

Caitlin Ghegan

Writing Sample: Essay

Searching Justin

I remember that the air was full of noise. We'd finished up with dinner; mom and dad had just cleared away the dishes. Wet, sudsy cleaning residue fizzled on the table. It was late, raining, and cold. It was winter. I was six.

Mom got a phone call. Something wasn't right. I could hear her in the study—her voice grew louder and louder beneath her distinct mask of calm. It was a tone I'd learned from an early age to fear. It sounded nice. But it wasn't really nice. I was burning with curiosity, shaking in anticipation of what I knew would be horrible news.

Mom called dad into the study. I could hear them talk in low murmurs, in voices they usually used when discussing where to hide Christmas presents.

A few minutes later, they emerged. Mom sat my brother, sister, and me down on the couch as she perched on the edge of the coffee table. She stared at us for a moment, her hands folded tight, before she spoke.

"Justin's going to jail," she said.

My little brother Michael was confused and asked what he did.

"He did a very, very bad thing. He *lied*. And when people *lie*, they need to be punished."

I didn't understand.

"Why is he going to jail?" I asked.

My mom didn't answer at first.

"Why is he going to jaaail?" I whined.

"He was bad. He helped someone kill someone," she said coldly.

I couldn't understand. I started to cry. My mother gripped my shoulders with her hands and stared hard into my face, her jaw tight, her teeth grit. I stopped.

"We don't cry over him," she snapped. "We don't cry for liars. He did a very, very, very bad thing. He *lied*."

To this day, I still don't understand exactly what my brother did, how he ended up in prison. All I have are bits and pieces, odds and ends of a shredded story my mother still refuses to tell.

Did he really kill someone?

On a gray and lazy weekend during my senior year of college, I popped open my computer and consulted Google. I didn't even know where to start. Justin B. Ghegan was just a drop in the bucket, a red headline in a faded news column. Did the Internet even exist when he went to jail?

As unlikely as it seemed that I might find some semi-credible information, if I was going to understand who my brother was, I'd have to dig up the bones. I wanted to know the truth.

That is, if I could find anything.

I did a quick, general search first. I typed in his name. Access to an Iowa news bulletin on escaped prisoner Justin B. Ghegan would have cost me a five-dollar monthly subscription fee. Did he actually escape? I didn't know. Did I want to waste five dollars? No. I tried again. Justin Ghegan, arrested for fraud, lives in California... but he never lived in California. That much I knew. I went back to the list. Chuck Ghegan. No. Not ever. My brother may have been a ghost for most of my life, but I know he was not nor never will be a Chuck.

I reduced myself to a basic background check website. BeenVerified.com. It sounded somewhat legitimate; I'd been parsing through random and less-than-relevant results, and the first search on this site was free. It was the only one I would need. I read the introduction screen:

“While we are constantly updating and refining our database and service, we do not represent or warrant that the results provided will be 100% accurate and up to date.

BeenVerified is a database of publicly available sources of information aggregated for your convenience...BeenVerified does not make any representation or warranty as to the character or the integrity of the person, business, or entity that is the subject of any search inquiry processed through our service.”

If the sources were public, why was Justin's record so hard to find?



My parents adopted Justin several years before I was born, when he was 8. His biological mother was an addict, crippled by cocaine and meth and mania and stupors. Her husband left, leaving Justin to care for her. Ginny, his thin, horse-faced social worker, painted him as a sweetheart with a broken past. It wasn't his fault that he was prone to temper tantrums. He couldn't help what had happened to him.

Mom never told me exactly what made her and dad chose to adopt him. Given mom and dad's childhoods, their years of frayed clothes and negligent, impoverished parents, I'd say they wanted to give a kid what they once couldn't dream of having.

Several years after his adoption, for reasons I didn't learn until I was in my teens, he was sent away to a boarding school. He had plans to join the navy. I still have his academy picture, his black eyes staring a hole into the wall behind the cameraman, his lips a grim line, his white cap far too large for his shaved head. He was going to turn it all around.

We lived in Massachusetts. Fate and some sort of destruction brought him to Iowa.

“Disorderly Conduct.” A person commits a simple misdemeanor when the person does any of the following: engages in fighting or violent behavior in any public place, makes threats or threatening gestures which the person knows or reasonably should know is likely to provoke a violent reaction by another, or, by words or action, initiates or circulates a report or warning of fire, epidemic, or other catastrophe, knowing such report to be false or such warning to be baseless.

Date unavailable. Charge dismissed. But what was the actual crime? What did Justin do? How could a single charge apply to a dozen different misbehaviors?

I read on.

He was arrested and suddenly, he wasn't my brother anymore. At least that was what mom said. She said she'd disowned him, whatever that meant, I couldn't talk about him, especially not at school, especially not with kids who could tattle to their parents. Every September in elementary school, the month of About Me projects and chicken-scratch biographies, I was reminded of my secret.

After Justin was arrested, my stick figure family photo grew one person smaller.

“Why'd you draw Justin?” my mom asked in first grade, leering down at the picture. I looked up from my crayons.

“I dunno...” I mumbled, my shoulders hunching, sinking into my ribs as though I might turn into a turtle hiding in its shell.

“Okay.”

I could tell she was mad. Her lips pursed. Her eyes were dark and still. Mom didn't always say not to include him. But her silence said everything. She'd pushed him out of her life. Hiding him hid her shame, her failure to turn a troubled child into a good person.

But why couldn't I keep him in my pictures?

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“*Minor Out Past Curfew.*” *Date unavailable. Fine of \$50.*
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Justin certainly wasn't around for most of my childhood, but I clung to the idea of him. I couldn't help it. He called from prison on every holiday, every birthday. His calls were as precious as Aunt Patti's Easter cards, full of confetti and five-dollar bills.

“...accept call charge from inmate at...correctional facility?”

I turned from the phone, pushed hard against my little ear, and called out toward the dining room, where cake crumbs littered the table and where dad knelt, stuffing wrapping paper on the carpet into a black garbage bag.

“Mom, I think they're askin' for money!”

There were instances in later years when I would hang up on his calls by accident, absentmindedly thinking his calls were from charity hawks. I've always been the token smartass in the family, but let's be honest: I've had plenty of dumb moments.

My mom put down her glass of wine and rose from her chair at the head of the table. She took the phone from me, which snagged at my gold hoop earring. I recoiled.

“Hello?” she sang into the receiver.

I could hear the rumble of the feminine, automated voice, asking my mom for money again. Mom pressed a button, which beeped loudly. I took to my favorite, useless activity of

swinging the phone cord back and forth as it stretched from the wall to where my mother sat at the kitchen counter.

“It’s Justin,” she said. “He wants to talk to you.”

I don’t think my mom completely disowned Justin when he went to prison. I knew later that he was written out of her will, but he couldn’t disappear entirely. There were too many relatives who knew he existed, too many pictures she would have to hide or throw away. And in all honesty, I don’t think she could have gotten rid of them. He was still hers.

She held the phone out to me and I grabbed it from her hastily.

“Hi Justinnnn!”

For many birthdays, I always shouted my greetings to him.

“Hey kiddo, happy birthday!”

“Thanks!” I squealed in return. “Happy Birthday to you tooooo!”

His birthday was the day after mine: Groundhog Day, as I reminded him for several years. When he was 11, he actually told my mom specifically not to have me on his 12th birthday. He didn’t want to share the day.

Aunt Barbara said he didn’t sleep much until mom brought me back to the hospital.

“Aw thanks, sis. How’s your day goin’?”

“Good, good, good!”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah! I got lots of presents.”

I rattled off the spoils, chattering over the water running in the sink. Mom returned to the dining room to fetch the dishes. I told him about my birthday cake, decorated with Esmeralda in a purple dress. He didn’t know who Esmeralda was.

“From Hunchback of Notre Dame!”

“Oh, alright!”

He asked if dad was there. I hollered toward the dining room. Dad walked into the kitchen, still dressed in his tie and suspenders, to take the phone from me.

“Daddy’s here. I love you, Justin!” I said.

“I love you too, sis.”

I looked up to dad. He smiled to me as I handed him the phone. I hugged him tight, my arms trying in vain to lock around his belly, then drifted to the family room, where Lindsey and Michael sat watching television.

My love and admiration for my father knows no bounds. He’s always been towering over me, six-foot-six, always my pillar of strength, my well of wisdom. Looking back at these evening phone calls, I can’t help but think of dad, speaking so evenly to my big brother. Whereas mom’s voice was sometimes clipped and high when she talked to Justin, my dad’s was calm and kind. Always. Whether Justin was in trouble with the guards or it was just another birthday, dad was always steady.

My brother’s feelings towards dad, mom mentioned once, were what first pushed him away from our family. I don’t know what dad did. I just know that there were bricks and broken windows and words.

Justin said he’d kill him, that bastard. He’d kill him.

Mom says Justin cried when I, barely a year old, became so scared of him that I screamed every time he came near me. Of course, I didn’t know any of this until I was in high school. I wish I knew more.



“Harboring a Runaway.” A person shall not harbor a runaway child with the intent of committing a criminal act involving the child or with the intent of enticing or forcing the runaway child to commit a criminal act... A person shall not harbor a runaway child with the intent of allowing the runaway child to remain away from home against the wishes of the child's parent, guardian, or custodian.

Date unavailable. Case dismissed.

Who was the runaway?



Most of the trouble I got into involved some sort of sibling conflict. Maybe I hit Michael because he told me I was stupid. Maybe I pulled Lindsey's hair because she told me I was ugly and fat. They pushed my buttons because I never could resist reacting, because it was my older sibling duty to take to their nagging.

My mother had choice punishments for her three biological children, each a different style for each of her very different children. I, being the “smartass” got the anger corner, the spare chair beside the liquor cabinet, a sometimes half-hour-long sentence of emotional limbo. I got the fear treatment.

I loved, still love, my mom to pieces. But she scared and can still scare the living shit out of me. I knew from a very early age that it was bad to nip the hand that gave me everything. I knew that if I did, she would roar. When I got in trouble, she screamed so loud that her voice seemed to rip the back of her throat: “Go sit in the chair!”

Being her oldest, I inherited her greatest love and her greatest expectations. I never wanted to disappoint her. Obedient, I sat there. She would move away from me and go wash the dishes or sit in the living room to read an issue of *Cooking Light* or make a phone call. I

sometimes tried to move out of the chair to go hide in my room, but her second set of eyes always caught me; her snarls sent me back to the corner. This didn't work for Lindsey, who by age eight simply stopped listening.

After some time, during which my siblings often sneered at my shame, my mom would come back.

"Do you know why you're here?" she'd ask stiffly.

Experience would teach me it was better to confess my crimes.

"We don't do that," she'd say. She'd follow with things like "Do you think that's okay?" or sometimes "Are you an animal?" and often "Bad things happen to people who do bad things."

When it came to trouble with my siblings, it was always the same message.

"Your family is your family. Your friends will come and go but you will *always* have your family. Your family will always love you."

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"Contributing to the delinquency of minors."

Date unavailable. Case dismissed.

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I don't remember the first outsider I told, but I remember Kristen McLaughlin was there when Justin came up in a conversation in fifth grade. She sat beside another girl; both perched atop the waterlogged wooden picnic table, staring at me like I was crazy.

"He *killed* someone?"

"Well, um...don't tell anyone. But, um, he drove the getaway car?"

"So he didn't kill them?"

"Uh... I don't think?"

“But how did he end up in Iowa?”

“Um...”

How could I explain? Where would I begin?

Justin was my brother. Justin loved me and told me so in every phone call, every scribbled greeting on brittle yellow paper. I was his baby sister. He cradled me as an infant, pushed me across the living room on my yellow Playskool car. I didn't want to keep him a secret. But what part of my relationship with him could I have shared with other kids? What about him did I really know?

“Why *Iowa*?”

I learned from few experiences that a sketchy answer would result in dirty looks or awkward silence. I'm sure some of them thought I was lying when I said “prison.” Eventually, I didn't answer “prison.” I told them I didn't know.

A few years later, when he got out of jail and they asked what he did for a living (he was an adult and therefore must have had a legitimate job), I always lied. If he snagged a position mowing lawns, I said “landscape design.” Two months later, a job at the supermarket deli would turn to a sous-chef position.

I was in middle school when they let him out of jail. I practically skipped around the hallways, giddy that he was free and that I could someday see him, but I couldn't share my excitement, even at home, where my mom treated the news with as much interest as she would have paid to an ad in the Sunday issue of the Boston Globe.

“*Voluntary Absence (Escape).*”

Date unavailable. Sentence: \$250 jail fine, 30 days.

His story seemed to fall together and fight itself all at once. A part of me wanted to believe that this patchwork story I had already learned matched up with the truth. A part of me wanted to know everything. Maybe he did escape prison. Maybe he did kill someone. Maybe this was all real.

But I didn't and still don't know how and if all these fragments fit together, how he ruined his life, what crimes he committed, or why he thought he had to.

In Iowa, at the age of 17, I met Frankie for the first time.

“Who’s that, Frankie?” I could hear Justin coo as I followed my brother’s wife Tiffany into their house, gingerly pushing at their scratched wooden door. I pulled off my snow boots and looked up at my pudgy, eight-month-old nephew, comfortably situated on my brother’s hip. He had Justin’s dark eyes, Tiffany’s scraggly straw-colored hair. Justin went forward to hug me tight. The infant reached out at my hair, long and red and shiny, yanked hard, and gurgled happily.

I really adored that kid. Instantly.

My mom, bursting forth with a wide smile, reached for Frankie, babbling in baby-speak that bewildered him. I took a look around the room and tried to hide my true opinion. It wasn’t the place to raise a baby. Three or four semi-feral cats climbed fuzzy towers stained pink and orange and brown. Dog kibble and post-blizzard slush trailed to and from the kitchen. Hair and fluff of every color coated the worn, mismatched couch cushions. From where I stood, I could make out a layer of dust on the dining room table. I tried not to make assumptions about how my brother lived. There was only so much he could afford.


But I certainly wasn’t in Boston anymore.

“Bette!” I heard another voice from the corner. I turned as another woman came into the room and hugged my mom. Her long dark hair fell perfectly straight. She wore wide, round glasses. She seemed like she was in her late twenties. I had no idea who she was.

She turned to me with a wide, white smile.

“Look at how big you are, oh my gosh!” she laughed. “I remember seeing you in your baby pictures! I’m Alaina!”


In Iowa, at the age of 17, I learned my brother had another sister. Of all the things I didn’t know, how could I have never known about Alaina?



“False Reports.” A person who, knowing the information to be false, conveys or causes to be conveyed to any person any false information concerning the placement of any incendiary or explosive device or material or other destructive substance or device in any place where persons or property would be endangered commits a class “D” felony.

Date: 10/07/1997. Disposition: sentenced.

Until I had checked the Internet, I knew nothing of the bomb threat. “False reports” seemed so vague. Why did he lie? Why didn’t anyone mention this to me?



We left Justin’s house before it got too dark. The frozen cornfields surrounding Waukon were barren, unfamiliar, and seemed dangerous after dark to “city girls” like mom and me. Justin wanted us to stay. Mom said we had to go; the narrow roads in the river valley were unlit and winding.

Looking out the window of the rental car, I watched the sunset kiss the trees, watched chunks of ice float down below in the Mississippi River. At other, narrower stretches of solid,

sparkling white snow, we passed ice fishers, gathering their kits and poles and sliding slowly back towards the banks. We passed crooked mailboxes and houses with boarded up windows and dirt roads that led deep into dead forests. We passed abandoned cars with cracked windshields and tractors tilted sideways.

I hadn't had the best impression of Iowa. Waukon, in comparison to home, was derelict. And Tiffany's family, every adult tattooed with fairies and pink panthers and pentagrams, didn't take well to the Ghegans. They criticized how I held Frankie. They took my quietness as rudeness and snobbery (Justin's sister-in-law went so far as to referring to me as "Miss Priss" in conversations with Tiffany on Facebook). When I told Tiffany's mother that my mom and dad were sending me to college next year, she pursed her lips and offered "Tha's nice."

I wasn't stupid. I knew how they felt about my family. They'd seen pictures of our house, our cars. They heard about trips to Hawaii, Cancun, and the Virgin Islands. Where was their share? Where was Justin's part of it? He had our name, didn't he?

But he wouldn't get any of that. My mom and I went to support him, to be present at Frankie's baptism. At the church, the Dotzlers sat on one side, the Ghegans on the other. Wasn't that something to do at weddings? I had thought baptism was supposed to represent some sort of new unity. Tiffany threatened to push me further away.

I turned my gaze back to the road and sighed.


"Iowa sucks."

"Ya think?" my mom chuckled. "Don't wanna move here any time soon?"

I shook my head.

"I feel bad for Justin," I murmured.

"I don't," she said. "This was his fault."




Somewhere on the page, I found what I had searching for the entire time I was reading Justin's scant background check.

"Attempted Murder." Prison years: 5. "Voluntary Manslaughter." Date: 01/01/1998. Disposition: sentenced. "Assault while participating in felony." Date: 01/01/1998. Disposition: sentenced.

Though I'd been told throughout my childhood that he had been involved in a murder, I didn't really know how to emotionally handle the information I'd found online. Somehow, I felt vindicated. I could finally see that Justin's past was actually worth hiding. I finally had proof of the vague, incomprehensible crime he'd committed, though I didn't know how it happened exactly.

But loud and clear and digitally accessible, it still seemed to explain what my family and I had hidden for years: Justin didn't just make mistakes. Justin was a murderer. My brother was and always would be known as a criminal.



I had always carried the secret of Justin with me everywhere, but also the weight of Justin's secret, my confusion and torn feelings. I had gathered shreds of his past: his volatile temper, how it drove him to threaten my dad when he was a teenager, how it forced him from the navy, how it led him to the wrong crowd. So how could I love a criminal?

The answer is that I simply didn't really know him. Nor did I know what to make of him. He was my brother. He was family. How could he possibly be this monster? Didn't people change? How could this person, the one who supposedly treasured his baby sister, be so cruel?

I knew only stories of his vicious anger. But then, one night, his anger was aimed at me.

In the years following my visit to Iowa, Justin had kept up with my life through the Internet. On Facebook, he followed mostly everything I posted. He commented on pictures of my boyfriend and me kissing at senior prom (“don’t let mom see”), statuses about papers in college being too difficult (“come on smart sister keep it up!”) and how I was sick of all-nighters (“go to bed!”). I remember wondering if all older siblings were this annoying.

Of all the things I wish he hadn’t seen, I wish he hadn’t seen my stupid political comment about Osama. It all seems so stupid now.

I couldn’t support the “death parties,” I wrote. That night everyone was cheering and dancing in the streets, I was honestly terrified. People wrote how safe they’d feel that night, but in my mind, I pictured Al-Qaeda, perusing pictures of our victory dances all the while plotting revenge for their fallen leader.

And being a naïve twenty-year-old social media addict, I vented my critique on Facebook. He replied almost instantly.

“Sleep safe tonight, sis! We killed that son of a bitch!”

I couldn’t agree. Revenge was a cycle. Hate begot hate.

“He killed Americans we should be celebrating!”

But hadn’t we killed thousands of Iraqis?

“Not enough.”

But wasn’t it cruel and terrible to kill innocent women and children?

“It’s payback.”

The exchanges continued. I started trembling uncontrollably as his answers poured onto the screen. Iraqis were evil people and they needed to be eradicated. We needed to kill them. We needed to be rid of them or else we couldn’t be safe. Who cared if other people were in the way?

In hindsight, I know that neither of us were in the right, that both of us were blinded by how we felt.

“We should strap that bastard to an electric chair and drag his body through the streets!!!”

My stomach had never churned so violently. My heart seemed to slam against my ribs. I had never connected Justin my brother to Justin the criminal. Where was Justin the dad then he said he'd kill the children too? Where was Justin, my brother, when he said my view of the world was so naïve? He continued to list cruel, bloody punishments that Osama and other Iraqis deserved. His commentary, growing more and more vicious, no longer offended me because of political stance, but because I couldn't come to terms with Justin's horrifying ideas of justice.

What was worse was when I realized my own friends could see everything, could see such violent posts attached to a familiar name: Ghegan. My name. His name.

“Who's Justin?” they would ask.

I started to delete his comments. He realized this quickly.

“You're acting like a child. Don't you know by now people have different opinions than you?”

I blocked him. This, too, he realized. He sent me messages through Tiffany's Facebook. I deleted them. He sent me texts. I deleted them. He tried to call. I ignored him. I cried and cried and struggled to hide my tears when my mom called later to reprimand me. Lindsey had told her about the conversation.

“You shouldn't have done that,” she snapped.

She told me how stupid it was for me to be so involved in an issue so complex and volatile, that I was being far too sensitive, that I shouldn't have been dumb enough to post something like that on the Internet. And she was right. I knew it.

“How many times have I told you? He’s a lunatic.”

I knew she was trying to protect me. I didn’t know it would hurt so much if and when she failed.



Murder 1st Degree. Date unlisted. Prison years: ten.



He has a daughter now. Sophia Izabel. She looks a lot like Frankie, who’s a big kid now and rides the bus to kindergarten, who got in trouble for temper tantrums a month ago according to Tiffany’s Facebook. Last month, he “left me a voicemail” using Justin’s phone.

“Hi Auntie Caitlin. You’re beautiful and um I love you!”

I am fully aware that ignoring my brother is cruel. I feel guilty when I don’t return his calls, when I delete pictures of Frankie and Sophia from my inbox. But even those are tainted now.

“You get those pictures from Justin?” Mom would. “Of the kids in the pool?”

These photos, she noted, came when the roof was leaking, when Christmas was around the corner, when Justin got fired for what felt like the hundredth time. I couldn’t get past the idea that Justin was not always the Justin who called to say “happy birthday.” He was a man who asked my mom for money when Tiffany had spent all of theirs on two new cats or mountains or “designer” baby clothes or mountains of Mountain Dew and cigarettes. Somehow, after that stupid, childish political talk, I adopted almost all of the observations my mom made. He could be manipulative. He could be violent. He wasn’t the person I expected or wanted him to be.

A year and a half later and I’m still frustrated with our Facebook conversation. I hate how I’m still so embarrassed that others saw his comments and hope that most people thought him

some strange, removed cousin. I'm still embarrassed by the extremeness of my reaction, how poorly I handled the conversation, how I might have hurt his feelings by cutting him off so sharply.

More than anything, I'm angry with my mom for how much she never told me. I'm still so confused.

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If a record can't make a representation of a person, then why am I so hesitant to let him back into my life? I can't help but wonder why I can push him away so easily. Part of me thinks that it's my sense of pride, that I'm behaving like the child Justin says I am. But there's another part of me that wonders what kind of relationship I could have with a brother that was never really there.

Bob, Bette, Caitlin, Michael, and Lindsey. We go to restaurants as a party of five, go on vacations as a party of five, share successes and losses and stories as a party of five. We're the Ghegans. We're lucky, fun, composed, intelligent, and happy as hell. Our school system loved my brother, my sister and me, praised our involvement and good grades and how active my mother was in everything we did. The Medfield families all knew who we were. All five of us.

To my mom, to most of my friends, to most of the world outside of Waukon, Iowa, the Ghegan kids are Caitlin and the twins. Caitlin, Michael, and Lindsey. I have always been the oldest. I am Bette and Bob's first child.

Maybe it's a lie. But maybe, to some degree, it's better that way.

*Note: name has been changed.