

It's Strange to Have Someone Look Up to You

I met Lizzy when I came home from winter break and rejoined the staff at Runza, a fast food restaurant that my friend's family owned. She was fourteen years old with a typical hair of adolescence. She wore a face of sneakiness and boredom, no matter what her mood. I was almost a foot taller than her, causing her to look over the brim of her thick oval glasses when we would interact. Lizzy didn't come off as an especially eccentric person. She didn't come off as an especially anything person. She blended in and wasn't looking to draw attention to herself.

It became clear that she had felt undeserving of that for some time.

“One study reports that at age thirteen, 53% of American girls are “unhappy with their bodies.” This grows to 78% by the time girls reach seventeen.”

- National Organization for Women Foundation

It was the day of the Christmas party, and I was working up front with Lizzy. It had been snowing all day, and we were bundled up in our Runza sponsored gear. I mentioned that I was excited to see everyone in normal clothes instead of our vaguely unflattering uniform of black polo and slacks. Lizzy responded that she was just going to wear jeans and a T-Shirt. I told her that I was planning on wearing a simple outfit too. She said that she would like to dress up more but she didn't really like her body.

“Research findings indicate that adolescents who can identify a positive role model in their lives have higher grades and self-esteem than those who can't, particularly when the youth knows their role model on a personal level.”

- Rachel Wise: *How Do Positive Role Models Affect Our Youth and Communities?*

Another day this winter the snow had made the restaurant so slow that Lizzy was sent home over an hour before she was scheduled to leave. She walked out in front of the counter to wait for her dad to pick her up. I was organizing various miscellaneous items underneath the counter, so we talked while she waited. She told me about a family friend who had become like her second father. Him and his wife I guess were always around, and made her feel at home. As she told me about these people she was so enthusiastic, so I kept prompting her to tell me more. She talked to me about her second family until her dad was able to come get her...
an hour and a half later.

“It is well documented that refusing unwanted advances can result in aggression, physical or sexual violence, or even murder. As a result, it is extremely common for women to adopt coping mechanisms and evasive strategies (such as evoking the spectre of alternative “male ownership” in the form of a boyfriend or a husband) to try to escape such situations safely.”

- Laura Bates: *‘Being a woman is scary’: the unspoken danger of declining a man’s advances*

Lizzy approached me one day with the information that she wanted to break up with her boyfriend, but didn’t want to hurt him. As a fellow empath I related to this uncomfortable feeling, but gave my best advice, including personal experiences and as much validation as possible. At the end of the conversation she told me that I was right, so she would break up with him...
after one more month.

“When young people are connected to caring adults, communities do well.”

- Mark Edwards, Executive Director, Opportunity Nation

One day my dad came home from a work fundraiser with a complimentary water bottle from the company “First Management”. The next day at work I noticed the same water bottle on a shelf. I asked Lizzy if it was hers. It was, her dad worked for First Management. I told her my dad had gotten the same one from some fundraiser for his work, and she lost her mind when she thought that there was even a slight chance our dads knew each other. She was so excited. I knew that she had misunderstood what I had said, and there was essentially no way that my dad had met hers, but I humoured her because it gave us something in common.

“Not everyone has the same good support systems. Even though there is growing acceptance for LGBT people, many teens don't have adults they can talk to about sexual orientation. Some live in communities or families where being gay is not accepted or respected.”

- KidsHealth.org: *Sexual Attraction and Orientation*

“So I have a dilemma”

...

“Alright what's going on?”

“So I’ve been dating this boy for a couple weeks, he is the sweetest, but I just don’t think I’m straight”

This conversation came completely out of the blue one day. Unprompted. It was almost comical how open she was sometimes. Younger teens are often seen as being closed off and broody, but Lizzy always represented the reality that people just want someone to listen to them.

Being a teenanager can be nearly impossible. Every little thing can seem challenging, especially when odds are stacked against you. But everything can be made a hint easier with just a little support.