

## Shedding the Shackles by Meghan Hyland

Mini motor mouth, Little Hyland, Erin's sister, Erin's *little* sister. The names were endless. Who did they reflect? Certainly not a person with an identity of her own, but a younger child shackling herself to her older sibling. Me.

In elementary school the shackles were inviting. They tempted me. Being two years older than me, Erin had done everything first. She knew which bus to take and how to do the hard math problems. She was even big enough to shop at the Limited and GAP. I mimicked her, pleading to wear her blue and white shirt (the only one that fit me) and to play Manhunt with her on Friday nights. When I was upset I'd creep into her room and beg to sleep beside her. "I'll sleep in the crack (the small space between the bed and the wall); I won't bother you. I swear." My requests were rarely granted. When in fact they were, a "fine, but you'd better keep quiet" was certain to ensue. I accepted the way she treated me, knowing that I must have been annoying, but I treasured the moments that she did not tear off the shackles that joined us.

At the age of ten I should have learned that I could not live my sister's life, but I was stubborn and therefore did not learn my lesson. I went to Erin's summer camp with its crisp Maine air and icy water. Among the masses of children stood one unhappy girl. She would play with a few children, but felt no connection to any of them. Everyone knew her sister. Voices. "That is Erin's sister." No one wanted to play with their friend's little sister, especially when Erin, herself, was eager to get away from "the nuisance." All alone, her heart ached. Going home day came, and tears flowed from many eyes, but two eyes remained dry. What was there to cry over?

"Our experience in the moment is always powerfully influenced by both our past and our projections about our next developmental steps" (Cohen 4). My middle school experience bridged me from my past identity as "Meghan the mimic" into my next one as "Erin's sister Meghan." In middle school I no longer needed to bind myself to Erin. Others bound us together. Each year on the first day of school, teachers would learn that I was Erin's sister. Attendance would begin: Brian Doyle, Julie Gillis, Sarah Hertel, Meghan Hyland." A momentary pause. "Are you related to Erin?" Thus began my metamorphosis into "Erin's sister."

At first this change was not apparent to me. In fact, it took me years to figure out what had happened. I began to follow in my sister's footsteps, and suddenly I lost myself.

In high school, Erin was the valedictorian of her class, and as her sister, I felt that I should perform at a level equal to her. I set standards for myself because no one ever verbally set them for me. Other children's parents compared their grades to those of their siblings. My parents never compared me to Erin. I did. They never once complained about my 90 not being Erin's 95. I did. When our report cards were sitting on the dining room table for all to see, I always wished mine could somehow be hers. Inferiority. Jealousy. I worked harder. Work led to frustration, frustration to tears, and tears to success. I hated it. I loved it. I was accomplishing what I wanted most. But what was that? At one time I would have answered, "to be just like my sister" but now it seemed that there was something more. I wanted to be successful, but I wanted to be my own person as well. I just was unsure how to break free.

I convinced myself that I was not dependent on Erin. Rafting, caving, babysitting, and even having a long-term boyfriend were all things Erin had never done. However, at the same time I joined cross-country track, ski team, and was inducted into National Honor Society—all of which Erin had previously been a member. By the time I reached my senior year of high school, Erin had been at Cornell University for two years, but her legacy in Cornwall, New York, lived on. I ran for Vice President of NHS that year, and when I won the election, my father said to me, "When your sister was President she started the blood drive. What tradition are you going to begin?" This was when it hit me. The years I had spent shackling myself to Erin had bound me so tightly that now I was trapped. Because I had followed Erin's path for so long, people now expected me to continue. I no longer wanted to be "Erin's sister," I needed to be Meghan again.

It was not until I began looking at colleges that I saw the opportunity to break free. My parents asked me if I wanted to visit Cornell and spend a weekend with Erin. I forced myself to avoid the trap. I told my sister that I was too busy with school and skiing to come for a visit. In truth, I feared finding comfort in Erin being there. I could not go to Cornell. I would not go to Cornell. It was time to make my own way, to choose my own path, and to throw away the shackles.

#### Works Cited

Cohen, Jonathan, ed. *Educating Minds and Hearts*. New York: Teachers College Press, 1999.