PERSONAL ESSAY

Sydney Sweeney and I

// BY LILY SCHECKNER

Fluorescent TV light flickering over my face, I sank deeper into the couch. I grabbed a fistful of popcorn from the bowl in my lap. I was bewitched by the new show I was watching: a brightly colored, nostalgic, quick-witted gem of a one-season wonder. It was called "Everything Sucks."

It came out in 2018, but I binged it in the throes of the COVID-19 lockdown. Like nearly every other eighth grader with their life turned upside down, I was lonely and confused. I felt that time was relentlessly passing me by as I laid in bed, ignored my homework, gorged on chips and slept through my Zoom classes.

Unsure what high school would look like with masks on, I turned to coming-of-age media. It was never satisfying. All the actors who were supposed to look like me were two decades my senior, and the struggles in "Gossip Girl," "Riverdale" and "Pretty Little Liars" were all booze, pills and murder — worlds away from my problems.

"Everything Sucks" was a breath of fresh air. I felt affirmed every time the opening credits rolled — because yes, everything did suck. The characters were played by true teenagers, some as young as I was in that era. And, despite the show taking place in the '90s, I recognized the struggles of those characters within myself. Their angst, their families, their mistakes — it was all familiar.

Long before she was a rom-com bombshell or a controversial TikTok sound bite, Sydney Sweeney played the foul-mouthed, red-lipped Emaline. I saw a fraction of myself in her. Like Emaline, I was handed an adult body as a child, and I didn't know what to do with it. I was extroverted and insecure. Emaline felt so real, down to her appearance — far from the airbrushed models in the other shows I had seen.

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Emaline was lauded as a beauty despite having some of the frizzy, pimply imperfections we all struggle with. She was unapologetically loud and complex, a popular theater kid with a mean streak. Yet, throughout the season, she softened, breaking up with her boyfriend and falling in love with a shy character named Kate. It was the first time I understood love between women, mostly because it wasn't between women. It was between girls — fumbling, unsexualized, teenage girls. After finishing the show, I sat on the couch for a few minutes, thinking. I realized I was bisexual.

Years later, long after COVID-19 ended, I was reintroduced to Sweeney via fractured, glittery clips of her breakout role as Cassie in "Euphoria." I never watched the show — perhaps to preserve that image of the imperfect Emaline. Sweeney didn't owe the preservation of that image to anyone. She had simply outpaced me, growing up far faster than I ever could have imagined. Still, I had no interest in this new coming-of-age show, another airbrushed story of booze, pills and murder.

The increasingly polarized dialogue around Sweeney, before and after the infamous American Eagle jeans ad, was mostly in my periphery. I usually thought people were taking it too far, but I couldn't help noticing her evolution from inspiring my queer awakening to being a marketing tool for the male gaze. It made me sad in a very distant way, like growing apart from a friend in preschool and seeing them at graduation. Or, maybe more accurate would be a comparison to myself — looking back on little me, before she was changed by parents and boys and bad friends.

I don't begrudge Sweeney for her evolution. I'm thankful to Emaline for giving me someone to recognize myself in. I hope every kid finds that person — and, oddly enough, I think there's something special about doing so through the remoteness of a TV screen. In a lot of ways, that distance is what allows me to live with the duality of Sweeney.

In a time when parasocial relationships are practically the norm, I find it comforting to be able to hang on to what Emaline once meant to me without knowing what her actress stands for now. I will never know if her current image is what has been created for her or something she embraces. It doesn't really matter. Either way, I know she once helped me embrace my 14-year-old self, in all my imperfections and awkwardness and complexity.

Whatever you think of the jeans ad, Sweeney propelled me to now — the last year of teenagehood — and the end of my coming of age.

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WEEKEND RECOMMENDS:

WATCHING YOUR FAVORITE ACTORS' EARLY ROLES