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THE TINKERBELL JAR

by

Kayla Berryman

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree

of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

in

English

Approved:

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Michael Sowder, Ph.D.  
Major Professor

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Committee Member

UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY  
Logan, Utah

2022

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## ABSTRACT

The Tinker Bell Jar

by

Kayla Berryman, Master of Science

Utah State University, 2022

Major Professor: Dr. Michael Sowder  
Department: English

This poetry thesis examines characters who are stuck in abusive or damaging familial relationships. All the characters in this collection want or need to escape their situations but can't for various reasons. These poems use fairy tales as well as elements and characters from the children's book *Peter Pan* to explore what it means to be stuck, as well as if it's possible to still love the people who hurt them. Fairy tales are used in these poems because so many characters in fairy tales return to their abusive or dangerous situations. In some versions of Snow White, the princess trusts her stepmother, even after her stepmother repeatedly attempts to murder her. Cinderella returns to her stepmother and stepsisters each night after the ball. Hansel and Gretel return to their cannibalistic stepmother and father who abandons them in the woods. Each character in this thesis is stuck either literally or metaphorically. In the original *Peter Pan*, fairies are created each time a baby laughs for the first time. In this retelling of the children's book, fairies are created the first time a baby cries. In the poems featuring Peter and Wendy, the two marry and capture the Neverland fairy Belle, a creature created from the first tears of a newborn infant, in a jar. Together the couple have a baby which they name Jane. Belle

follows Peter and Wendy throughout their ill-fated marriage, observing the family, particularly Peter and Wendy, and their inability to address the larger issues surrounding their family. Throughout this collection the world of fairy tales blends with what readers might more readily identify as the real world. In the poems told in second person point-of-view which take place in the real world, the speaker observes and questions if it's possible to still love her abusive brother.

## PUBLIC ABSTRACT

The Tinker Bell Jar

Kayla Berryman

This poetry thesis is a collection of poems thematically linked together. Each poem revolves around characters from fairy tales and children's books who are stuck in situations with abusive or harmful family members and crave an escape. In Part One of this collection, the poems take place in what readers might identify as the real world. In Part One, the poems have elements of fairy tales in them, and the speaker, or narrator of the poems, uses fairy tales to understand and relate the relationship between her parents and brother in a way that she can understand. The speaker of these poems understands her relationship with her brother and parents through relating to Cinderella and Snow White. It is important to note that the poet is not necessarily also considered the same as the speaker or narrator in poetry. In Part Two of this collection the poems shift to talking about Peter Pan and characters from J.M. Barrie's book *Peter Pan*. In *Peter Pan*, fairies are made the first time each baby cries, which is a lovely idea, but there is no mention whatsoever of what happens the first time a baby cries. In the original book, Wendy returns to London, along with her younger brothers. The three children grow up, and Wendy keeps the story of Peter Pan alive by telling her daughter, Jane, about Peter Pan. In my poems concerning Peter and Wendy, the two marry and have a daughter named Jane together. The family is also followed by Belle, the fairy created from Jane's first tears.

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CHAPTER I  
CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

**Thesis Topic and Purpose**

The first time I realized I couldn't have anything to do with my twenty-year-old brother Owen came after an argument I can't even remember.

In my mother's bedroom, I hold a cup of coffee I've reheated twice, trying to get rid of another headache from crying myself to sleep, from running mile after mile on an empty stomach, trying to see how far I can push my body into hunger, a reaction to stress I've had since I was a child. The bottles of Moscato and vodka I've been sneaking into my parent's basement and drinking by myself don't really help with my headaches. My mother lies in her queen size bed, pink sheets tousled, the rose patterned comforter soft and wrinkled. My father's left for work already, eager to leave the house each morning. My mother stares at the wall and snuffles. I worry about her almost as much as I worry about Owen. Despite her enabling Owen's behavior, the excuses she creates for his mood swings, his inability to hold a job, his threats of violence, and drug abuse, she is often the first victim of his verbal abuse. When his laundry isn't freshly washed and folded, when his breakfast she wakes up early to make isn't hot enough. She smiles and tells me how everything is fine, normal.

My mother snuffles again as her tears run into her curly hair splayed out on her pillow. Her face is blotchy. I sit on the edge of the bed, near her, dodging piles of laundry and shoes, open dresser drawers. I hope the smell of coffee hides the alcohol on my breath.

"Hey," I say softly. She raises a hand in a halfhearted hello and grabs from a box of Kleenex tissues on the nightstand.



“He’s so *mean*, ” she says, still staring at the bedroom wall, gray in the early morning light. My toes curl back and forth on the carpet of her bedroom.

“Last night was unacceptable. He’s abusive,” she continues. I stop wiggling my toes and stare. For all his screaming, his stealing and hiding prescription and club drugs, my mother’s empty threats to call the police, I’ve never heard her describe Owen as abusive. Abuse is something for other families. Abuse is something that happens to other people, not her, not me.

I won’t learn until two years later when a therapist tells me my experience living with Owen was a traumatic experience, after I no longer have any contact with my parents or brother, that Owen’s treatment towards both my mother and me fits the criteria for emotional and psychological abuse.

I twirl a ringlet of hair with a nervous, sweaty hand and shift on my mother’s bed. “I hope he never gets married. He treats women like crap. He treats me like crap and he treats you like crap. He’ll do the exact same to a wife,” she says. The word “crap” sounds crude and strange coming from my mother, a devout member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints or Mormon Church, a religion which prioritizes the family above all else and promises the reward of “being together with your family forever” for good, obedient behavior on earth. Those who reach the highest level of the afterlife must follow a strict set of rules, among them marrying and having a family. Members of the Church are encouraged to marry young and have as many children as possible. For members of the Church, remaining unmarried means facing intense social pressure, but also means not being allowed into the most desirable level of the afterlife.

My stomach drops into my toes and my acid mouth goes dry. For the past several months I’ve convinced myself I was going crazy, imagining things as mom and dad reassure me my family is normal, healthy and functional: the trip to the emergency room where Owen threatened

to murder his boss, the recurring nightmares in which I find Owen dead and wake up with a headache and aching jaw from grinding my teeth, the many, many times I've feared he'll hit me, his manic episode shortly after the US implemented COVID restrictions and he paced through the house wearing a N-95 mask and disposable gloves, screaming how we now lived in a dystopian society where all the women are going to die out from COVID, so he planned to sell me into prostitution.

I say nothing and finish drinking the rest of my coffee. I'm not crazy. I'm not crazy. I didn't imagine anything.

I need out.

### **Content and Themes**

At its core, this poetry thesis is an attempt to explore characters in the real world and in the world of fairy tales who are stuck in abusive, or damaged and damaging relationships and who crave escape. My poetry in this collection started with focusing only on Owen, siblings in fairy tales, and the poems featuring Peter Pan and Wendy. I wanted to know if it was possible to still love an abuser, more specifically, if I could still love my brother in a non-damaging, healthy way. I do not know if I will ever have the answer to my question. After writing my first poem about Owen titled "Inside the Snow Globe," I expanded my thesis to include my parents, addiction, abuse, and mental illness when I realized I wanted to write about things that make me angry or upset. I realized I also wanted to know if I could ever have a healthy relationship with my parents as well. I, like many of the characters in this collection, wonder if they are also going to follow the same patterns of their parents and parents before them. Poetry and fairy tales allows for an exploration of those questions and rips apart the lesson I was taught that women and girls

are not allowed to show anger, that good girls do not speak up when they are hurt or treated unfairly, a lesson I now realize is damaging and based in shame and misogyny.

Each character in my thesis is stuck literally or metaphorically. Many characters in fairy tales return to their long-standing relationships, usually with family members who previously hurt them, physically or emotionally. Fairy tales, like family relationships, are constantly changing and reframed depending on the audience. There is no one correct version of Cinderella, and the retellings of fairy tales in this thesis reflects that change. Snow White trusts her stepmother in disguise several times, even as her stepmother attempts to murder her. Cinderella returns from the ball each night to go back to her stepsisters and stepmother. Hansel and Gretel return home from the woods to a cannibalistic stepmother and father who all too willingly abandon them in the woods. In my spin-off of J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan*, Wendy and Peter marry, and Wendy trusts Peter even after he proves himself to be a less than ideal husband and a poor father to their daughter Jane. My version of Wendy turns out to be ill-suited for motherhood, despite Barrie's assertions that Wendy wanted nothing more than to be a mother.

Throughout my poetry about Wendy and Peter, the two are followed by the fairy creature Belle, a fairy made from the first tears of a newborn infant (as opposed to the first laugh of a newborn baby presented in Barrie's novel and replicated in other books for children, most notably my favorite children's book by Gail Carson Levine *Fairy Dust and the Quest for the Egg*.) While Barrie and other writers such as Levine have built on the charming idea of fairies coming from the first laughter of a newborn baby, both writers neglect to mention what happens the first time an infant cries. Belle is my answer. A cry marks the entrance of a healthy baby into the world but later in life signifies grief or anger. Belle is the embodiment of an emotional reality

Wendy and Peter ignore, even as they strive to fit into Wendy's perhaps more "realistic" world and leave the magic of Neverland behind.

I have considered the ethics of writing about family members carefully. I cannot write about my own life without writing about my family as well. The religion and culture I was raised in taught me family is the most important thing in this world, and for better or for worse my family has heavily influenced my own life. To write about my own life is impossible unless I also include my family. I am done feeling small and trapped.

## **Influences**

### **Natalie Diaz**

Natalie Diaz's poetry collection *When My Brother Was an Aztec* features poems dealing with the speaker's brother's meth addiction. Diaz uses mythology to talk about the speaker's experience caring for her brother, as well as the heartbreaking, unbearably frustrating moments which follow caring for a sibling who abuses drugs. In her poem "When My Brother Was an Aztec" Diaz writes:

he lived in our basement and sacrificed my parents  
 every morning. It was awful. Unforgivable. But they kept coming  
 back for more. They loved him, was all they could say. (1)

The repeated attempts on the part of the speaker to trust their brother can be traced throughout many of Diaz's poems. In her poem "How to Go to Dinner with a Brother on Drugs," Diaz states:

It gets old,  
 having your heart ripped out,

being opened up that way. (46)

Later in the same poem, the speaker's brother appears ready for dinner dressed as a Judas effigy. The speaker then muses about the brother's use of meth including his paranoia, the destruction of his parent's house, the destruction of his physical body, and his inappropriate behavior at the restaurant where he "licks his lips" at the female server (47-50). After the dinner is over, in an unexpected twist of the story of Judas selling Jesus, the speaker of Diaz's poem realizes "*Your brother is on drugs again. / You are at a dinner neither of you can eat*" followed by a scene where the speaker offers the restaurant server thirty pieces of silver and asks, "*What can I get for this?*" (51). Diaz consistently twists stories her audience is familiar with while also inserting the speaker's brother into known narratives involving characters such as Jesus, the devil, and Judas among others.

Mimicking Diaz's patterns, I also subvert the expectations and patterns of known stories, particularly fairy tales, in my poetry thesis. An example of challenging the expectations and patterns of fairy tales is shown in my poem "Leaving Cinderella's Fairy Tale." In my poem, I use elements present in some of the older versions of Cinderella which some readers may not be as familiar with but are present in the collections of the Grimm's Fairy Tales or other less widely known versions of the tales. One such example is the replacement of Cinderella's fairy godmother with the tree which is placed at the grave of Cinderella's mother, or the prince's attempt to capture Cinderella by smearing tar on the castle stairs. Readers expect Cinderella to live in a castle and marry a prince. However, in my poem Cinderella begins by mopping the floor of her house and ends by mopping the same floor after visiting home for Christmas, where she realizes she doesn't need to stay in the same unhealthy relationship with her family.

In my version of Cinderella, the mother rather than the stepmother is a central figure. Cinderella's mother in my poem is present as what I describe as a "bare boned tree" at some points and is described as having a human form at other times in the poem. Cinderella's mother disregards Cinderella's concern surrounding her physical safety or her desire to not be involved in her two brothers' lives, one who is "arrested for underage drinking, another who hides pills in his stereo speakers." While Cinderella asks for her mother's understanding, her mother conveniently turns back into a tree and gives Cinderella clothing items rather than support. The mother also "asks for more of your tears to drink," referencing the transformation of Cinderella's mother into a tree which is then literally watered with Cinderella's tears in the Grimm's version, as well as the parent-child role reversal my Cinderella faces. Once the mother realizes her sons will not listen to her, she attempts to cast Cinderella into the role of a parent, stating "Your Brothers Listen to You, Tell Him to Stop Drinking / how This Time Things Will be Different."

My Cinderella leaves her parent's house, stuck on the porch steps in tar which forces her to remove her snow boots while lizards and pigeons sing to her, an element also present in some versions of the tale. The return of Cinderella back to her own house where she once again mops the floor shows Cinderella reversing what readers think will be the ending. Rather than choosing the predictable ending (staying involved with her abusive family, becoming a princess) my Cinderella's ending shows resiliency rather than following the story readers expect her to follow, an action which makes sense given one of the central questions concerning how often we mirror the same patterns as previous generations.

**Jeannine Hall Gailey**

Jeannine Hall Gailey's *Becoming the Villainess* was the first collection of poetry I read as an undergrad and found enjoyable. As I started reading more poetry I also read Gailey's chapbooks *Field Guide to the End of the World*, and *Unexplained Fevers*, although *Becoming the Villainess* has remained my favorite. Throughout *Becoming the Villainess*, female villains, princesses, as well as female characters from mythology are placed in the modern world. Gailey's characters, for all the darkness they face, also enjoy games of softball, triumph, and moments of humor.

As I first began reading poetry, the first thing I noticed about Gailey's poems was that they were *fun* to read and relatively easy to understand. As I learned more about poetry I began to appreciate the development of voice Gailey gives to her characters from fairy tales and mythology, particularly her attention to the voices of characters who are considered antagonists of stories or who are often overlooked as in her poem "Conversation with the Stepmother, at the Wedding." Gailey writes in the voice of wicked stepmothers present in many fairy tales

You don't understand how hard it was,  
 those greasy children  
 with their lentils, their field mice,  
 always playing with fire. (56)

I also admired how Gailey references enough of the tales to give readers clues as to the characters she is referring to. For example, Persephone in "Persephone and the Prince Meet Over Drinks" enjoys a pomegranate cocktail at the bar with Hades, Cinderella in "Cinderella at the Car Dealership" looks at purchasing coaches made of pumpkins, and Persephone plays softball in "Playing Softball with Persephone" where the softball "rolls forward and she grabs it, / squeezes it like a ripe pomegranate, almost takes a bite" (12).

I have always loved fairy tales and take most of my inspiration for my writing from Gailey. Like Gailey, I also write about characters from stories we know and cast them in a different light, particularly when it comes to the poems featuring Wendy and Peter Pan. While *Peter Pan* is considered a children's book rather than technically a fairy tale, *Peter Pan* is still full of magic and charm frequently found in fairy tales. Like most fairy tales, *Peter Pan* can be seen as problematic for many reasons. In Barrie's novel Wendy is consistently cast as someone who is only meant to take care of Peter, her brothers, and the Lost Boys. For much of the book Wendy is pushed aside by Peter, even as she helps him with simple tasks Peter takes credit for, including the reattachment of his shadow, which Wendy sews back on using a needle and thread (39). Much of Wendy's feelings are ignored throughout the book, most noticeably the trauma of Tinker Bell's attempt to convince the Lost Boys to murder Wendy (87). To give Peter some credit, he does insist on banishing Tinker Bell for her crime, but she then reappears throughout the story. Tinker Bell convinces the Lost Boys to shoot Wendy with bows and arrows as she lands on Neverland. Once Wendy is shot, the Lost Boys instantly regret their actions and realize they shot a human rather than an animal. One of the Lost Boys states "Peter was bringing her to us," followed by another Lost Boy saying Wendy was "a lady to take care of us at last," further reinforcing the idea that Wendy is only meant to serve the boys and Peter (89).

I first began writing about Peter Pan and Wendy as an undergraduate, partly because I am still enchanted by many of the ideas of *Peter Pan*, even as an adult, and partly because I wanted to write about a failing marriage and failures as a parent, but do not have children and have never been married. I wondered and still wonder if I will become the same type of parent as my own parents, should I ever have children, if I will become my mother, should I ever marry. Wendy for me represents and reminds me of so many women I know. My poems featuring Peter Pan and



Wendy focus mainly on Wendy, who marries Peter as an adult. True to Barrie's ending, my Wendy also has a daughter named Jane. However, my Wendy marries Peter, which does not happen in the original story. The two are naturally a terrible match and Wendy is less than equipped for motherhood, especially when her daughter refuses to cry and instead only laughs.

Using Gailey as a model, I wrote many of the poems featuring Peter and Wendy in the voices of either Jane, Wendy, or Belle, the fairy made from tears. In my poem "Wendy and Peter's Baby," I use the voice of Wendy to talk about her experience and frustrations of motherhood. While Wendy discusses her childhood experience of caring for an alcoholic father and a mother with severe depression, I use the same technique Gailey uses, referencing the story my characters are from while maintaining that my poem is a different creation than the original story. In my poem, Wendy reflects on how she always believed she would be an excellent mother because of the parent-child role reversal she grew up in. Wendy's father is an alcoholic who "came home drunk and singing, hired a dog as a nanny," a reference to the Newfoundland dog present in the Darling children's nursery readers may be familiar with. Acorns given as kisses, thimbles, taxidermy crocodiles, and pickle jars of fairy dust all appear throughout my poems, also references to the original story. My Wendy wants desperately to fit into the normal life she thought she wanted and is dismayed when her child fails to cry. Wendy's daughter laughs like normal, which forms a fairy "and it was all very nice and magical, yes," another reference to Barrie's work, as the formation of fairies from laughter is expected and familiar to readers. The final appearance of a blue fairy formed from Jane's tears serves to tie together the rest of the poems featuring Peter and Wendy.

**Shanan Ballam**

The darkness of the story of Little Red Riding Hood, combined with the retelling of the speaker's experience as she attempts to protect her sister from an abusive husband heavily influenced the way I chose to talk about my experience with my brother. Although I had previously read Ballam's other collection *Pretty Marrow*, and found it helpful to my writing, *The Red Riding Hood Papers* played a heavier role in terms of writing this thesis due to the themes present in both my poems and in Ballam's work. In the poem "Joint Custody," Ballam sets the speaker in the mundane world of a kitchen preparing shrimp while talking on the phone with her sister. The setting of the safe kitchen smelling of ginger and garlic makes the image of the brother-in-law torturing cats more disturbing. Ballam writes:

She tells me how he used to laugh when  
the cats writhed in his hands, how he covered  
their mouths until their claws scrambled  
in the air (17).

Later in the poem, the speaker imagines her brother-in-law doing the same to his daughters, the speaker's nieces. As the shrimp cook in oil, the speaker imagines "the cats' green eyes pop[ping]" (17). On its own, "Joint Custody" is disturbing and gut wrenching, full of sensory details, anxiety, and the helplessness which follows the inability to help a sibling from a dangerous situation. Coupled with the story of Little Red Riding Hood, the voices of the Wolf, Grandmother, and Little Red Riding Hood lends itself to an overall darker tone and meaning, full of predators lurking inside of those we think we can trust.

Like Ballam, I too place my characters and speakers in situations which juxtapose the mundane with the dangerous. I also call upon the physicality of illness presented in Ballam's collection *Pretty Marrow*, particularly in the poem "Coma" where "Urine drains through a tube /

into a plastic bag. The urine is thick and marigold-orange” (4). In my own poem “Inside the Snow Globe,” I place my own characters in the mundane mixed with the dangerous and strange, much like Ballam does in many of her poems. In “Inside the Snow Globe” I write:

She asks for water, fewer blankets, invisible cats arching their backs,  
 rubbing against her bare legs, fur against fever skin. The ceiling fan beats,  
 whips used Kleenexes surrounding your grandmother’s bed like snowflakes.

Your grandmother asks you if you are her own daughter

People die every day, and it is not unheard of for patients to be confused before their deaths. However, the specificity of the grandmother asking for “invisible cats arching their backs, / rubbing against her bare legs, fur against fever skin” serves to add another level of strangeness to the poem. Much like Ballam’s writing where dead grandmothers haunt speakers and live inside the speaker’s “brain like bluebells, like water” in “Safe House,” my poem “Inside the Snow Globe” is full of the physical world of one dying and various types of fear and pain. I describe the speaker’s grandmother on her literal deathbed complete with brown teeth and mint flavored swabs used in healthcare settings, the grandmother’s heels rubbing “hot and sore against bedsheets, toes curled inward from lack of use,” a condition which frequently happens to those nearing the end of their lives or on hospice. Throughout “Inside the Snow Globe” the speaker struggles, like many of my speakers, to understand how much she is like her mother, who also had a brother who abused drugs. While the speaker recounts her fear of her brother’s physical abuse, and the reasons why she can no longer have contact with her brother, the speaker’s grandmother ignores her granddaughter’s experiences and fears and asks her to:

please, please be more like your mother,

(oh so good, forgive your brother for he knows not what he does, as your mother forgave her brother when her own parents kicked him out for abusing drugs, his arrest, his failure to keep a job.

While the placement of the poem within a snow globe serves to keep the poem in the realm of both the magical and the mundane, it is the combination of placing “Inside the Snow Globe” alongside other poems which take place only in the world of the fairy tale which serves to highlight other themes illustrated throughout my collection, as Shanan Ballam does in her *Red Riding Hood Papers*.

### **Ted Hughes**

Ted Hughes’ *Crow: From the Life and Songs of Crow* follows the creation of a character named Crow. *Crow*, much like many of the poems which have influenced my thesis, relies on the use of mythology and known tales, which the poet then inserts characters of his or her own creation into. Crow is a trickster and out of place character in many ways as he discusses the creation with God in “Crow Communes,” and watches battles as he searches for his place among the rest of creation. Hughes’ Crow is a character who doesn’t quite fit in with the rest of the birds. In “Crow and the Birds,” Hughes writes

When the eagle soared clear through a dawn-distilling of  
emerald

When the curlew trawled in seadusk through a chime of  
wineglasses

When the swallow swooped through a woman’s song in a  
cavern

And the swift flicked through the breath of a violet (29).

Hughes lists all these lovely details and descriptions of things the other birds did, and then stops shy of having a poem full of only lovely, non-disturbing things and images by inserting Crow who is left “spraddled head-down in the beach-garbage, guzzling / a dropped ice-cream” (29). Crow is a character who doesn’t fit into the narrative readers have at the ready when they read mythology. Similarly, my Belle is a creature who doesn’t readily fit into the realm of Peter and Wendy.

In “First Cry,” I present a creation myth about the tears of the first newborn infant which then goes on to become the fairy which follows Peter and Wendy through their miserable marriage and poor attempt at parenting Jane. In “First Cry” I draw on Hughes for his creation myths, particularly paying attention to the ways in which the natural world of Hughes’ poems react to Crow and the way Crow in turn reacts to the natural world. In “Crow Alights,” Hughes writes:

Crow saw the herded mountains, steaming in the morning.  
 And he saw the sea  
 Dark spined, with the whole earth in its coils.  
 He saw the stars, fuming away into the black, mushrooms  
 Of nothing forest, clouding their spores, the virus of  
 God.  
 And he shivered with the horror of Creation (10).

While Crow reacts in horror, the world in my poem “First Cry” reacts to the creation of fairies made from tears with a smile. In “First Cry” the first parents ever have a newborn baby and don’t know how to react to the baby’s never-ending crying, and neither does the brand new

world. Trees, sharks, and even the sun and moon attempt to escape the cry. When the baby does finally stop crying, it laughs, and “rainbows uncurled, daffodils exploded, / lotus bloomed” as the first fairies are formed from the baby’s laughter, which is part of Barrie’s origin story of fairies. However, the creation of fairies from tears is ignored in “First Cry” because the world is too tired to notice anything else.

My poetry thesis is intended to present characters and speakers in situations in which they long for escape. Taking inspiration from Hughes, Ballam, Gailey, and Diaz, I rework the known narratives of fairy tales and children’s books to present characters and speakers in abusive and damaging situations. While my hope with this project was to reach a conclusion about what it means to love an addict, or if it’s possible to still love someone who is abusive, I don’t know that I found an answer, and I don’t know if I will ever find an answer. My hope is that if readers find themselves in similar situations they will at least start to ask themselves the same questions.

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