

# *Sixth Sense*

*By Hudson Ling*

## **Preface**

Repurposing. The assignment is so limitless that it's difficult to figure out where to start. Take something you've written before that might have done the job in the past, but really lacked authenticity, feeling or worth. Give it a new purpose, and try again. Ready, set, go. Two past works immediately came to mind: My Common App college application essay and a narrative I wrote freshman year about my life's complications. Both pieces were about me, and both pieces did the job – Here I am! I was accepted to Michigan, and regarding the other paper, I pulled off an A.

Admittedly, I had a lot of help when I wrote my college essays. Throughout the process, I had hundreds of eyes on my essays and application: Relatives, tutors, college counselors, high school faculty, current Michigan students, you name it. But after all of the reviews and revisions, I then had hundreds of voices on my essays, too. The essay had great structure, which unfortunately eroded its potentially powerful content. The essay was supposed to be about me, but progressively the essay became about the “best version” of myself that wasn't always the real me.

The other work that came to mind was a narrative I wrote in the Lloyd Hall Scholars Program during my freshman year. Unintentionally it, it was kind of a repurposing of my college essay. It was more personal, legitimate, and fun to write, but it lacked structure and needed to be extended. Repurposing for Sweetland provided the perfect opportunity. I reread both original pieces, and decided that this wasn't an assignment; it's a story. When I took the rubric and guidelines out of the paper, I could think more clearly, creatively, and authentically. Writing this piece has made me realize why I love to write.

## Sixth Sense

The curious seven-year-old boy looks around the Chapel, making eye contact with individuals and then anxiously looking away. He mouths the words and occasionally glances down at the pamphlet. His feet quiver restlessly and his right hand plays with the small hole in his navy tucked-in Polo.

*“We believe in One God,  
the Father Almighty,  
maker of heaven and earth,  
of all that is seen and unseen...”*

Is it really, though? Does every single student, teacher and parent here *really* believe this? The inquisitive boy had memorized the Nicene Creed before he could even add or subtract. Even without any scientific knowledge or much development, he skeptically questions the reality of a God who created everything on Earth. But as he continued to question these things, he started to feel the nerves. Every time he questions faith, reality and death, a sharp pang of guilt and anxiety shrouds his mind and body. He continues,

*“For us and for our salvation  
he came down from heaven:  
by the power of the Holy Spirit...”*

Why does he question anything? He shouldn't think about these things so pedantically. These aren't just myths, lessons and beliefs – these are moral guidelines, to which his family had agreed to when they enrolled at St. Matthew's Parish School. The girl next to him taps him on the shoulder. He's lost in his convoluted thoughts and daydream, not even noticing that by now the rest of the Chapel is seated having finished reciting the Creed.

The Pacific Palisades Baseball Association. It seemed like the most important thing in the world at the time. A gloomy January afternoon, it's time for practice. And this is no joke – playoffs are right around the corner. All of the parents pop their champagne and motivate their boys to win these town bragging rights. The boy warms up with Brady and Daniel, starting up close and ultimately throwing “long toss.” With a massive wad of Big League Chew in his mouth, smeared eye black and his blue Dodger hat, he's ready to go.

The car ride home felt like forever. Even a first grader knows how brutal the West LA traffic can be after four o'clock. Even while watching SpongeBob on the TV screen in the car, he couldn't stop spacing out. He looked outside the window and saw a huge statue of Christ in front of the Palisades Presbyterian Church. Then, he started to hear the Nicene Creed, as if someone were whispering in his ear.

*“He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,  
and his kingdom will have no end...”*

It seemed like another reminder not to question anything. He put the blanket over his head and curled up into a ball as if he were hiding. After falling asleep, the nanny carried him into the house and put him to bed. The boy woke up from a nightmare of confusion and walked downstairs to find his mom and wait for his dad to come home from work.

He saw his nanny gazing out the window, looking sorrow and shocked. Even Rusty seemed a little down – maybe he didn't get enough Milk-Bones today. Tommy and Peter, the boy's little brothers, came inside from playing basketball because it started to rain. That seemed strange, too – it rarely rains here.

Finally, he went into his mother's room – he hadn't seen her all day. There were chairs fallen over on the ground, pillows all over the place, the bedsheets were scattered, like tornado damage. His mother threw the phone at the wall, sobbing and screaming to tell her son that

Daddy wouldn't be coming home today. This wasn't an extension of his business trip in Thailand. This wasn't a late night at the office. This wasn't even a divorce. His father had suffered a heart attack after hockey practice and didn't win the battle for life in the hospital.

There were no words. Not even tangible anxiety or fear or confusion or pain. Only numbness, nausea and dark fantasy – he wondered if he had actually woken up from his nightmare of if this were rather a trippy, horrifying phase of it. He fainted himself to sleep and woke up to dozens of people teeming the house. Like angels, they came bearing gifts, support, and warm hugs for the entire family.

*“We look for the resurrection of the dead,  
and the life of the world to come.  
Amen.”*

My life was never the same after that day. I remember being that boy, but I can't relive or recall that unique numbness. My early years felt out-of-body and as if I had no control. It was like I were living in the third person, and I've been trying to gain first-person control and agency ever since. The following years at St. Matthew's, people treated me differently. Sympathy. Pity. Condescension. I needed to find my voice. I needed to break free from everything I knew.

Most of my friends went off to Loyola High School, a strict all-boys Jesuit athletic powerhouse in the Los Angeles metro area. I instead decided to attend Harvard-Westlake School, an elite prep school boasting 40% of the 280 attending Ivy League and Stanford each year. Intensity now derived not from faith, but rather from academic competitiveness and rigor. Well, there was a strong sense of faith on campus, too, but it wasn't mine. Harvard-Westlake School is comprised of more than a 50% Jewish student body. It's the school that the Wall Street and Hollywood parents send their kids to. Harvard-Westlake immediately opened doors to different cultures, ideas, and life decisions.

Where honor codes, examinations, and texts are not formed and chosen in light of the Bible, Harvard-Westlake provided a completely new outlook on everything. I was older now. I started to think differently about girls. At St. Matthew's the teachers took the concept of Virginity and intimacy seriously, but never discussed sex in detail because of its profanity. My parents always assumed I'd marry a nice Christian girl, but we never discussed it because I grew up without a male figure to teach me about the birds and the bees. Maybe that's why my mother was so surprised when they met my first *real* girlfriend, Shira Michelle Levin.

On the outside, Shira's your central-casting Jewish American Princess. She's a 5'3 Beverly Hills blond girl who dresses in all black, drives a white Mercedes, and is vegan and gluten-free with the exception of challah. But she lived more than 45 minutes away, attended the Marlborough School for Girls, and her parents had almost no mutual friends with my parents. You can probably imagine that this surprised my mom.

*"The LORD God commanded the man, saying,  
'From any tree of the garden you may eat freely;  
but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat,  
for in the day that you eat it you will surely die'" (Genesis 2:16-17).*

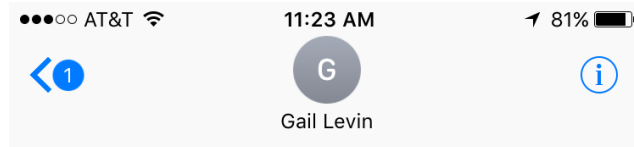
Shira was like the forbidden fruit. I could choose from any girl – a Christian girl, of course – to keep the family's roots alive. But that wasn't the case, and I had never really gone against my mom's expectations. The Serpent living in my mind emerged in wake of this new temptation:

*"Now the serpent was more crafty  
than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made...  
When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a  
delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable to make one wise,  
she took from its fruit and ate" (Genesis 3:1).*

11 points out of the 15 allowed. Just four points (one forgotten turn signal) away from failing my driver's license test, but the DMV gave me the benefit of the doubt. This was freedom. This was independence. This was dangerous. Shira convinced me to take the keys to our vacation house in San Diego, so I told my mom I was just going to sleepover at Henry's house.

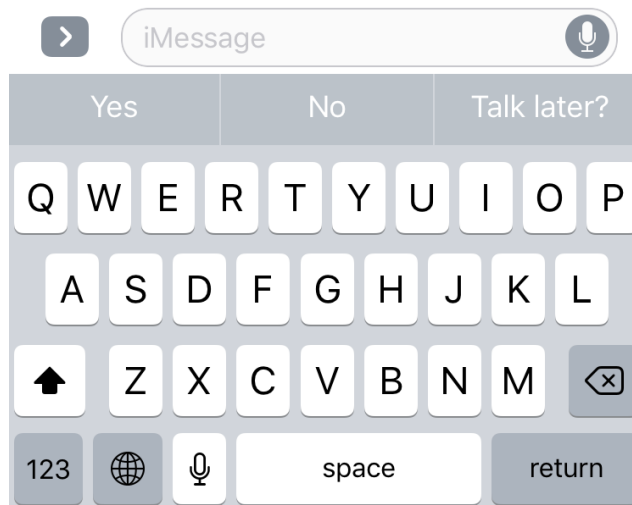
Sunroof open, 80 miles per hour, blasting Sweet Caroline, we made it to San Diego in record time. The feeling of disobeying my mom was nerve-racking but strangely addicting. The temptation was irresistible and made me even hungrier for independence, and my mind spaced out into my imagination. But what if my mom found out? My legs trembled as I heard panicking voices in my head. Do I take the exit to the house, or do I turn around and go home? The apprehension clouded my vision. "Wake the fuck up!" she yelled in panic as I swerved, dodging two cars and nearly missing our exit. We laughed, I smiled, and we continued to the house.

I set up Netflix and poured champagne. Locking hands, her Cartier ring rubbed up against a cut on my inner finger. At the sensation of the sharp pain I pulled away for a second. I took a deep breath and admitted I was nervous. We had never done this before. She reached for the bottle. Tipsy, intimate, and free, my nerves subdued. I'll spare you the X-rated details, but it was worth every bit of guilt. I felt loved and valued. I felt mature and sophisticated. Scratches on my back, bites on my neck, and a clear mind for the first time, frankly I felt like a man. She fed me a quarter of a Xanax, and everything around me slowed down. Reality drowsily transitioned into a dream.



iMessage  
Today 11:22 AM

Hi Hud, have you been able to get in touch with Shira today?? She's supposed to be home by noon and I haven't heard from her since yesterday!



Waking up to this text, I panicked and shot up out of bed. It was 11:23am, and we were a two-hour drive away. I forgot to turn the Read Receipts off, so I had to respond quickly. Another lie. At this point I was getting through each moment with more and more lies. I couldn't even keep my story straight; my mom saw a picture on Facebook of Shira and me on the beach, and I had to tell her we actually went to Malibu for the day. I couldn't even think rationally. Anxiety weighed me down and pushed me back like a strong gust of wind.

There was no time for thinking – we had to get home before this situation got worse. I grabbed the keys and her hand, and we scrambled to the car. I had never driven so fast in my life.

*“Blessed are those who wash their robes,  
so that they may have the right to the tree of life and may enter the city  
by its gates.  
But outside are ... the sexually immoral, the idolaters,  
and everyone who loves and practices falsehood” (Rev 22:15).*

Dizzy, dazed, and confused, I looked around and saw smoke. I felt a sharp pain in my neck, and I see her bruised and in tears. A man knocks on my door while his wife yells on the phone in shock. My car was a wreck, but that was the least of my problems. I couldn’t react well and again I felt like I was living in the third person, stumbling words and shivering in chills and fear.

I replay the car accident scene in my head whenever I get into a car: the smoke, the pain, and the feelings of failure and humiliation stab me in the gut. Was this punishment for lying? None of this would have happened if I had just listened to my parents.

I still get the chills, the quivering, and the ironic feeling of worry that comes with freedom and autonomy. Religion’s out of the picture – it’s disappointing my mom that makes me cringe. College decisions had to be made soon. And that meant the time to move away from Shira was coming soon as well. I wasn’t ready. I had gone through everything with her and also with my mother. Not to mention I had never even endured a real winter before. Good luck with Michigan weather, kid.

Soon enough the time had come. Ann Arbor. Boston: 804 miles away. Business, communications: different professional interests. Fraternity house, luxury apartment: different standards of living. Rural town, busy city: very different paces of life. Gradually, a disconnect



between us grew while dependence on each other dwindled. Phone calls and facetimes every night turned into jealous texts on Thursday nights. The “sorry, I actually can’t talk tonight because I’m \_\_\_\_\_...” texts arose more and more, ultimately turning into occasional small talk. I loved Michigan; it’s the perfect balance of academic rigor and going out. But despite living with 40 of my best friends, I still felt lonely, anxious and often depressed.

Animated. Poised. Composed. When I asked my friends and even people I don’t know well for adjectives that best describe me, these were the most common responses. Animated? Most likely. But poised and composed? That interested me. Only when I stepped out for a moment and looked at myself as if from the third person could I see why people chose these adjectives, even though internally I never really felt this way.

I was never the saddest person in the room. Unless you knew me and my past, I was the person you’d never expect to be sad. I suppressed and hid my feelings inside, covering them with a blanket of the “Ross School of Business student, varsity athlete, entrepreneur, musician, ‘fratstar,’ upper-class, privileged, Los Angeles-native, ‘resume kid’ and all of that bullshit façade that merely shrouded my insecurities. Preparing for interviews, writing applications, and slowly becoming an adult, I looked at myself on paper, but didn’t even think it was really me.

The alarm clock startled me. I could have sworn that I had just fallen asleep – there’s just no way it was morning already. I could feel knots of anxiety in my chest. I was so tired that it hurt to move. I popped a Lexapro and hit snooze on my alarm about six times. Finally, I shot out of bed and ran to the bathroom to brush my teeth. Stumbling down the stairs and underdressed for the Ann Arbor tundra, I hopped into the Uber. It was a busy day – it’s always a busy day. I keep myself so busy that I never have a second to stop and think about how I really feel – whether it’s with academics, work, sports, or social.



**Wolverine Support Network**

March 24, 2016 · 🌐

"I want those that suffer to feel like they have a voice and a hand to hold. I never want anyone to feel alone, as anxiety and depression can be isolating on its own."



**This Student Took Chilling Photos To Show What Anxiety Feels Like**

A picture is worth ~1,000~ words.

That's when I stumbled across Wolverine Support Network on Facebook. WSN is a student-led peer support community that empowers University of Michigan students to destigmatize mental health. I knew that this was my opportunity on campus to never feel alone. Of course, with my 40 housemates, volleyball teammates and colleagues, I was never *physically* alone. But in terms of being in a dark place, it often felt like an abyss. I reached out to some of my friends involved in WSN and registered for a weekly group.

In our first meeting, we went around the circle introducing ourselves and then sharing our "highs" and "lows" of the week. I was astonished by some of the backgrounds, hardships, and places some of these other students came from. And the most amazing thing was that they're

people I had never met before, yet after just 10 minute of icebreakers we delved into deep and intimate discussion. I listened carefully, and learned:

“I’ve needed to be around people more than ever, yet I’ve pushed them away.”

“My life is constantly out of balance; too much of one thing, and too little of another.”

“I don’t know where the time goes. I sit down to be productive, and by the time I snap out of my thoughts it’s time to move on to the next thing.”

And the list went on. I wasn’t alone. So much of what people said resonated with my troubles. I was ready to open up and share my history with anxiety and depression:

“I remember being that curious and lost seven-year-old boy...”