

How I learned to stop worrying and love myself

by K. Miller, '04

Ariel and Marie were sisters. Marie was two years younger than Ariel, one year younger than me, and I fit between them nicely, in age as well as personality. They lived in two different hemispheres of existence, and I hovered around the equator, bouncing from pole to pole depending on which sister I was with.

For me, Ariel was the personification of cool. Even her name was cooler than mine. My name was wooden, it fell to the ground with a thump, but Ariel's danced. When she scratched the energetic verticals of her name--Ariel Acosta--the letters became edgy and hip. My swirling cursive seemed cliché in comparison. I liked hanging out with Ariel because she made me feel cool too. I was insecure with my conformity. I felt guilty that I owned clothes from the Gap, that I had cried at Titanic, that I worried about my hair. With Ariel I felt validated. If Ariel thought I was cool, well, then maybe I was.

Ariel was everything I wanted to be. She was brilliant, and she seemed to know something about everything worth knowing about. She shopped at thrift stores and wore big black boots and clothes that didn't match and her thin blond hair was spiky and went every which way. She played the violin and the piano. She was a photographer. She went to Guatemala for the summer. She was into hardcore, ska, punk, and everything "indie," she was straight edge and went to lots of shows. She dated guys much older than she. She liked Vietnamese food and watched soccer on the Spanish-language station.

Ariel was unpredictable, and I loved discovering new facets of her personality. She often seemed lost in her thoughts, which I was convinced were deeper than mine, and I was always dying to hear them; to be admitted into the club of deep thinkers. Ever her fallibilities were infallible to me; even the dorky things were cool when she did them. (She confided in me about her profound childhood love for New Kids on the Block--Jordan was her favorite.)

We went to used CD stores, where I loved the bargain bin and the soothing click click sound of the practiced browser hunting for gems. She introduced me to Pho, Vietnamese noodle soup, and I was incredibly relieved that I actually liked it. This was hope for what I saw as my bland and unsophisticated palate, which preferred pizza and mashed potatoes to more worldly cuisine.

We went to shows together, mostly ska. We went to the 9:30 Club, where the under-21 handstamps took days to wash off, an inconvenience which Ariel thought straight-edgers should rightfully be exempt from. We went to the Black Cat, which was narrow and dark and sweaty and wonderful. We jumped and grooved together in the crowd, which undulated as a unit, and always left drenched and exhausted and blissfully happy.

One time we drove to Phantasmagoria, which had mosaics on the walls made out of broken CDs; I loved them and wanted them for my own. As we waited for the show to begin, we watched the young rudies congregating with a critical eye. Ska was on its way out by then, and these kids embarrassed me, with their suspenders and checkered tights. They looked like they had spent hours getting dressed, and I thought "poseur" but didn't say it because I was wary of hypocrisy, and besides, there was more to be critical of than their clothing.

Ariel had asked me to go at the last minute--she was really desperate, she said, because this guy playing, you know, was a ska legend, and oh-yea-Joe-would-be-there-too. Joe was her ex-boyfriend and a trombonist in one of the opening bands. We left early so she could talk to him, awkwardly, as he loaded his equipment to leave. We were both embarrassed when she realized I had noticed the look in her eyes that gave away the feelings she was trying so desperately to transcend. "I'm such a stupid girl," she said on the way home.

I began to see that Ariel had weaknesses--normal, stupid, embarrassing weaknesses, the ones I was trying to run from. I hated my body then, as I still do, not restricting myself to a particular body part--my thighs, my hips, my arms, my back, my knees, but rather hating everything. But Ariel was skinny, she didn't worry about her weight. It was only later than she confided in me her own private obsession--her skin. Unlike Marie, who had perfect skin, Ariel had acne. I didn't usually notice, but Ariel did, and it tormented her. She spent hundreds of dollars on expensive moisturizers and astringents and cleansers and creams, after trying every brand in the supermarket, feeling guilty the whole time. Learning about this obsession only made Ariel seem more mysterious to me, and made me only more hungry to learn her secrets.

Although with Ariel I found myself wishing she'd say more, with Marie, I'd be more likely to wish that she'd shut up. Marie was sarcastic and flamboyant, with a wit that was sharpest with people she loved. She could be obnoxious and mean but more often was funny and endearing. She made fast friends wherever she went--with waiters, grocery store checkers, homeless people. We were both in the Drama Club, but Marie was always on stage. She called herself the Queen of the Universe, and her rule was despotic, with the countdown to her birthday beginning months in advance. You did not forget Marie's birthday.

Marie could make even the most boring class entertaining. She always pushed the limit, saying smartass things to teachers that would have had anybody else in the Principal's office in two seconds flat. But Marie's smile was so bright and her wisecracks so dead on that teachers couldn't help but either laugh or sigh in resignation.

When you're smart, you can get away with a lot, and Marie had a quick mind, like Ariel. She was good at everything, pretty much, except French, but often she didn't try very hard, and so she got lower grades than she would have liked. Lower grades than Ariel, their mother was quick to point out, even though Marie was already acutely aware. ("Why did I

have to be the dumb one?") Marie worried, sometimes, about college, but rather than seriously consider her options, she'd usually just say "Screw college. I'll move to California or New York and be an actress."

Marie was addicted to passion, no matter how canned. She loved country music, the sappier the better, and cheesy romantic comedies that got terrible reviews. She watched soap operas religiously--General Hospital in particular, but there were several. She loved musical theater, and her idol was Bernadette Peters. She saw the Broadway version of Annie Get Your Gun with Bernadette as Annie three times. She devoured trashy romance novels and sometimes during class we'd take turns performing dramatic readings of the sex scenes.

Marie loved animals of all kinds, dogs in particular. She went to the Animal Shelter often to play with the animals there, and sometimes I went with her. Whereas I was tentative, Marie's love for the animals was all-embracing and visceral. She didn't mind cleaning up the dogs' messes and she didn't flinch when they jumped up and left her face glistening with slobber.

With Marie, everything was an adventure. While we drove, we blasted old-school Madonna with the windows open, or Billie, the British teen pop star we had claimed as our own, singing at the top of our lungs. I didn't like most country music but she played it anyway and some songs grew on me, they became guilty pleasures. The folk music I liked more. Ariel was furious when she saw the "Folkin' Awesome" bumper sticker that Marie had put on the beat-up Volvo wagon they shared. In Ariel's mind, it was equivalent to having "Kick me, I'm lame" tattooed on her ass. Her protest, however, was literary: "It isn't even a good pun!" she grumbled.

Marie and I loved driving to Middleburg, our secret place where wealthy people lived to play small town. We admired the artificial quaintness of it all. Once Marie struck up a conversation on the street with an old man and two little girls, something I loved her for doing because I could never have done it myself. They invited us back to their farm, we brushed and fed their horses and Marie dazzled them with her charm. They said to come back any time we wanted to ride. We promised we would but never did, only partly because the old man, in his insistence that we come back to ride and in his attention to Marie's chest, seemed a little too excited about the idea. We didn't really want to be a part of some fetishistic fantasy, but that wouldn't necessarily have stopped us from returning.

On the way home we pulled off the highway by the ostrich farm we had discovered earlier, amazed at the apparent incongruity. We went to Fuddrucker's and had Diet Cokes and big juicy hamburgers, the best anywhere, and swore that next time we'd both have salads. I wondered if the ostriches we had seen went into the ostrich burgers on the menu. Marie wondered why she couldn't be naturally skinny, like Ariel.

My insecurity with conformity might just have saved my life. I'd contemplated suicide many times as a teenager-I'd lock the bathroom door and crouch on the floor with a kitchen knife at my wrist. I'd scratch the surface of the skin, daring myself to go deeper, but I was always too chicken to go through with it. I pretty much gave up on the idea of killing myself when I decided that suicide was cliché and un-glamorous. Instead, when I was depressed, I fantasized about being shot in a drive-by or something similarly martyr-like.

I do not know why Marie tried to kill herself the week before our Junior-Senior Prom, when she swallowed an entire bottle of pills. I do not know if she, like me, had fantasized about her funeral, pondering who would cry and who would make speeches, or if she just had no clue how many people loved her and wished they could have even a dash of her wit, charm, and intelligence.

When the news came out, everyone who'd taken Psych 1 or seen an episode of Frasier had their own psychoanalysis. She kept her feelings bottled up for so long that this was the only answer for her." Or: "It was a cry for attention," some said. "She always did crave attention. She didn't really mean to kill herself." I understood this need to know why, but these people frustrated me all the same. I had already proven myself to be a terrible judge of character, so I resisted these speculations.

Marie's friends turned her suicide attempt into a contest of who was better friends with her, with points earned for visiting her at the hospital or talking to her family. They reveled in their "insider" status, and honed the phrase, "I really can't say" to the ultimate in bitchiness. Apparently, the irony, that if Marie had attempted suicide, then maybe they hadn't been such a great friend to her after all, never crossed their minds.

It was difficult for me to think that the sarcasm, the fun-loving nature that I had so treasured was all a front for a sadness that ran much deeper. It was both frustrating, and in an odd sense, comforting, to think that Marie was such a good actress that she could be so incredibly unhappy without anyone else having a clue, thus rendering them powerless. In retrospect, everything and nothing makes sense.