

## MY SIMPLE REALIZATION ESSAY CONTEST

DELIGHTS



## MY SIMPLE REALIZATION

## “Music Is My Friend When I Need It”

After spending her childhood performing in stressful singing competitions, ASHA LEMMIE quit cold turkey. Years later, she embraced songs as pure comfort.

**I WAS 2 WHEN** I started singing. Broadway musicals, butchered operas, jubilant Disney songs. I had inherited a talent my mother had not, and she ensured it would be fastidiously nurtured. I was enrolled in voice, piano, and violin lessons, and later, in competitions. From the age of 5, I measured my talent against others' for the amusement of a crowd. Stern-faced judges, heavy red velvet curtains, an X-marks-the-spot in white masking tape on the stage. I was good enough to win often—but never often enough, as far as I was concerned.

When I'd place second in a competition, I'd ban the failing piece from my repertoire—for both playing and listening. I've walked out of malls because I heard some elevator-music rendition of a song I thought I'd

botched. Through all those years of singing and playing, my passion was tied to the need for control. But the reality was that music had more control over me than I had over it.

After college, and 16 years of competing, I stopped cold turkey. I could have kept practicing for fun, but I didn't do that either. Instead I sank into a depression. No one was looking at me anymore. I was invisible as a young woman living alone in New York City. But the sense that no one was looking at me and that I was surrounded by thousands of more talented people was, oddly enough, just what I needed to feel free.

As the anxiety started to lift, I remembered the beginning of it all: being a child who fell in love with music and sought it out in the most unlikely of places. In the

sound of the rain on the roof, there was an arpeggio. In the hum of the refrigerator and the buzzing of the coffee maker, there were hints of a minor chord. In the moments of my life that were the darkest and most fearful, there was, in the back of my mind like an old friend, always a song—an Ave Maria, a Holy Mother, full of grace.

I welcomed that friend back in. I became OK with the occasional karaoke night. I could play simply because I wanted to—because it was Thursday, because the greatest betrayal to a loyal instrument is to let it lie silent. Decades later, I have rediscovered the wisdom of my 4-year-old self, who belted out a Broadway tune: The sun'll come out tomorrow. ■

ASHA LEMMIE IS THE NEW YORK TIMES BEST-SELLING AUTHOR OF *FIFTY WORDS FOR RAIN*.

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## “A Name Is Never Too Much”

Nearly a decade after leaving her home in Nigeria, LUVVIE AJAYI JONES recognized the power of her own perspective.

**I’M A PROUD** Nigerian woman. But when I was 9, I moved from Nigeria to Chicago, and my self-confidence was shaken for the very first time.

The first day of school, when I walked into my classroom, the teacher asked me to stand in front of all these strange faces and introduce myself. It was my first time walking into a room where not everyone looked like me. I was sure of nothing. Even the question “What’s your name?” felt like a trap. The answer was Ifeoluwa Ajayi, but right then and there, 9-year-old me knew that no one would pronounce it properly, and they’d make it heavy on their tongues, like a burden. My name felt like it was too much. It was too foreign. It was too Nigerian. It was too strange. And it wouldn’t do.

I decided to introduce myself as Lovette instead. It was a nickname from one of my aunts, because in Yoruba, Ifeoluwa translates to “God’s love.” (“Lovette” later became “Luvvie.”) Every time afterward, when teachers looked at my original first name on their roll call list and frowned or said, “Whew, OK, this one is hard,” my decision was reaffirmed.

The University of Illinois was where I reclaimed my heritage. It was there I met others with stories like mine, who also went by new names to keep theirs from being butchered. It was there I realized that my perspective, which is very much informed by my culture, was one of my superpowers.

Who I am in the world today is an unapologetically Nigerian American, Chicagoan, Black woman. I inhabit all these identities, and seamlessly move through them. We are judged every single day on who we are, and how we are. And oftentimes, people bang their internal gavel on us and decide we are too much. As a Black woman who is opinionated, straightforward, and unapologetic, I am secretary of Team Too Much. I even bring the kettle corn to our monthly meetings. I’ve been considered aggressive or loud or angry for simply being direct. But I’d rather be too big than too small any day. ■

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## “It’s Better to Be Happy for a Little While Than Unhappy Forever”

Everyone wants a kitten, no one wants a cat—unless you’re MEG CABOT, and susceptible to falling hard for elderly felines.

WHEN MY HUSBAND and I first moved to the Florida Keys, we intended to spend only the winter months there. The rest of the year, we would travel in Europe and go to shows in New York City.

Or so we thought.

One day, as we were renovating our house, a little black-and-white cat showed up. Stray cats are everywhere in Key West, ever since Ernest Hemingway was gifted a six-toed cat in the 1930s, as the story goes. Its descendants have roamed the island freely, cared for by kindly cat lovers.

But the one who showed up at our door didn’t seem to have anyone to care for her. She was skinny but affectionate. Soon my husband was calling her Gem (because she was such a little jewel).

Obviously we put off our plans to travel. We couldn’t go anywhere, because Gem needed us.

She stuck by our side for 10 years, until she passed away of old age. We were heartbroken—but then we thought, “Well, at least we’ll be able to travel now.” We booked trips everywhere, staying for months in Paris, Denmark, and Manhattan.

Though we had a lot of fun, without a warm, affectionate cat to return to, the house in Key West seemed empty and cold. We both felt a little rudderless in our lives, and even a little depressed.

That’s when a friend spotted a skinny black-and-white cat at the SPCA who seemed a lot like Gem. Even though “Allie” was affectionate and sweet, she’d been waiting for years to be adopted. No one wanted her, because she was an older cat—over 10—and she had some health problems.

We were torn. Allie was adorable, but we didn’t want to risk breaking our hearts over another pet that might die soon. Then one day, while I was getting my high-lights done, my hairstylist asked, “Isn’t it better to be happy for a little while than unhappy forever?”

It was a total light bulb moment. We’d been so happy with Gem and were so unhappy without her. Wouldn’t even a few more happy days be worth it?

So we raced to the SPCA to rescue Allie. With a little veterinary care and lots of good food and love, all her health problems disappeared. That was five years ago, and we’re still deliciously happy staying home with our new little gem.

MEG CABOT IS THE BEST-SELLING AUTHOR OF MORE THAN 80 BOOKS FOR ADULTS AND TEENAGERS, INCLUDING *THE PRINCESS DIARIES*.

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### “I Would Like—Actually, Love—to Apologize”

For ELIZABETH PASSARELLA, saying “I’m sorry” is a power move.

A FEW YEARS AGO, I got a forwarded email—it is now a meme, I’m sure; look it up—about how women should stop saying we’re sorry. Instead of “I’m sorry I’m late,” it instructed us to say, “Thank you for waiting for me.” Instead of “I’m sorry I’m just now getting back to you” in a work email, I should write, “Thanks for your patience while I ignored your proposal.” Or something like that. And I do understand the intention: Women too often apologize for things they shouldn’t, making themselves smaller and diminishing their worth in a way that is unnecessary and props up the patriarchy. I get it, I do. I just don’t think it’s for me. Sorry, but I really like apologizing.

Part of the reason is that I was raised in Tennessee, where good manners—being exceptionally polite, deferential to a fault, even if you don’t mean it—are expected.

If someone bumps into me, I will instinctively say, “Oh my goodness, I am so sorry!” like it was my bad. This is the type of needless apology I’m supposed to disavow, I think. But it’s a habit. And life is hard. And people need compassion. Maybe that bonus apology smooths a few bumps in the road for a stranger. I certainly don’t feel any less whole for saying it. Listen, I’m chronically late. Until I miraculously change (I probably won’t), I’m going to apologize for being late. So what if “I’m sorry” is the first thing out of my mouth to a colleague I’ve left waiting? The next thousand words can be badass.

And if I’m honest, I need the practice. I need those throwaway sorries to grease the wheels for the more important ones, which, historically, have not come easily to me. I was a bratty teenager.

I’m an argumentative spouse. On our walk to school the other day, my 8-year-old was rambling about a hypothetical situation in which a kid might need to make a hard decision on his own: “You know, if his dad was out, and his mom was mean, so she couldn’t help.” *Hypothetically.*

I’m determined for my generation to be better at apologizing to our kids than our parents were; that calls for more sorries, not fewer. On good days, I apologize for big stuff and ask for forgiveness—which feels much better than stewing in my own self-righteousness, believe me. Other days, I can only manage “Sorry I ate the last peanut butter cup.” I feel fine about it. Apologies to whoever sent me that email.

ELIZABETH PASSARELLA IS THE AUTHOR OF *GOOD APPLE: TALES OF A SOUTHERN EVANGELICAL IN NEW YORK*. SHE LIVES IN NEW YORK CITY WITH HER FAMILY.

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## “Boredom Is What My Brain Needed”

KRISTYN KUSEK LEWIS was on a nonstop podcast and audiobook kick. Then her earbuds quit on her.

ONE RECENT MORNING, when I set out for my usual run, I turned on the news podcast I subscribe to and the sound started to go fuzzy. I stopped in my tracks, immediately frustrated, because even though my run is one of my favorite parts of the day, I knew I would have to abandon it if there was something wrong with my earbuds. How could I possibly exercise without listening to something?

I got the earbuds working, but throughout the day, and the next several days, I noticed how much I'd been pairing my routines with something to listen to, always with the intent of making the task more pleasurable. Before I got in the shower, I turned on a podcast. Vacuuming or folding laundry? Perfect time for an audiobook. I couldn't even brush my teeth before bed without someone chattering in my ear. The Covid outbreak made things worse: Given the 24/7 togetherness with the family, I discovered, shamefully, that I could be “alone” by

popping in my earbuds. What better way to tune out the sound of my husband chewing yet another handful of Triscuits?

I had a moment of reckoning one Sunday evening. We'd been spending our stay-at-home time building a backyard clubhouse for the kids, and I was outside painting all day. By the time I finished, I was physically and mentally exhausted. I felt fried in the way I do after a long day of writing, and as I stood in the kitchen, looking at my phone, it was easy to see why: I had spent six hours listening to audiobooks. Was it entertaining and enlightening and fun? Yes. But six hours?

The next day, as I clipped on the dogs' leashes for a walk, I decided to forgo the phone. Instead, I would be in the moment. Try as I did to relax, to notice the birds chirping and the sun filtering through the trees, I was mostly just bored. But by the time I circled back home, I felt calmer. And

clearer, as if the fog that often clouded my thoughts had evaporated. I could actually hear myself think. Maybe boredom was what my brain needed.

I love that at any moment, I can tap a button and listen to Michelle Obama talk about parenthood or hear David Sedaris narrate his latest book. But it's also a fact of modern life that having a fire hose of entertainment at our fingertips means it's all too easy to distract ourselves right out of our own minds.

I still can't run without my earbuds, but I've started to shower in silence, and brush my teeth, and walk the dogs. Now I notice the clinking of the dogs' tags against their collars, the sound of my own breath, even and steady. And I know that, even if it's a little dull, it's a moment of stillness, a chance to be alone with my thoughts, maybe the only one I'll get all day. ■

KRISTYN KUSEK LEWIS HAS WRITTEN FOUR NOVELS, INCLUDING *PERFECT HAPPINESS*. SHE IS REAL SIMPLE'S CONTRIBUTING BOOKS EDITOR.

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### INSPIRATION PROMPTS

- When have you had a realization that made you live differently afterward? It doesn't have to be an enormous change.
- Is there something you loved in childhood that you'd abandoned and you've rediscovered it? What have you learned about yourself as a result?
- Is there an area in your life where you've learned to let go of self-criticism, and rediscovered true joy as a result?
- Has there been a moment that's led you to reevaluate a relationship? (Perhaps you've decided to let an unhealthy relationship go, or possibly you've deepened an existing relationship; i.e., an experience led you to understand a parent, sibling, relative, teacher in a way you never had before)
- Have you had a life experience that led you to decide you'd been wrong about something? What was troubling about that? What was freeing?
- Or, have you had a life experience that led you to trust your instincts and believe in yourself in a way you never had before? How did that feel, to trust yourself?

### PERSONAL ESSAY TIPS

Almost every personal essay, whether it's 300 or 3,000 words, tells a story of change: a change in your attitude or the way you move through the world, a change in your relationship, a change in your core beliefs or habits

The arc of the personal essay: I felt a certain way > then I had this experience (e.g., I changed my circumstances; I changed my mind over time; I saw a person/situation/aspect of myself in a new light; something happened that led me to admit I was wrong; OR something happened that led me to realize I'd been right all along) > then I felt a different way

For a short-form essay like My Simple Realization, the epiphany doesn't have to be major; sometimes small adjustments or realizations can open the door to bigger things

An affecting story is rich in detail and specifics; you're aiming to create a mini-movie in our minds

That old saying "show, not tell" still holds true; instead of "I was excited" or "I was crushed," go deep and let us in on what you're feeling: "I could feel the blood pounding in my ears" or "It was like a two-ton weight had descended on my chest"

Pace yourself; a common pitfall, even for professional writers, is to set the essay up at the beginning with a gorgeous, hilarious, or otherwise compelling scene ... but then run out of steam; you have to love and care for the middle and the end of your essay just as much as you love the beginning.



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### SELF-EDITING FOR MENTEES

- **Does your essay include broad, general statements about a situation that are not unique to you or your story?** (An example might be an essay about having a disappointing birthday that includes the statement, “Life isn’t about material things.”) Think about how your essay would read if you removed these statements, or found a way to rephrase them that was more unique to your situation (“I tried to take a deep breath and remind myself that life isn’t about material things, but that didn’t stop me from wanting that neon orange leather jacket.”). Doing so will demonstrate your creativity and make your essay more personal, and more uniquely you.
- **Read through your essay and look for times when you used very general adjectives (great, good, nice, fun).** Think about whether there are other words that would do a better job conveying your meaning. For example, when you say, “I’m a great writer,” is your story really trying to demonstrate “I’m an expressive writer”? Then that’s what you should say!
- **Similarly, do you use adverbs like “very” and “really” a lot?** Try to find more precise words to use instead! For example, instead of “very happy” you could say “ecstatic;” instead of “really low” you could say “abysmal,” etc.
- **Read through your essay looking for repeated nouns and verbs.** If you use the same noun or verb more than three times in the course of your essay, try to find a synonym or rephrase a sentence or two so you can use different terms. You want to demonstrate that you have a good vocabulary and are a creative thinker! As you go through your essay, you may also see other opportunities to use more detailed and descriptive language that is better for telling your story.
  - Before: I’ve always thought of myself as a great writer, but I never thought I would write a letter that would make my mom cry.
  - After: I’ve always thought of myself as a great writer, but I never imagined I would pen a letter that would make my mom cry.
  - After After: I’ve always thought of myself as an expressive writer, but I never imagined I would pen a letter that would move my mom to tears.
- **Read your essay out loud to yourself.** Are there sentences that are hard to get through? Phrases that sound clunky or are difficult to put together in your mind as you read? Remember that the college admissions officers reading your essay are most likely reading HUNDREDS of essays, and might not have the time or energy to go back and reread something that doesn’t make sense or doesn’t come easily the first time around. Do your best to make sure every sentence in your essay makes sense and tells the reader what you want them to know the first time they read it—they might not read it a second time.

