

By LESLIE SAMPSON

Lessons From My Past

THE OTHER DAY, I found a letter that my mom wrote me years ago, during the worst time of my life – while I was homeless on the streets of Boston. In the letter, she berated me for running away from my Chicago home, for running away from myself.

But it all seemed like such a good idea at the time. You see, I was a high school outcast. While my classmates were into the latest fashions and music, I wore black and listened to The Beatles. Then, when I was 16, I started listening to the New Kids on the Block. Only the “popular” kids liked them, and for the first time, I had friends. It had nothing to do with who I was as a person – but I didn’t know that then.

Then, two weeks after my 17th birthday, my mom and stepfather split up, and my mother and I moved to Kentucky, which I hated. As soon as I turned 18, I returned to Chicago to stay with my stepdad. Our relationship was shaky – he’d begun to blame me for the divorce. To get out of the house and make some money, I took a job as a waitress. At the restaurant, I ran into an acquaintance from high school. Lori and I had been in the same home-room, and we were both New Kids fans. I got to know her better at work, and we bonded. Shortly thereafter, in the dead of winter, my stepfather and I had a huge fight. Usually I listened as he accused me of ruining his marriage. But that night, I stood up to him. He threw me out.

Lori picked me up and suggested that we leave everything behind and drive to Boston. In my vulnerable state, it sounded like a pretty good idea. I didn’t want to return to Kentucky, and the New Kids lived in Boston. I packed the next day, while my stepdad was at work, and then we took off. With nowhere to stay, we lived in Lori’s car. In the mornings, we’d find a gas station with a bathroom.

We’d wash up in the sink and use the hand drier on our hair. We spent our days searching for work. At night, we’d drive to a nice neighborhood and park, laying the car’s seats flat so that no one could see we were inside.

After two weeks of this, we stopped at a gas station to inquire about jobs, and Lori struck up a conversation with the woman behind the counter. When she heard that we lived in Lori’s car, the woman invited us to stay in her cellar. She was a New Kids fan, too, and she said she’d help

us until we got on our feet. She also got us jobs at the McDonald’s next door.

Lori and I worked different shifts, and she would keep the car and park it. I didn’t know about taking the subway, so I’d walk about a mile and a half to work every day. I couldn’t afford new shoes, so I wore my thin canvas tennis sneakers. As winter wore on, I lost sensation in my fingers and toes. I was constantly shivering, filthy. Living near my favorite rock band was beginning to lose its luster. Meanwhile, Lori bonded with our landlord, and she invited her to

IN PURSUIT
OF MY FAVORITE
BAND, I RAN
AWAY TO BOSTON
AND ENDED UP
ON THE STREETS.
REFLECTING ON
WHAT IT MEANS
TO BE “HOME.”



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TRUE STORY

move upstairs. I remained in the cellar, and I wasn't allowed to shower unless I paid extra.

A couple of months later, I came home from work and the others were waiting for me – they accused me of stealing New Kids memorabilia and had tossed my belongings into the snow. I wasn't the thief in the house, but it didn't matter. They wanted me out. I had nowhere to go, and payday was two days off. I sat down in front of a store and counted my change. I couldn't remember the last time I'd eaten. I had no coat, no gloves or hat; the soles of my shoes were worn through. Then a van pulled up beside me. It belonged to a shelter. The driver asked me to come with him, and I did. I spent two nights there, then went to McDonald's to collect my last paycheck. I didn't have enough money to make it to Kentucky. However, my paycheck was \$2 more than the price of a ticket to my grandparents' home in Maryland. They agreed to take me in, and I got a job cleaning hotels.

I worked for a couple of years and started college in Kentucky three months shy of my 21st birthday. I was four years older than most of my classmates. I felt out of place – they partied; I studied. I instinctively began to lie about my background just to make friends. But then I remembered what I learned in Boston: "Fitting in" isn't all it's cracked up to be. I had my own unique past, and I was proud of it. I'd been poor, and I was richer for it. I didn't need to run.

Today, I live in Boston again, and I like it a lot better this time around. I'm a college graduate with a job at the *Boston Globe* and a roof over my head. And, yes, it might not be cool anymore – but I still have a soft spot in my heart for the New Kids on the Block.

Leslie Sampson works at the Boston Globe store and lives in Dorchester.