
The World Outside

Julia Sullivan

Julia Sullivan grew up in a small Massachusetts town, from which she later escaped. She is currently a writer and book editor.

I grew up in a small town surrounded by hills, and much of my childhood was devoted to planning my escape. This was not considered unusual; the town seemed to decide early on which young people would stay and which would go. There was some kind of sign, invisible to me, but as apparent to those who cared to look for it as the difference between good eggs and bad was to the chicken farmers I knew in those days.

No one was surprised when I left, but then we were not from the small town surrounded by hills. We had moved there, when I was still very young, from a small town almost surrounded by water. We came for a number of reasons, most of them mythical, but mainly because it was cheaper to live there and my father would have more time to write poetry and plays. Hardly anybody new ever moved to the town in those days, and most of the new people didn't stay. The life there suited the people who led it, and if it didn't suit others, well, there were plenty of other places for them to live. There was a ham and bean supper or a turkey raffle almost every night for some charitable purpose; when the Town Hall burned down, everybody came and stood around the Common to watch. It was almost like a different planet, with a heavy atmosphere and its own gravitational pull.

I knew it would be important to plan a good escape. I had seen others try it, and get caught in the town's field of gravity, drawn inexorably back into the round of lodge meetings and bingo nights. I watched carefully, making note of the dangerous areas and plan-

ning how to avoid them. Like most escapees, I kept my best ideas to myself. I might talk big with the big talkers about how I was going to be an astronaut, or a throat surgeon, or a Hollywood screenwriter, but that was just talk, and talk was the cheapest thing there was. The important thing—the only thing—was to stay as far as possible from the town's gravitational pull until I had left its orbit and was heading for the world outside.

The power of the town lay in three strong attractors: Comfort, Family, and Sex. I was pretty much immune to any comforts the town had to offer: our standards at home were different enough from the ones around me that I knew I would never fit in, although I could see, sometimes with envy, just how reassuring that would be. My family was small, and lived far away from the town, and was never the kind of family that made demands on your time. I was safe from two of the force-fields, then . . . I just had to be sure not to get trapped by Sex.

I had had a preview of what it could do. At one point in my childhood, my mother was a town official, and her duties included issuing marriage licenses. One night (it seemed to be very late), a couple still in their teens came to her, begging for a license, the girl in tears. They were underage, and her parents had thrown her out of the house; you could probably write the rest of the story yourself. The thing that frightened me most was the desperate exhaustion on their faces, a look I had only seen before in trapped animals' eyes. My mother took charge of the situation, gave them coffee and cookies, called their parents and reasoned them into submission, convinced the girl to go home, and told them both to come around to her office the next day. After she closed the door behind them, my mother came to me under the dining room table where I was hiding and said, "I hope you've learned something tonight." I had, of course, but it took a few years for the lesson to be of much use, since I had the young child's contempt for adults who were ensnared by sex. How could something fit only for the lowest campfire jokes have dominion over people old enough to drive a car and stay up as late as they liked? It seemed ridiculous.

Not too many years later, I realized what all the fuss was about. It was the seventh grade, on the day before Thanksgiving. Some