

3-17-2022

A Group of Hyenas is a Cackle

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

A GROUP OF HYENAS IS A CACKLE

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

CREATIVE WRITING

by

Kristin Gallagher

2022

To: Dean Michael R. Heithaus
College of Arts, Sciences and Education

This thesis, written by Kristin Gallagher, and entitled A Group of Hyenas is a Cackle, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this thesis and recommend that it be approved.

Anne Castro

John Dufrense

Julie Wade, Major Professor

Date of Defense: March 17, 2022

The thesis of Kristin Gallagher is approved.

Dean Michael R. Heithaus
College of Arts, Sciences and Education

Andrés G. Gil
Vice President for Research and Economic Development
and Dean of the University Graduate School

Florida International University, 2022

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to the committee for reading and commenting on my manuscript, especially major professor Julie Wade, who has read it no less than five times. I'd also like to acknowledge the FIU faculty who taught me and the peers who read and provided feedback on my work.

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS
A GROUP OF HYENAS IS A CACKLE

by

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Florida International University, 2022

Miami, Florida

Professor Julie Wade, Major Professor

A GROUP OF HYENAS IS A CACKLE is a memoir about sisterhood, success, and self-worth. The memoir spans approximately twenty-five years in the memoir-speaker's life and is divided into five sections. Book one explores her childhood through high school graduation, focusing on her experiences as the eldest sister in a hardscrabble, Irish-Catholic family living in New England during the 1990s and its central defining event—the death of her mother from a drug overdose. Book two examines a slice of adulthood in the protagonist's twenties when she was a law student living in New York City with her sister. The remaining three sections work like a ribbon that weaves throughout the narrative via a prologue, a hinge passage, and an epilogue in which the memoir-speaker incorporates women's gymnastics and explores the concepts of sacrifice, truth, and success to illuminate and unify the major themes of this protagonist's journey.

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Hail Mary Pass

About a year after Mom died, when I was a freshman in high school, I had a weekend job as a cashier at a car wash. Customers pulled their Range Rovers and Subarus up to the window and ordered the type of wash they wanted from a menu, kind of like McDonald's, except this historical town's zoning laws prohibited chain restaurants. People said they would ruin the aesthetics.

I was fourteen years old. My colleagues were mostly men in their twenties and thirties. They were the ones who did the actual washing. One of the guys used to shoot a BB gun at squirrels when it was slow and tease me about reading the bodice-ripper novels someone left in the metal filing cabinet in the office. I swore I wasn't reading them, but my face always turned the color of a strawberry Blow Pop when he brought them up.

There was no public transportation in this suburban Cape Cod town, so Dad had to drive me to work. One morning, he pulled into the gas station parking lot about a half mile away from the car wash. I thought he wanted a coffee or gas, but he idled by the side of the building.

"You can walk from here," he said.

I looked at him to determine if he was joking.

He smirked and cut the engine, then sat back in his seat and waited for me to get angry or get out.

I knew this game well. He loved to provoke, to watch me lose control. It fed into the narrative that I was an angry, explosive teen, unable to respect adults. The opposing narrative: my 4.0 GPA, my job, and my spot on the high school swim team.

I got out of the car and started to walk.

There were no real sidewalks on the road, just grass embankments. The town's obsession with historical preservation (at least since its 1639 ~~invasion~~ establishment by English settlers) also meant that there were no paved sidewalks and no streetlamps on its curvy back roads, no matter how many people wrapped their cars around telephone poles. How things looked from the outside meant the most.

Daffodils grew haphazardly along the sides of the road, almost as if someone had thrown thousands of seeds out of a moving car as their preferred method of planting. Everyone loved these flowers. Daffodils were a first sign of spring, and there was even an annual festival dedicated to them, but as I trudged to work, all I wanted to do was rip them out of the ground and whip them at cars while screaming.

It had been about six months since my father came home and handed us some trash bags. *Go pack*, he had instructed us. We were moving out of the house we shared with my aunt and uncle into my father's girlfriend's house. I had not even known my father had a girlfriend and found it incredible that someone would date him.

At work, I took people's cash and pretended to care if they wanted their undercarriage cleaned while I contemplated whether my hatred for my father was

justified. Maybe there was some lesson here? Was he teaching me to be a better person and I was missing the point? What was it about me that he so detested?

A few hours into my shift, he pulled up in his dilapidated mini van, waving like a long-lost family member on the *Ricki Lake* show.

“Free car wash!” he exclaimed.

I peered into the van. Paul sat in the passenger’s seat where Dad could keep an eye on him, while Ann, Liam, and Emerson were in the back rows. My siblings smiled and waved, excited about driving through the rushing water and soap suds in the car wash’s tunnel. Dad knew that if I was rude, it would make me look like a surly bitch in front of them.

I plastered a smile on my face as I pushed the buttons to give him the cheapest possible wash. No upgrades, no wax.

As he pulled away and honked the horn, I knew for certain that he had dropped me off at the gas station for the sole purpose of messing with me. Aunt Alex called them his *fuck fuck* games. He’d played the same games with my mother, and in my opinion, they had contributed to her downfall.

All my hope for escape rested on a pending application to boarding school that I had submitted after meeting a camp counselor who went there.

I was going for that Hail Mary pass, which in New England was most often associated with Doug Flutie’s last minute sixty-four-yard pass in a football game between Boston College and the University of Miami. Despite battling thirty-mile-an-hour winds, Flutie completed the pass and the Eagles won the game.

I had collected letters of recommendation from my teachers, written admissions essays, filled out the application by hand in my best penmanship, taken (and aced) the standardized admissions test, and visited the school for an interview. Nana—Dad’s mother—helped me with the test fees, bought me an outfit for the interview, and drove me to the interview. She had worked as a telephone operator for years, climbing the corporate ladder up to middle management back when that was an uncommon place for women, and she could be *so damn charming* in public. Without her, I didn’t have a chance at getting into this school. Dad did not object, which was the best I could hope for.

My father’s girlfriend lived on the other side of town in a house with a perilously steep driveway and a partially finished basement where Ann and I had bedrooms. Liam and Paul had a room adjacent to the bedroom Dad shared with Cindy. Emerson moved into the master bedroom where Cindy’s six-year-old daughter and her guinea pig slept. Cindy’s adult son Brian lived at home after dropping out of high school. He slept all day and played video games while smoking weed all night. Dad was never home. I also tried to stay away as much as possible. I went to school and swim practice, caught the late bus back to Cindy’s, and ate some leftover pasta with peas and parmesan cheese (Cindy was a vegetarian who refused to cook meat), and worked on the weekends.

Dad let us know that he expected us to be self-sufficient and not to bother Cindy for anything. If she didn’t like something we did, she’d tell Dad about it and

we'd hear about it during Saturday morning chores, all outlined on a chart that Cindy posted on the front of the refrigerator.

A classmate from my school dated a friend of Brian's, so my girlfriends came over to hang out one weekend shortly after we moved. We crammed into Brian's room and someone pushed a towel under the crack in the door. For hours, we passed around a bong and listened to music. If Cindy was pissed about it, she didn't say anything.

Brian got high enough to tell me that he could hear my father and his mother *fuck like bunny rabbits* because their room was directly under his, and I took this as my sign to go to bed. I went down to the basement and left my friends upstairs, where they eventually passed out on Brian's floor.

In the morning, as I was coming out of the bathroom, Cindy cornered me.

"Did you friends sleep upstairs in Brian's room?"

"Yeah, I think so," I replied.

She wrinkled her face. "You know that's wrong, don't you?"

Lady, there's a lot wrong with this picture, but my friends are the least of it, I thought as I went back downstairs without answering her.

When Cindy started locking the snacks in her bedroom, she said it was because we ate too much. I'd come home from school hungry, and there'd be no dinner leftovers, but her daughter would be sitting at the table shoving her face with fruit snacks, and I swear I wanted to blow up the entire house.

The worst part was that my father sanctioned it. When we complained, he told us there was nothing he could do.

It's Cindy's house, he'd respond.