

An Interview with Jill Quist

by Leah Sackett, *Mud Season Review*

“I was going to change my identity from being a good girl to being a bad girl. Bad girls got in trouble. Bad girls were infinitely more popular. Bad girls had boyfriends.”

–Jill Quist

What was the required amount of time and distance from these events to write this essay?

It never really occurred to me to write this essay until I started working on my memoir. When I started outlining events that were turning points, this one was a must. How much time and distance did I need? I started working on the book, and this essay, about 40 years after it happened but the memory is still vibrant and resonant.

How did this coming-of-age experience impact your identity?

As I said before, this was a turning point for me and a defining moment. I had decided a couple of years earlier, when I was in eighth grade and unpopular because I was that kind of kid did well in school, was a bookworm, and a teacher’s pet, that I needed to make a change. I consciously decided that when I went to high school, I would reinvent myself. I was going to change my identity from being a good girl to being a bad girl. Bad girls got in trouble. Bad girls were infinitely more popular. Bad girls had boyfriends. The event I described in my essay confirmed me as a bad-ass and made me a minor celebrity for a while in my group.

How did this coming-of-age experience impact your relationship with your mother—both long and short-term?

Before this happened, I think my mom wanted to live vicariously through me. She wanted to reimagine her life through me, not making the same mistakes—she married a gay man when she was in her early 20s, she went on to have six kids. In retrospect, she would have done it differently. She saw me as her way of redefining herself. Short term I was a rude awakening and a big disappointment to her. Longer term, we had a complicated relationship that has lived beyond the grave. I loved her, but we were angry at each other for much of our lives. We didn’t see eye to eye on many things.

Did your father's absence set a tone for the rest of your adolescence and your relationship with him?

My father's absence was highly influential in my life, especially in terms of my relationships with men. I made colossally bad choices—I always chose men who were unavailable. You name it: married men, men with steady girlfriends or fiancés, gay guys, priests—I never actually went out with a priest, but you get the picture. Generally, I chose men who were bad for me. Often, they were in relationships with friends of mine. It was very self-destructive behavior. Ironically though, it was in my comfort zone. It's what I grew up with—what I knew, it was predictable. In most cases, I knew it would end, and end badly, and that made me feel safe because it was so familiar.

Were there consequences for the evening activities?

There were punishments for the other kids, but not for me. The boys were all suspended or expelled. That was hugely consequential because they were all in their senior year of high school, graduating in a month. We knew it was likely to affect their college admission. My girlfriend "Alexis" wasn't allowed to see any of us, and she was required to come straight home from school, she was grounded, her phone calls were closely monitored. She was a prisoner. My parents did their usual good cop/bad cop routine—my father said that living without my friends was punishment enough and my mother wanted to ground me. He won. That said, life at home and at school was extremely lonely and tense for a while.

You reflect on simpler times with your mother. Were you able to achieve this simplicity again?

My mother and I did finally achieve some simplicity in our relationship after my own daughter was born and I became a mother myself. I saw things differently once I was a mother. I was able to walk in her shoes and understand how frightened and vulnerable she must have been when my brothers and sisters and I were young. I understood not only how frightening society was, but what she went through as a straight woman married to a gay man. It's kind of amazing how long she kept it all together.

What drew you to write a coming-of-age essay?

As I said earlier, I started to write a memoir (about what it was like to grow up with a homosexual father and a heterosexual mother at a time when it wasn't ok to be gay), and this essay, "The Best Bad Girl," was a natural fit. I had to bridge the change in my identity from goody-two-shoes to teen bad-ass.

What authors influenced your writing style?

This is a tough question for me. I don't know how I would describe my writing style, so I don't know who influenced it. I pay a lot of attention to beginnings and endings. I particularly enjoy nuanced chapter endings and studying how other writers do it. I'm not poetic, but wish I were. So, I study how authors use imagery and metaphor and wish I could imitate it. I also study how writers weave sensory descriptions into their stories. I read voraciously and widely so it's hard to narrow the field of writers who influence me, but some of my favorite writers of memoir and fiction are:

Memoir – Mary Karr, Jeannette Walls, Tara Westover, Maggie O'Farrell, Sue William Silverman, Jeanine Cummins (*A Rip in Heaven*), and one of my all-time favorites but a lesser-known work is *Girls of a Tender Age* by Mary-Ann Tirone Smith.

Fiction – Jeanine Cummins (*American Dirt*), Ann Patchett, Anne Tyler, Elizabeth Strout, Kate Elizabeth Russell (*My Dark Vanessa*), Dennis LeHane, Kate Atkinson, Tana French, Ann Napolitano, Alice Sebold (*The Lovely Bones*).

I've noted book titles that were significant for me, and I highly recommend them.