle in our usual spot, the gritty linoleum floor outside the science classroom. They're talking in a bored way about homework assignments and last night's television shows. I sit down with them and say with gravity, "Guess what I just heard?" Immediately they all stop talking and listen to me - the violin prodigy, the knitting girl and the nervous girl who talks relentlessly. They're captives of the information I hold, which I offer to them like a wise man offering gifts: "H. did it with 12 guys at once!" Like the girls in the restroom, my lunch mates are shocked. "Are you kidding? Ewwwww."

Over the next few years, kids tell all kinds of wild stories about H.'s exploits. Usually the stories have to do with her and a crowd of boys; the boys multiply exponentially while she remains alone. In my mind, I imagine her in the backs of cars, maybe with the windows rolled down and her hair flying, I

imagine her kissing anyone who's in front of her, hectic and oblivious. I wonder about her future; although as I sink into a deeper and deeper gloom, I should probably be wondering about mine.

That day in the hallway, as I spread the rumor of the 12 boys, though, I am not gloomy at all. Suddenly I feel a sense of communion with my lunch mates, a giddy sisterhood. We're like campers sitting around a fire telling ghost stories, huddled together and gripped by fear, only in this story the monster is an insatiable girl. As we become more and more worked up about what H. has done, it's as if we're aligned against the darkness, against the frightening and limitless underground of sex that she represents. Only later will I wonder why we wanted to talk about girls this way and never boys; why we cared about what H. might do in the dark; why we so easily believed such a cartoonish story of sex, when there were so many things we no longer believed.

Weeks pass, and the excitement of the rumor wears off. I return to my sullen existence, made even more unbearable each afternoon when a boy at the bus stop starts greeting me with "Hey, dog" and barking. I give up on the whales when I decide we're all going to die in a nuclear winter. I don't have anything to offer my lunch companions anymore, so I sit by myself. Sometimes I loiter in the bathroom stall, waiting for the thrilling girls to return with their rumors, but my timing is always off.

Walking down the stairs on the way to class one day, I find myself alongside H. She looks at me with a spaced-out expression of kindness, as if maybe she knows me from somewhere but she can't remember where. She looks real - not disgusting or corrupted. She looks deep. Even then I think I suspected that there were no 12 boys, only two girls walking next to each other, and the mutual feeling of being lost. In my memory, she's so close I can see ink stains on the tips of her fingers. But then the last bell rings, and she is gone.

*Emily White is the author of "Fast Girls," from which this article is adapted, to be published in March by Scribner. New York Times Magazine; New York; Jan 27, 2002*

## **PROFESSIONAL EXAMPLE #2**

### **The Waiting**

By Brian Mockenhaupt

I'm reading *Stars and Stripes* one day at lunch, my rifle on the floor between my feet, before we start the workday, driving our Humvees around western Baghdad. There's an article that says that sudden emotional stress can spike your adrenaline and stun your heart. So I add that to the already impressive list of ways you might die in this war, from bullets to beheadings. The main way, of course, is the bomb, the improvised explosive device.

Mostly we drive around Iraq, often we walk and always we wait. Waiting to blow up. But my luck runs strong. I've been hit with only one bomb, and it exploded too early, just in front of our truck. The detonator was elaborate, but the bomb was shoddy and did little more than pepper the truck with gravel and shrapnel. Dirt and rock cascaded through the turret hatch, and we yelled to one another, asking if anyone was hurt. Then we laughed and whooped. What else can you do? With the explosion came relief, a release of anxiety. The anticipated had become the realized, at least for a moment, until the next moment, when the worry crept back. And that's inevitable. Everywhere you look, there's a possibility. The bombs are hidden in dead dogs and dead donkeys, trash piles and fruit stands, parked cars and moving cars. They're stuffed in sewer pipes, hung from overpasses and tucked behind street signs. Any place is a good place to slip, strap or bury a bomb.

Pondering this too often overwhelms the spirit, so I tuck the worry deep. But it comes back randomly, while walking down an alleyway or watching through the truck window as the fields and markets and side streets zip by. That's when I feel my heart trip, losing its cadence. Maybe in that pile of dirt, that overturned bucket, that bag of garbage. A sharp breath and my chest contracts. The truck might protect me. There's comfort in that. And when I'm on foot, I reason I'd most likely be killed by the blast. There's a kind of comfort in that too.

This cycle of observing, reasoning and rationalizing runs faster and faster, and after many dozens of these moments, my mind moves from panic to resignation in an instant, a beat. I may still have a young man's body, but now I have an old man's heart, and I know when I'm back home it will quiver from loud noises and strain in the night, while I sleep and I dream. There will be memories that linger from those things I experience, but plenty more from the things that I keep expecting to happen.

When Thanksgiving comes around, we stuff ourselves with turkey served by the Indian and Pakistani dining-hall workers, dressed for the day as Pilgrims and Native Americans. That night I'm sent up the road with my team to clear an intersection for the arrival of our company commander, who's being dropped off by another patrol. A bomb exploded nearby earlier in the day, during another platoon's foot patrol. The blast blew everyone to the ground and sent two soldiers to Germany with shrapnel wounds. I see the crater. I stand in it. Five feet wide and two feet deep.

This is the problem with looking for bombs: They're hidden well, so you have to be close to find them. And if you do find one, you're probably too close.

With this in mind we walk, away from our trucks, past darkened houses and toward the intersection. We stop, crouch and whisper. There, on the far side of the road, is a small mound of dirt where there was none a few days ago. We shine spotlights on it but can't tell. We look at it through a thermal scope but see no heat signature. Maybe it's just dirt. I creep up with Conlon, one of my soldiers. Closer, and closer still, and we see a piece of cardboard under a thin layer of dirt. He reaches for the cardboard. Resignation. He pulls it away. Two cylinders, bigger than coffee cans, are nestled in the dirt. Two baby blue wires, twisted together, run from each into the ground. That's a bomb. Three feet from our faces. Beat. Squeeze. Flutter. I'm backpedaling now, waving off the others.

Move. Move. Move.

But this must be the trigger man's night off.

The bomb-disposal guys come later, drive their little robot out to the dirt pile and sit an explosive charge next to the bomb. They blow it up, with a flash and a boom, and through our night-vision goggles we watch the white-hot rain of shrapnel shower down, tinkling on the pavement.

We watch this and we talk about what nearly was. And we talk about next Thanksgiving, how we'll have the best story at the dinner table about those things for which we're thankful. But the next year, when I am finally at home with my family and friends at the table, I don't tell the story.

*Brian Mockenhaupt served two tours in Iraq as an infantryman with the 10th Mountain Division and is now working on a book about the military. New York Times, March 12, 2006*

## PROFESSIONAL EXAMPLE #3

### Unplanned legacy

By Philip Higgs

There is no good way to start this story. A friend of mine killed himself on New Year's Eve, and the question on everybody's lips, the one right after "How was your New Year's?" is "My God, what happened?" Sometimes I just tell people that a friend passed away. The delicate treatment doesn't work, though, because everyone wants to know the details, or they assume it was a car crash in some far-off state or that I, at 28, have been hanging out with an aged friend who just happened to pass on, ever so gently, perhaps in a slumber lullabyed by me.

None of this is true. What happened was this: shortly after midnight in the dark outside a ranch party in Texas, an extraordinary and near-perfect friend loaded his handgun, put it to his head and pulled the trigger. His name was Mark He was drunk as a monkey - which he often was - after an entire bottle of Scotch, and yet still pulled it off. All of which is the worst thing in the world to me, to innumerable people and especially to his wife of 18 months. But it's certainly no response to someone who's inquiring about your holiday. The next question is always "Did you see it coming?" as if it were something written in the stars. There are a million lines leading to the idiotic convergence of guns and alcohol, and any one of them could have been stanchied, given enough warning. But there was no warning.

He wasn't the only one who brought a gun to the party. I spent New Year's out West with Mark two years ago; and he, his fiancée and his brother all brought guns to shoot off at midnight. But too much alcohol got in the way, and they never got around to it. This time, nobody got around to it, either. Except Mark.

Maybe the only sympathetic or sensical answer is that it was an accident. I'm not hopeful enough to think he was aiming for the sky. I think his aim, at least, was intentional. But it wasn't suicide either. I try to explain this to people; nobody gets it. The pieces fit together like a suicide, but I don't think he got up that morning and thought, Here's how it's going to end.

A few years ago, I climbed out my 20th-floor bedroom window and hung there while my roommates were partying in the next room. I might have been drinking; honestly, I don't remember. I had all the things that cause a tear in the depressive personality: no money, no lover, a dead-end job cruelly draining my youth. So out the window I went. I didn't plan it. I didn't even look down. Hanging high above the F.D.R. Drive in my underwear, I thought, So that's what this is like. I certainly didn't think, It's all over when I let go. After 30 seconds or so, I got tired, so I kicked my leg up and got back into bed. That's kind of how it went with me back then. Not the ugly, desperate, hanging-out-of-windows thing, but the I-wonder-what-happens-when-I-do-this thing.

That was my first year in New York. I had moved here for a magazine internship, one that didn't offer much in the way of inspiration or vie de bohème (or cash), and soon all the troubles of being rudderless set in. I ran across Mark, someone I knew from home. In high school, we'd courted the same girls and stayed out late drinking with the girls we were courting. Mark was a card-trick genius, a bright-eyed under-age Johnny Cash alky. We would end up at strangers' parties together; on the

way home, driving through the foothills, he would hang onto the car roof while I took the turns too hard. At 16, he told my Bible-proud mother on her own doorstep on Easter Sunday that he was an atheist.

You may think that I'm being too smart-alecky for someone whose friend just died. Trust me, Mark would have wanted it this way - except he wouldn't have used the word "aleck."

Last December, when I last saw him, his new favorite song was some bluegrass thing called "Broken Telephone": The lines are down..... Connection's gone. Over a Mexican breakfast, we got to talking about guns, and then his guns, and then - after I'd reflexively berated him for owning them - about the beauty of machinery. There was no suicide note. The whole guns-at-midnight thing could have been a ruse, a detailed and protracted ruse. But I don't think so. There was a lot going on with Mark, room for roiling in his enormous mind.

To me there's something missing, something that makes it less than a suicide. It was a mistake, one that he would take back in a heartbeat. He would have known enough to apologize profusely, overwhelmingly, to try to patch things up: "I'm so sorry, Sweets" - he called his wife "Sweets" - "I don't know what I was thinking." He'd chalk it up to bad behavior, and never do damage again. He was just putting the gun up to his head, pulled the trigger just to see what it felt like. Not realizing that what it would feel like - with the blood and the ambulance rush and the final gasps for life - was what it was going to be. There is no answer; there is no clean diagram of Point A leading smoothly to Point Z. I'm getting by, though; I'm doing O.K. Thanks for asking.

*Philip Higgs is a writer living in New York. New York Times Magazine; New York, Feb 7, 2002*