

# Thinking about What I've DONE

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I REMEMBER EMILY GORDON sitting in the corner on a little red plastic chair thinking about what she had done. She had straight black hair, a round face, and high cheekbones. A perfect little Indian girl. I felt sorry for her, but I also wanted to be better than her.

Our teacher, a grown man who wanted us to call him The Ape, didn't make her face the wall. No, she had to sit and watch all the other kids play and socialize. Considering the amount of time Emily sat in the corner, it was a wonder how she ever learned to function in the world at all.

Emily was the smartest girl in my class from kindergarten at Steeby Elementary until graduation from our dilapidated high school. And in kindergarten and first grade, she was the best of all of us. She was shocking and boisterous. She made us laugh, knocked us down to size, and made us feel like little royals. Her mom tied her hair up in a ponytail and it would bob up and down from the top of her skull. She told us in kindergarten that her mom and dad were Indians and so she was an Indian, too. My mom and I were Indians, too—Potawatomis. But Emily would change over time and she would stop wearing the ponytail. In fifth grade, she would tell us she was an Ottawa Indian. In seventh grade, she became Odawa. And not an Indian, a Native American. In tenth grade she went back to being an Ottawa, but by then she was a Grand Traverse Band Ottawa. By the time we graduated from Wayland Union High in 1990, she sometimes referred to herself as an Anishinaabe, but since no one ever heard of that, she settled for Ottawa again. And at Lisa Candelaria's high school graduation party, I thought I heard her say she was Anishinaabekwe—an Anishinaabe woman.

WE WERE NEVER close friends. I should say we were never friends. But in kindergarten, everyone in class was a friend, before first grade socialization kicked in and created outcasts and cliques. And like everyone who had a birthday party in first grade, I invited Emily. We didn't play much together and we weren't neighbors, but she was fun. I invited half the first grade class—all the boys, a couple girls that lived on my street, and Emily. Everyone showed up, except Emily. I didn't even notice until two decades later when my mother brought out old photos from the basement, looking for pictures of a long lost relative. I can see the old house on Forrest Street, the inside ripped to shreds by two hours of birthday party madness. We were all gathered around for a group picture, everyone getting ready to leave. No Emily.

I mean, I understand it was first grade. I'm sure no slight was intended. Emily got invited to every party. She couldn't go to all of them. And it's not like she had a car or a chauffeur to drive her around on her various social appointments. Maybe the invitation my mom sent to her house never arrived. Maybe my mom wrote the wrong address.

In second grade, The Ape kept sending Emily to the corner to think about what she had done. I remember The Ape putting on his ape mask the first time and making us laugh with his monkey shins. I remember how he used to make us laugh just as Emily had made us laugh in kindergarten and first grade. But when the bell rang, he demanded obedience and quiet. He told us it was what we would need to do in the real world. And when he sent Emily to the corner for mouthing off or laughing too loud, he would leave her there a long time. She was a bright, thoughtful girl, so she must have done a whole lot of thinking. Some days, she might have spent two or three hours in the corner. Some days, she forfeited recess. Some days, she had to eat cold lunch and drink white milk with The Ape in our cold classroom while the rest of us ate hot lunches and drank chocolate milk in the gym.

Our kindergarten teacher, Mr. Tom, had informed my parents that I was a slow Indian and wouldn't graduate from high school. I proved him wrong, but it took me until second grade to show my chops. The Ape allowed

us to work in our spelling books at our own pace. The spelling workbook was a big, oily bastard that took most of the kids in class until December to finish. I finished in early October. Emily, sitting mostly in the corner with no desk, finished two weeks behind me. I was teacher's pet to The Ape. He asked me to write the weekly spelling tests he offered to the other students. He asked me to craft crossword puzzles using that week's vocabulary words for the other kids to solve, including Emily. I wonder if she resented me, if she was jealous of my special place in class. I wrote out in longhand the rudimentary spelling tests and assignment sheets. I even delivered the afternoon milk tray from the kitchen. Had I been ten or fifteen years older, The Ape would have sent me to pick up his dry cleaning and buy his cigarettes from the gas station store by the V.F.W. While I was hustling for The Ape after finishing my workbook, Emily sat in the corner doing nothing but thinking about what she had done.

Everyone considered me the smartest kid as we entered the third grade. Dondi, my best remaining friend from school, once admitted to me I intimidated everyone in third grade. He said I ruled the class with an iron fist. I responded that Larry Barnett, the ten-year-old, 120-pound, third-grade delinquent used to scare the hell out of me and everyone else, but Dondi shook his head. I remembered wrong, he said. Even Larry followed my lead. Dondi said that, in fact, Larry was only the third most intimidating kid in class—Emily had Larry beat out, too.

I remember little about her in third grade. She was no longer boisterous and since I was the smartest and she was a girl, Emily was no longer worthy of my attention. The Ape, the corner, and all that thinking about what she had done fixed her but good, as they say. It must have been that year where she acquired that superior, persecuted air. I lost track of her.

In third grade, R.J. Steeby still used textbooks copyrighted in 1972, the year I was born, a fact I thought was cool. My mom, who commuted to Grand Rapids every day for work, didn't think that was very cool and had the bright idea to enroll me in the new gifted and talented program in the G.R. public schools. One day a week, I would wake up at 5 a.m., ride with my mom to the city, and attend this special school for gifted kids (Not necessarily "smart," mind you, but "gifted"; "smart" being an abstract word based on the IQ test that could no longer be considered an objective indicator. Lots of kids were "smart," see Emily, but not everyone was "gifted."). Getting the school district's permission to take me out of school for a day a week was my mother's second foray into confronting that esteemed board of elected white people (more on the first later). She explained that Wayland and its 18<sup>th</sup> century teaching methods would stunt my intellectual growth and so on.

**I**T SEEMED THAT I WAS SO SMART by the beginning of fourth grade that they couldn't even keep me in class. Of course, not being in class made it more difficult to maintain good grades, the objective indicators of my intelligence, those letter grades we had all heard about but hadn't seen on our report cards until fourth grade. I struggled to maintain Bs at Steeby school. And in the gifted and talented program, I wasn't the smartest. I wasn't the dumbest, either (a short kid named Dusten took that honor; he wore a winter coat indoors and swore up and down that he remembered the moment of his birth), but I wasn't used to putting forth effort. And city kids were worldly, like those kids always getting in trouble on after-school specials. We Wayland kids (e.g., me) were more like the farm animals on Green Acres. I did the Tuesday gifted and talented thing for two years until my parents yanked me out and told me to go back to being the kid I was in second and third grades.

By the beginning of sixth grade, I had become a cult figure, almost a ghost of my former self. After the experience of going to school once a week with the after-school special kids, I thought Steeby Elementary was a big, fat joke. And to be fair, my teachers thought I was a big, fat joke, too. They hadn't seen my brilliance at that spelling workbook in second grade or how I dominated the room with my wit and charisma in third grade. I was in danger of becoming one of those Indian kids who starts smoking in sixth grade, drinking in seventh grade, skipping too much school in junior high, and sniffing glue or huffing gas in ninth grade. Selling pot from Hefty bags and cooking meth from my dad's barn was next and then, because I'm Indian, probably juvie and then prison.

Sixth grade just about did me in. Twelve-year-olds are pure evil. I got called fat, ugly, stupid, and retarded more that year than any other year before or since—combined. No one would have considered a boy the smartest anything (except maybe smartest ass) by the end of that year. The girls hit puberty and they knew the answer to every question. Boys were loud and, though years away from realizing that they were from Mars, they went to Jupiter, where they went to get more stupider. The smartest boys were always dumber than all the girls. The dumb boys, however, acquired popularity while nerds and dorks appeared out of nowhere like termites.

But for six weeks at the beginning of sixth grade, the old me was back. It was our teacher. A regular teacher would have bored me to death and driven me to my mom's cigarettes. A bad teacher could have done worse. But our teacher—later memorialized as The Drunk—was awesome. I was the smartest kid. School was fun again. Well, to be fair, our egalitarian Drunk implied that five of us were the smartest. Me, Emily, Dondi, Lisa Candelaria, and a kid who moved away in December named Ridge. It felt good to be king again—it felt right—and I blew the fifty bucks my dad gave me for my good grades on baseball cards.

It didn't last. The Drunk was an alcoholic. He stopped coming to work and we started seeing more and more of another teacher. She became our full-time teacher by Halloween. That teacher was a very, very bad teacher. I went from being the smartest kid to the most disappointing. Dondi went from being the smartest to being an overachieving jock with no future. Lisa went from being the smartest to being the spoiled brat daughter of the town mayor. Ridge went from being the smartest to living in Alaska.

And Emily went from being the smartest kid to being the biggest, most heinous bitch in the history of Allegan County.

We knew these things because our new permanent substitute teacher told us all these things in private conferences. She started to tell us all off.

**S** O I STOPPED BEING THE SMARTEST kid again in sixth grade. I did okay in junior high. I'd pick up a few A's on every report card, but I didn't do as well as my test scores suggested I should. In eighth grade, they placed me in Wayland's first gifted and talented class. My mom did a little bit of wrangling with the school board over that one, the board arguing that my grades and my failure in the Grand Rapids program counseled against trying me out again. But my mom was crafty. Whatever she did, it worked. It always worked.

I expected to see Emily (the smartest), Lisa, maybe Dondi, and a few others in my class, but I didn't see any of them. Somehow, "smartest" and "gifted" had become mutually exclusive at Wayland.

So my "gifted" class and I learned about Dante and Shakespeare and Elizabeth Barrett Browning and plagiarism, but I wondered what the smart people were doing while we watched *West Side Story*. The rest of the kids in my gifted class would never populate the top of the honor roll then or later in high school.

And then, near the end of eighth grade, my gifted class teacher's film-student daughter turned the goofy little screenplay I wrote for class into a short film. It was a re-writing of Beowulf involving smart, elitist kids who triumph over dumb, mean kids and their mothers. The director premiered the film at the Ann Arbor film festival. That same summer a literary magazine published by a community college English department published a poem I wrote about despair in middle school. Armed with two pieces of art, I turned into a small town rock star. Even the stoners compared me to the guy from Middleville who became the bassist for Metallica.

My artistic well dried up after that but the high school assistant principal still gave me a special plaque for proving that not all Wayland students are lifeless bags of flesh. I read my poem and they showed my film in front of the entire school at an assembly at the beginning of ninth grade. The football players and the girls' basketball team remembered the film and the suicides and the forensics team remembered the poem.

Once I became known as a screenwriter and poet, I returned to the throne of the school. I didn't have to do much to keep my title ("the smartest"). I took a lot of B-pluses and A-minuses, but I always carried around a battered copy of *Ulysses* or *The Waste Land* for effect. I carried one or the other around in law school, too, when I realized there was no difference between law school and high school—lockers, cliques, bad drunken sex, teary melodrama, sack lunches, bulimia.

I took the prize away from Emily even though she never took less than a ninety-five percent on a test, never once took an A-minus on her report card. I suppose Emily didn't care. She thought she was above high school. She was a beautiful young woman and attended all the cool kids' parties with her special brand of condescension. She had her snooty nose up in the air while she passed the time before she became an important and powerful adult. And she would drink too much peach schnapps at parties (she was an angry drunk). Though I never witnessed an outburst from her, I heard about them from others. Flying off the handle over some perceived slight, she'd tell everyone around her that they were nobodies.

But Emily was still a teenager and—as after-school specials taught us—teenagers make bad choices. She fell in love with a football player. She spent her time with people who made her feel fat and ugly. She obsessed over bad television dramas about wealthy white people. The biggest mistake was the football player. She did more for him than he did for her. He took all the college prep classes to be near her and he actually did okay, well enough to go to a decent college. She taught him to think like an adult and to stop smoking. In return, he drafted a list of ten pretty girls he wanted to fuck by the time he graduated. Emily was number two on the list. Her older sister, a Grand Valley State undergraduate, was number one. By the time Emily discovered the list, eight names had been crossed off. Only Emily's sister and Lisa Candelaria remained untouched.

I don't recall ever conversing with Emily in high school. I might have said "Excuse me" when I nearly spilled a beaker of partially diluted sulfuric acid on her new shoes once, but we never talked. We never said hello in the morning or nodded to each other as an acknowledgment of the other's brilliance or Anishinaabe confederacy. As far as I can tell, there was no jealousy or hatred between us other than the non-specific hatred toward all of us that emanated from Emily like an odor.

The next time I saw Emily after high school graduation and graduation parties, I was a third year law student, confident and laid-back about my future career and life as an Indian lawyer. I had just left my Immigration and Refugee Asylum Law class and entered the hallway. It was packed, as usual for the time of day, with first year law students leaving Kamisar's criminal law shouting match. I usually slipped out the back door to avoid people, but I was supposed to meet a friend on the other end of the building for lunch. So I pushed against the grain of 1Ls. I muddled through and looked up to see Emily standing right in front of me. She looked the same but tougher, meaner—a first year law student. Law school must have made her put up the defenses even stronger than usual. She saw me, too, and she must have recognized me. She stared me dead in the eye and paused for just a moment. The shock of seeing each other. I blinked first and in that instant she moved on, elbowing right past me. It was high school all over again. She didn't need to acknowledge me, speak to me, or catch up with me. We were nothing to each other.

**W**E SHOULD HAVE BECOME GREAT FRIENDS, compatriots, allies, something—two Anishinaabes, same lousy public school district, kindergarten through twelfth grade. We both got out of there and succeeded. We were both going to be lawyers, graduates of the finest, most prestigious law school in Michigan. We should have relied on each other for advice and counsel because we understood each other's past better than no one else.

But none of that happened.

I didn't see Emily again in law school. And then I graduated and moved out west. Sometimes I tell my friends the story about how I saw a woman from Wayland in Hutchins Hall and that she was Indian, too. I also tell them how she wouldn't talk to me in the hallway, leaving out the part about how I didn't talk to her, either. My friends

say that law school sometimes changes people and maybe she just turned into a bad apple. I say I couldn't disagree because I knew her from the beginning of grade school. But I also knew about her struggles against The Ape and the football player. And she knew about my struggles to be a "gifted" student, how I was a disappointment and an underachiever. We both survived our sixth grade substitute teacher. We both survived being Indian in a white, rural school district, with its attendant racism and sexism and other assorted bigotries.

But we had never relied on each other. I realize that we had always been rivals and would never be friends. The law school brush-off was the same brush-off we had been giving each other for twenty years. I think about all the times I saw Emily at powwows and camp meetings in Grand Rapids, Dowagiac, White Pigeon, and Mt. Pleasant when we were kids. We never talked. We saw each other and walked the other way. We always had. I don't remember a conversation with her. Ever. Not one.

It's been ten years since I last saw Emily in that hallway in Hutchins Hall and I haven't seen her since. I've been working in Indian law for those years and I've met a hundred Indian lawyers in that time. I've heard stories about a couple hundred more. It seems everyone who works in Indian Country knows everyone else. It's an insular community. You could fit all the Indian law practitioners and academics into one big corporate law firm and still have room for a large mergers and acquisitions or international finance practice group. There just aren't very many.

And Emily isn't one of us.

**I** MAGINE EMILY DID WHAT most of our colleagues at Michigan Law would go on to do—work for a corporate law firm or a corporation or the federal government or maybe become a law professor. That's what the law school wanted us to do. It was the method the school used to ensure that the alumni contributions would keep coming in and maintain the school's prestige. The law school counselors were willing to help me find a job in Seattle working for Berkman, Deloria, Goldman, and Petoskey or the Environmental Protection Agency, but they didn't help me find a job as in-house counsel for an Indian tribe. Maybe the same was true for Emily.

In my first job for a tribe in Arizona, I got paid about \$30,000 a year. Not bad money, but the real benefit for me was working at a place where most of the other employees were Indians. There were Navajos and Apaches and O'odham and Yaquis and Pomo Indians. My first major project in Arizona was going to the local school board to ask them to change their history textbooks to books that wrote about the local Indians in a better light than repeated references to the word "savage." It reminded me of my mother's first foray before the Wayland school board, demanding the same thing in 1981. The school board told me to get lost, but it was satisfying to try.

In Emily's first job, assuming she received the average job for a Michigan Law graduate in 1999, she would have been paid about \$110,000 and worked in Manhattan, D.C., Chicago, or San Francisco. She would have been the lone Indian working at a big firm with over 100 or 500 or 2,000 lawyers. She would be the token Indian. And when she went out with her friends at night, she'd be the only Indian in the group, the only Indian in the bar or restaurant. It would be just like law school. But maybe that's what she would want. Maybe she craved the uniqueness of being the only Indian in her social group. Maybe she could still be a Grand Traverse Band Ottawa and a lawyer for a big corporate firm with non-Indians for clients.

I've been thinking about what I've done and I can't come up with any answers. I don't know why we weren't friends. I don't know why we ignored each other as though we were ashamed of ourselves. I don't know why I was the smartest kid in high school and not her. I don't know why I keep thinking about her.

And I don't know what I will say to Emily if I ever see her again.