EMILY ANN WILKINS

Emily Ann Wilkins is a graduate of Genoa Kingston High School where she was involved with dance team, art club, foreign language club, diversity club, and Key Club. She is an art major with an emphasis on jewelry and metalwork. She hopes to one day own a jewelry business. This essay is meaningful to Emily because she has finally been able to clearly express this significant childhood event.

Emily wrote this essay in Rhiannon Catherwood's English 103 course during the fall of 2010.
He opened the door and shoved me into the laundry room, barking orders to clean the blood off my clothes before he saw me again. I climbed up from the floor and rubbed my elbow gingerly. I was still shaking. Whenever my stepdad went off like that, I just went numb to the pain and anger. He didn’t work, so he was always home. I don’t remember him ever leaving the basement. He was waiting like an untamed tiger, ready to pounce whenever I made a mistake. Sometimes I had no idea what he was yelling at me about. I loaded the washing machine, and it made that vibrating swish noise that relaxed my taut muscles a bit. I folded socks. Anything to keep my hands busy; I didn’t want to think or feel. I wanted to be numb. I changed into some clean clothes that I had in my pile. Everything smelled like mildew. It wasn’t very bright and the single light bulb flickered overhead.

He swung the door open, and it ricocheted back off the wall. His body filled the door frame. He was six feet, two inches tall and weighed about 360 pounds. I was only ten years old at the time; my older brother was eleven, and my little brother was about one. Finally, after standing there menacingly, he spoke.

“How can you be ten years old and not understand how to sweep the floor correctly?” His wild eyes and loud, deep voice made me sink away. I shrugged and looked down when he paused for a response. He was a strong believer in eye contact. He grabbed my chin and yanked my head up, demanding a response.

“Oww-I don’t know!”

“Everyone has a reason why they do the things they do, so ‘I don’t know’ is an incorrect answer. Think! If that is even possible for you.” He was constantly insulting me to make me feel like I couldn’t do anything right.

“The play place was too heavy for me to move, so I swept around it.” I was crying now.

“That’s total bullshit, you are just a lazy piece of worthless garbage.” He let go of my chin. “I pay all the bills and provide you a home. I shouldn’t have to do more than that, should I?”
I was not going to argue with him. It was pointless. I had tried before. I ended up with a slap to the face so hard that it bruised. He was gifted with witty replies and I wasn’t, so he always won in the end. When he pointed out anything having to do with money, I knew it wasn’t going to end well.

“Is it too much to ask for it to look nice for when your mother comes home? She is overworked and needs to come home and unwind after managing people all day.” My mom was at work all the time, so I did everything, from raising my brother to doing all of the cleaning, while maintaining all A’s in school.

“I’m sorry, I will sweep again.”

“Sorry isn’t good enough. After you sweep, you are grounded to the laundry room until further notice.” To make his point clear, he stabbed me hard, over and over, with the handle of the broom as he said each word. I was backing up and could feel the cold cement wall against my back. Tears were falling like a waterfall. He stormed out of the room, and I could hear the creak of the stairs as he went upstairs. I prayed he wasn’t going to grab his belt. I started sweeping furiously.

My other brother was standing silently outside the door of the laundry room. He rushed in. I collapsed in his arms.

“I hate him so much. I wish he would just die and go to hell.” It sounded muffled because my face was pressed against his shirt. I looked up and saw the agreement on his face.

“Come on, you have to finish sweeping before he gets down here.” He helped me stand up.

“When do you think he is going to let me out?”

“Before Mom gets home.”

“That’s not till late at night! It’s only like eleven o’clock!” The kitchen was next to the stairs, which were next to the laundry room door. I snuck into the kitchen and shoved a Twinkie into my pocket. I hadn’t eaten anything yet. I finished sweeping and sat down in a chair in the laundry room, waiting for the squeak of the uneven stairs.

My stepdad finally came downstairs, and I heard his slippers scuff against the ground as he walked over to analyze my sweeping job. It was perfect. I think it angered him. He slammed the door and locked it. My prison.

I heard my little brother’s wail of a cry. The ruckus had woken him up from his mid-day nap. I sighed and wished I could
comfort him. There was laundry from the last week in the room, so I started to do it. I would rather be in here than out there, I thought.

I waited and waited and waited. My stomach growled loudly. I ate my Twinkie, but I was still starving. It was 8:00 p.m. Watching the clock made the time seem to go even slower, if that was possible. The hum of the washer and dryer lulled me. I got sleepy. I lay down on the small pile of dirty clothes left on the floor. I didn’t care if they smelled at this point. I started drifting off. I adjusted my shirt; my mom bought it for me at Brookfield Zoo near Chicago. Oh, how I loved it there. We always had so much fun because it was just my older brother, my mom, and I who went. My favorite part was the butterflies. My brother didn’t understand why I went to the zoo to see them, when we had them at home. He preferred the monkeys. I told him he looked like one too. My mom laughed. She was pretty when she was relaxed; her eyes were really blue. We entered the souvenir shop near the food court. I automatically saw the bright blue shirt with a large monarch butterfly on it, and I fell in love. I had to have it, so I begged my mom. She said only if you give me a big kiss; I laid one on her cheek that made a loud smack.

I awoke to the door slamming open. He face was etched with anger and disbelief. I jumped up so fast my head was spinning. I tried to get rid of the gogginess. “Why is the laundry not done?” he demanded. I looked out the tiny window and saw it was black outside. Usually I would see the perfectly manicured lawn, bushes, and flower beds without a single weed in them. I focused.

“I’m almost done.”

“Your mother comes home in an hour. It better be done, or all hell will break loose for you, girly.”

He had pre-invented lies that he could spin to my mom, and she believed every word he said. He was a great actor—even I believed him sometimes. I wondered why he always had to feel powerful and better than everyone else. I think the guilt of not working really affected him. He blamed it on health issues.

I finished in the nick of time. My mom’s headlights probed through the tiny window that faced the front of the house. My stepdad opened the door.
“Did you learn your lesson?”
“Yes.”
“And what would that be?”
“Never disobey you, sir.” I was angry that he always acted like nothing happened, and he was so nice to me afterward. It made me sick. It was all a pretty little performance. Convincing to everyone, except those who knew the real truth.

“You can come out now.” I sat on the couch and pretended to be watching TV. I honestly wanted my mom to be happy, and she was when she was with him. She walked down the stairs and put her purse down. She looked haggard. I can never burden her with the truth.

“Hi! How was work?” I smiled.

“Ugh, same old, same old. Bridget doesn’t understand the concept of professionalism…” She kept going. I had heard this ten times before. Ignorance is bliss. I blamed the bruises on being clumsy, if anyone ever asked. The invisible wounds hurt the most. My life was a beautiful façade. I put my best mask on.

“Do you want me to make you a plate for dinner?” I asked in between chatter.

She didn’t know a thing.