



PEGASUS MAGAZINE

SPRING 2023



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Editor

Megan Grant

Graphic Designer

Michael Bello

Cover Art

Raven Amaro

Faculty Advisor

Paul Pat

Editorial Staff

Aniyah Barr

Sloan Glover

Sage Glover

Lucy Morris

Special Thanks

Allyson Gleason

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EDITOR'S NOTE

I am very grateful to have had the opportunity to read each submission from my fellow DCCC students. The themes that were easily recognizable among the submissions were loss, anxiety, and growth. Many of the writers were extremely vulnerable with their pieces, so we wanted to ensure that each work had its space to shine. I hope as you read these literature pieces that you also become encouraged and inspired to see the beauty in vulnerability.

I would also like to take the time to express my gratitude to the following individuals: My faculty advisor, Professor Pat, for giving me the opportunity to be this year's student editor for Pegasus. Your advice and confidence have given me the confidence to continue to strive in the next stages of my life. Michael Bello, our graphic designer, who has assisted in completing this project. Your patience and drive have made this experience worth it. The editorial staff who took time to carefully assist in the decision-making process. Lastly, a big thank you to the writers for trusting us with your work. Without it, this would have not been possible. I wish everyone all the best in your future endeavors, and I hope the magazine inspires you as it did me.

Megan Grant
2023 Editor

Obscura

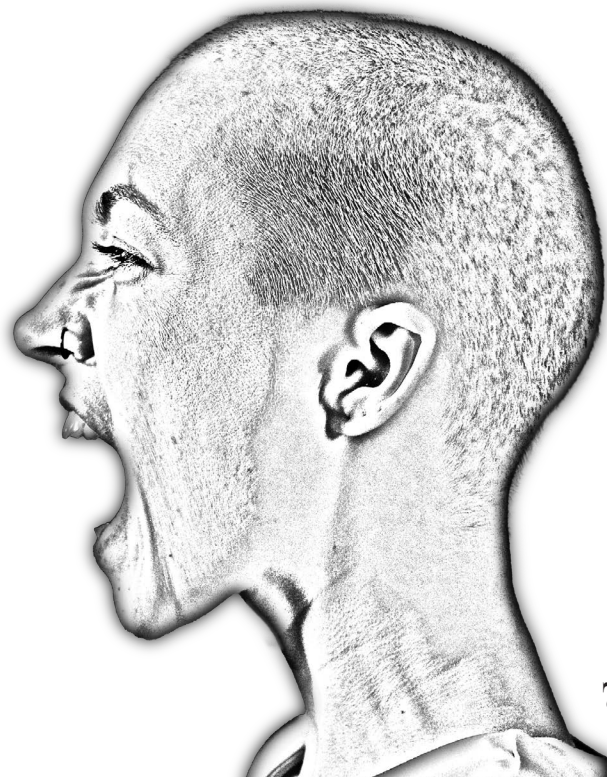
KEVIN CLARK



That Night

CHELSEY KERR

The silent screams that tore through me shattered
the very fabric of my being
slowing time and space.
All of the pieces I sewed together
to make the assemblance of the person I was
broken apart
leaving me shattered and raw
suspended in the vicious grips of grief once again.
All of the meticulously placed walls I erected
around myself crumbled at my feet
leaving the broken little girl, I fought so long to conceal.
The false strength and hope I projected disappeared
the moment I heard you were gone.
As the discarded pieces of myself fell at my feet
I sunk to my knees trying to put them back, wrapping my arms
around myself as if sheer act of will could hold
them in place, to where they laid for the last 19 years.
The earth should have shaken from the screams
tearing through me.
The stars should have fallen from the sky
from the inhale of grief that consumed me.
The sea should have encompassed the world
that no longer existed without you here.
Instead, I just broke
silently screaming
suspended in time.



A Touch That Binds

TYKIRA WASHINGTON-PRICE

I scanned the signs directing me toward the parking lot I had to turn into. To my left, in parking lot A, was the maternity ward. To my right, was the cancer treatment center. My heart sank. The choice between life and death floated before me and I could no longer turn away. I swallowed hard, blinked tears from my eyes, and turned right. I lumbered up the pathway leading to the information desk, my car keys digging into my palm. The security guard stopped me, his eyes glazing over my face once before heading back to his cell phone.

“May I help you?” he drawled, a bit of an annoyed edge to his tone.

I had to clear my throat before my voice could emerge.

“Yes, uh, I’m here to see my grandmother. She’s...” I trailed off, my mouth unable to form the words my heart knew I would have to eventually say.

“She’s here,” I finished and bit my lip. I wore a purse, high heels, and a wallet filled with credit cards and old bank receipts, yet I never felt so young, so childlike. The possibility of living in a world without my grandmother had sent me racing backwards through the years. And there I stood, a grown toddler in desperate need of a nap and a hug.

This time, the guard looked up to stare fully at my face. Whatever he saw in my expression caused his eyes to soften. In a tone that sounded loads lighter, he asked “What’s the name?” I stammered my name and began to fumble around in my purse for my driver’s license. The guard’s lips curled up slightly.

“No Miss,” he said, holding out a hand to steady mine.

“What’s the patient’s name?”

“Oh,” I breathed, embarrassment fighting with my budding grief.

I muttered my grandmother’s name, moisture filling my eyes. The guard typed something on his keyboard and a list of names filled the computer’s screen.

“She’s in room 285,” he said, pointing to the elevators down the hall.

I was sure I thanked him, though I didn’t remember my mouth moving. The elevator ride was short, my strides were even shorter. Ahead of me, room numbers floated in a swirling haze. 283, I counted. 284 followed. My knees knocked together painfully, impeding my stride, but I told myself to keep moving. There was no telling how much time the woman who raised me—my truest friend—had left on this earth.

Room 285. I place my hand on the handle, paused to still myself, then opened the

door. My grandmother lay on her deathbed, her breaths shallow, her eyes closed. I struggled to remain upright. Once the living embodiment of a thunderstorm rolling over peaks and valleys, to be a blessing or a curse to the land before, the woman before me was a husk of her former self, the hint of a rain among scattered clouds.

Not knowing what else to do, I rushed to her bedside to take her hand. I gripped her fever-warm fingers so tight the hold hurt me, yet my grandmother didn't even stir. She had no idea I was there, seated beside her, with hot tears falling steadily down my face, and I did not, could not understand how this was so. How could a person who owned a quarter of my heart not know that I was there with her? The knowledge of this crawled through my guts like ants through a farm.

Why wouldn't she squeeze back?

I looked down at our intertwined hands, and a memory struck me suddenly. I was seven years old, and I was now old enough to be left unattended. I didn't know why my capability to be left alone was a good thing, but I didn't care. Members of my family had traveled to South Carolina for our annual reunion, and I had been desperate to go. I was eager to see more than the four streetlights lining the sidewalk of my block, each standing guard like sentinels my grandmother had hired for my protection alone. I was ready to see a world that lay beyond my small avenue, and I could only hope the world was ready to see me, too.

My uncle, my aunt, my grandmother, several cousins, and I packed into the car and rode for many hours. And when it felt like I would never regain the feeling in my backside again, we had pulled in front of a house that looked like it could fit into the backyard of our house back in the city. There were trees everywhere and animals I had never seen before running around my feet. I knew what a chicken was from pictures, yet seeing its plump body flap its wings mightily, just barely leaving the ground, before it sauntered off, was such a sight for my young eyes. I decided right there and then that I would be a chicken. And for the rest of the day, I chased and flapped and hopped just like my new friend did.

As the evening approached, and after I had ran inside to grab a quick drink of water, I raced back outside to find my grandmother near my new friend's birdcage, which was little more than a wired enclosure. She didn't hear me sneak up behind her because I was eager to show her how I saw my chicken-friends pecked for food. I watched as she coaxed one of them from its cage, and held it firm under one arm as she would one of her heavy church purses. She stroked the top of the chicken's head, smoothing down the feathers. And then with a swiftness I didn't know she possessed, she gripped the chicken's neck and wrenched it to one side.

The chicken went limp in her arms. I cried out, too startled to stay quiet. My grandmother spun, and ran to me, chicken still in hand, its limp neck bobbing up and down. She knelt so our eyes were level and asked me what was wrong, but I couldn't answer. My eyes refused to leave the chicken's dangling head. My grandmother followed my gaze, looking to the chicken, and back to me, a slight smile playing on her lips.

"It's okay." She pulled me to her, gentle yet firm and patted me on the back with her free hand. Her fingers glided over my scalp, up and down my spine and the back of my neck with ease. I sagged into her arms and cried, letting her touch and shushing lull me into a daze. I did not understand. The experience left me completely torn. Was my grandmother a killer? The snuffer-outer of life? If so, how could her touch provide me with such comfort?

I look to my grandmother's hand now, the monitors and machines breathing for her, and the thought had hit me once again. How could those same hands be both life and death for me? I was no longer that seven-year-old, watching my grandmother kill an innocent creature. I was a grown woman and a mother of my own. I knew that what I had witnessed was merely just the natural cycle of life. The chickens were raised and caged to be food. And in that my little buddy had served its purpose.

Yet here I was again, wondering the same questions decades later. How could my grandmother's hands be both death and life to me? Life in the way she cooked and kneaded dough for drop biscuits and sweet potato pies. Death in how she didn't squeeze back when I squeezed. How had she not acknowledged my presence in the slightest? I had seen first-hand the power in those hands. Where was that power now?

And I suddenly understood. My grandmother was leaving this world and I was going with her, tethered to her by my hope that if she could only hear my voice and know my touch, she would come back to me. The room door opened. Footsteps filled the space behind me. My husband knelt beside me and gently uncurled my fingers. He rubbed the back of my grandmother's hand, smoothing away the crescent-shaped indents my nails had left behind. Then he took mine, and kissed my palm before our fingers interlaced. Was that what life was, the grasping and letting go of hands? The hold and release, exchanging one grip for another? And how would I know that it was time to let go?

My grandmother didn't tell me if it was time to hold tight or be free. She only died, with me forever clutching.

Hope

CHELSEY KERR

I have always been the cynic
While you lived your life clinging to hope
You believed in something bigger than us
You had your faith and your signs
Things that I could never understand
I never wanted to belong to a God that took so much
I waged wars on myself
While you tried to save me
I used to rage and scream and break into the nothingness
With the hopes, I wouldn't feel such emptiness
While you prayed for me to heal
You prayed for me to stop hating me
You begged me to feel
And now I'm sitting here praying to a God I never understood
Praying that you are happy
Looking for signs
That you are okay
Begging that all the things you wanted
me to feel
will end up healing me

Piles

RAVEN AMARO



Charmed I'm Sure

KARA MCGLOIN

Nostalgia introduces herself to you at the first taste of adulthood. Her grip is firm with the handshake she gives you, her fingers cool and light like your mother's on your feverish forehead as a child. Gentle and soft, with the grin of a shark, she speaks to you like a friend with soft memories of times that twinkle with easy joy. Somehow, someday, not too far away from the day you first met her (around the time you start to notice the carvings of your laugh lines around your eyes) she becomes the best friend that stabs you with a smile. Somehow, she turns into the betrayal of a lover with the ghost of their last kiss on your lips. She's suddenly the nausea of the memories from your childhood bedroom or the familiar scent of your mother's perfume. She reminds you of her name in the memory of your father's laugh. She makes you weep with the thought of sunny afternoons watching cartoons with your pig-tailed sister.

She's always there, sneaking up on you when you least want her to.

Nostalgia is cruel. She's saccharine, her sickly-sweet feeling a rock in your stomach that speaks of times long passed and people that are long gone. She whispers of places that you will never see again, of people that just exist now in your memory.

The Past is tricky. He greets you like an old friend, even though he's long gone himself. The Future doesn't bother to greet you, but The Past makes it a point to—even if the only direction you can move is forward. Backwards doesn't exist to you, like a pawn in a chess game. No matter how much your heart aches to feel the sun on your cheeks in your grandfather's fishing boat or the gentle caress of your mother tucking you into clean covers, The Past doesn't come back. Not for you, not for anyone.

The Past, he's mocking. You can hear it in the way he teases you with his lover Nostalgia, late at night when you can't sleep or in your apartment making dinner from a recipe that won't taste like your father's. It will never taste the same, and Nostalgia and her love won't let you forget that. They won't let you forget anything, really, especially not the things you would like to forget most. Nostalgia and The Past are two of the oldest and greatest poets that man has ever known.

Long before you were here, they whispered painful memories into the ears and the hearts and the brains of both the greatest Kings and the lowliest of paupers, the same wishes as yours wandering into the hearts of dreamers and cynics alike.

You long to live with The Past again just as much as you wish to run away from him. You can do neither.

Once you're introduced to The Past, once you start to hear the whispers of bygone times and nearly forgotten places, you begin the endless march to meet The Future. The two of you will never be acquainted, like two ships that pass quietly in the night.

The Future is filled with dreams and possibilities, of "what ifs" and "if onlys". The Future is more of an idea than anything else, unlike the concrete mess of his brother and his paramour. He's more of a sounding board for your own dreams and less of a tease to remind you of what was. The longing you feel for The Future, lust filled and thirsty, is never satisfied. Instead you will only ever meet the forgotten middle brother, the least liked brother of The Fates.

Shy and quiet, The Present is the loneliest brother—he is neither dreamed of nor sought after, nor lusted after or avoided in the way of his much more alluring brothers. He simply Is. The two of you exist parallel to each other, the most quiet and steadfast of companions. Little mind is paid to The Present, as how do you reflect on a time or a place or a person that you can still see or touch or feel? The Present whispers to The Past, sharing all of your secrets, sharing what's yours as the time slowly passes behind you—he serves as a quiet observer, undetected as you are blindly seduced by the easy attraction of his two brothers.

When Nostalgia introduces herself to you at the first taste of adulthood, it's like you've already met. She knows you better than you know yourself. She greets you like an old friend. The gossip she's heard, it's had her dying to make your acquaintance. Her grip is firm with the handshake she gives you, her fingers cool and light like virgin snow in the mid-December winter.

4:30

PROPHET OGEDENGBE

I live in a world of my own making
At 4:30 in the afternoon I started a game, now I can't stop playing
What is it I was supposed to do?
Do I live or do I leave?
Do I swim or do I sink?
Do I stay or do I fade?
I still gaze through the light of yesterday.
I live with regret and endless happiness.
You might try to call me confused.
I started this game so I could keep playing.
I gave myself something to do.
Do I live or do I leave?
Do I swim or do I sink?
Do I stay or do I fade?
I survive through the light of yesterday.



Map of My Stars

ISABELLA MELVIN

My body is a map of stories.

The acne scars on my face tell of a face-picking habit I've never grown out of.

The eyebrow scar shouts I'm clumsy.

The chipped fingernails say I bite them as a nervous habit.

The stretch marks on my stomach whisper the battle with food.

The faint scars on my arms and thighs speak of healing.

The callouses on my feet talk about how I have my dad's genes.

The sweat on my palms agree with the callouses.

The under-eye bags drift in and out of sleep,

Hoping for an undisturbed sleep tonight.

My body gains a new story every day,

And I love it for that.

Who Am I?

GREYSON

For 14 years of my life, I was perceived as a girl. People referred to me as Mia and used female pronouns. However, there was something festering inside of me. I would look in the mirror and couldn't recognize the person staring back at me. When I was 6 years old someone called me a boy and I'll never forget the relief that ran rampant through my body. I didn't understand it but looking back it made sense. At 8 years old, it clicked. And when I mean clicked, I didn't yell to my third-grade class, "Hey everyone, I'm a boy!" The air around me shifted and I was able to identify something different within myself. It felt massive and world-changing but I still had no idea what it meant.

From that point on things got much harder. Even though I was able to recognize a change I still couldn't figure out what it was yet. Puberty came into the picture and threw a complete wrench into everything. I was starting to understand why I was so uncomfortable with everything that was going on inside of me. I'm in the wrong body. I'll never forget when I got my period for the first time. I was sitting in the bathroom and a feeling of intense pain and fear washed over me when my Nana cried out in jubilation, "Congratulations! You are finally a woman!"

I will never forget the impending sense of doom that took over my entire body because now it's real—my body confirmed that I am a girl.

So, by the time I reached middle school, I was able to put language to how I was feeling, at least internally. While the word Transgender felt foreign on my tongue it was what fit the best for me. Now having this information I knew that I had to do something about it. So I carefully planned how I would tell my parents.

My dad and I were having a conversation about man caves of all things. I had just recently got the entire second floor to myself, and we were trying to figure out what to name it. He suggested the "lady cave," and I jokingly suggested the "man cave." I assume he didn't hear my teasing tone because after I said that he stared at me and asked: "You aren't one of those kids who wants a penis, right?"

Every single alarm bell went off in my brain. I felt exposed, a deer in headlights even though that's not what he saw. Instead, I softly chuckled, walked to my room, and closed my door as my world felt like it was collapsing in on itself.

This was how I decided to come out to my parents with my therapist looking at me with surprise as she did not expect me to come out that way. After I retold the story,

I answered my dad's question with "Yes, dad, I want one." The silence enveloped me until I couldn't breathe and my mom had to leave the room. She slid down the bathroom wall as if she just heard that her daughter died. In a way she did.

My dad stared at me in silence, trying to figure out what "caused me" to be this way. The ride home was intense and awkward as no one knew what to say. I kept thinking about how I woke up that morning so excited to share with them my truth and now all I was left with was the aftermath of what I did.

I came out to the rest of my family and told them I wanted to be called Greyson and my name was legally changed in January 2022. I got top surgery last April and have completed my transition for the time being. There are still days when I don't know where I "fit." I feel like I'm not male enough or female enough, so whenever I'm around either I feel like an imposter infiltrating the opposite gender. I'm in this perfectly imperfect middle ground that leaves me wishing I could go all in like other Transgender people. I don't want hormones or bottom surgery, but at the same time, I feel incomplete as if I'm some Frankenstein monster with mismatched body parts.

I have difficulty looking at my gender experience as a superpower and more as a weakness. I can be brash, loud, and rude, but also, shy, quiet, and honest. I can fit in with both, but I don't feel like I belong enough with either. It feels like no matter what I do I'm not masculine or feminine enough, not male or female enough. My dad always tells me, "You're just Greyson."

And I know he means that as a compliment, but it makes me feel alone because I'm the only one in the box. Even now I still don't know where I fit. Our world still sees gender as such a controversial topic, and there are politicians that are doing all they can to stifle my communities' true and authentic selves. It feels like they don't know what to do with people like me who fall somewhere in the middle.

Sometimes I wish our society didn't put so much emphasis on what body parts we have. It would make me feel a lot better if we didn't. At the end of the day, this journey is ongoing, and I am doing my best to see where it takes me.

Patterns

RAVEN AMARO



Public Usually

SHAKEARA ABNEY

Feeling sweaty, flustered, and nervous
but still excited, I pondered the idea
of speaking up.
Speaking up because I know I have the
words that most may benefit from,
but I pondered in my own fear.
Fear that teaches me to remain silent.
To remain silent in fear.
Silent with mass.
Silent outside.
Silent inside.
Silent with friends.
Silent with family.
Silent in fear.
I wonder.
Why does silence ponder?
Ponder the unknown. Ponder the fear.
But what silences silence?
Silence is silenced by pondering to speak.
Speaking up.
Pondering confidence.
Pondering courage.
Pondering allowed me to silence my silence
and to thrive in my growth.
Pondering has allowed me to understand
the importance of pondering.
Why sit in silence when I can speak up?
Speak up for me.
Speak up for fear.

Speak up for silence.
Speak up with mass.
Speak up outside.
Speak up inside.
Speak up with friends.
Speak up with family.
Silence in fear no longer exists.
I defeated the fear.
I have communicated to myself
the importance of speaking up.
The advantages of speaking.
The benefits of speaking.
I understand that challenges
are uncomfortable.
Challenges are frightening.
Challenges are necessary.
And challenges are appreciated for
the uncomfortableness that it offers.
Without it, there is no future.
No future for self.
No future for growth.
Fear is silenced by growing
through the challenges.
So why remain silent?
Why ponder in fear?

Asthma

ALISON JENNINGS

Since I can remember, I struggled to breathe.
It was normal for me,
taking small breaths.
Don't exert yourself,
Remember your inhaler.
One day, my nanny called to attention how
strange that is
That I cannot simply take a breath,
That it must be so scary!
She could not fathom how I choked,
With nothing around my neck.
The one thing, most natural and free to
humans, I cannot do.
My sore lungs were just mine.
There is an invisible hand,
specifically for my throat.
I had a curiosity: how does this happen?
My father told me I was a sick baby,
Lucky to be breathing at all.
Instead of being grateful for my half-
functioning lungs,
I searched for comfort in damaging ways.
Cigarettes reached parts of my lungs
oxygen cannot.
The smoke encased my esophagus,
Providing a false sense of comfort
Amid my asthma attacks.
I always regretted that last draw.
Was it worth it?
Not at all, but watch me
do it again.

My Mother's Ears and Eyes

EDISON HONG

My mother's ears are gates to the unknown,
Listening to foreign sounds that she cannot decode.
Her eyes, windows to the world, gaze in wonder,
But the language spoken is a melody that's a blunder.
She hears the whispers of people from near and far,
A symphony of sounds that she cannot comprehend.
She watches the expressions on their faces,
Hoping for a smile but it remains a stranger.
From job to job, she goes with high hopes,
Hoping to find a place where she can thrive.
But with every door that closes, she weeps,
Her tears of sadness a testament to her strife.
She works hard, her hands are calloused,
Her spirit strong, her will unbroken.
But the unfamiliar tones of this new land,
Are a barrier she can't seem to overcome.
Still, she presses on with grace and dignity,
Her love for her family a beacon of light.
Her eyes and ears, now familiar with the sounds,
Hear the music of a better life, and they shine bright.
So here's to my mother, a woman of strength and courage,
Her eyes and ears a testament to her perseverance.
She may not know enough English, but her heart speaks volumes,
Her tears of sadness a testament to her resilience.

Moonlight, Memory, and Forever

KIER STROUBER

Somewhere is moonlight,
that holds a memory.
Of us under it,
together
still,
and
forever.

Killing In Our Name

ISABELLA MELVIN

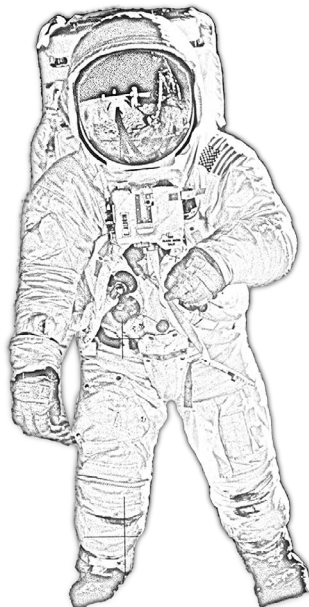
Coral's stretching arms of glory,
Full of life and color.
Soon sent to purgatory,
For guilt that is not theirs.
Fish swim within,
Making lives in the rock.
Forever they have been
Until they were not.
Shrimp graze,
Taking their time.
Soon their world set ablaze,
Never returning to its prior.
Crabs sweep the floor,
Looking for rubble.
Now they wash upon the shore,
Limp and weary.
Stars move along the sand,
Undisturbed.
Now in a wasteland,
Struggling to find food.
A pod of whales goes stead,
Protecting the young.
All is bloodshed,
The littles are not spared.
Mighty predators of the sea,
Fin slicing the water.
Once so lordly,
Turned into soup for the rich.
Loving dolphins coo,
Happy to be.
Led into tides askew,

To be killed for being high
on the food chain.
Octopus wriggling about,
Hiding in plain sight.
On a plate with trout,
Sliced alive.
Nets plentiful,
Mounds of trash.
We spread out tentacles
In places we should not.
Killing our brethren,
Diminishing their size.
Strike then run,
Cowards we are.
Power is a sad thing,
We kill without meaning.
Pull back the drawstring,
Let loose upon all.

The Man On The Moon Speaks

JASON PAPOUTSIS

The man on the moon doesn't speak
Yet there's solace in his silence
And stillness in orbit
His hands hold asteroids
And he sees supernovas
In the smallest speck



Father

ZEPHYR CONSUMIDO

I could still feel his built arms around my neck as I struggled to catch my breath under the shade. I can't go on like this. I need to eat... flesh. On my hands and knees, I crawled to the direction where I could smell a faint scent of humans. My desperation to live on gave me a boost of energy to crawl faster, flinching in pain whenever I came over sharp rocks. When I caught sight of a slender male figure, I dropped all my weight on the ground and felt my body shrink. Catching a glimpse of my hand shrinking back to its normal state, I felt warm tears trail down my nose. My hard work has been ruined, because of one weakling! I sacrificed many things to achieve my goal, and this boy runs along proud of having beaten me using his raw strength. I have never felt more humiliated in my life. I have failed you Godfather, but please believe me when I say I will fulfill my promise of avenging you. No matter how many times I fall back down!

"You look like you have a carnivorous diet." A ground-like voice interrupted my frustrated thoughts. I lifted my heavy head to see the man that I saw earlier standing in front of me with a bowl of green leaves in one hand. This guy doesn't seem like he's from around here. His hair was oddly dyed in bright green, and his clothes were sophisticated, unfit for a simple wanderer. There's no village either, just a campsite and himself. What is his ulterior motive in approaching me? Does he not think of the danger of approaching a stranger? One that looked like a hideous monster seconds before I turned back into a human. The man squatted down, and using his free hand, grabbed a handful of leaves and shoved it in my mouth. I was about to spit it out, but his large hand covered my mouth as he let out a command, "Swallow." How could I, such a terrifying monster, be intimidated by another man? Could he possibly be... like me too?

"If you're thinking I sold my soul to the devil in exchange for power, I'm not a desperate low-life like you."

Who is this man? Why does he know about what I did? He stood up and walked back to his campsite while continuing to speak to me. "Who knew the terrifying Grendel, who has been terrorizing Heorot for years, is actually a woman in distress? Tell me, darling, how did it feel when Heorot's soldiers cut your father into pieces in front of—"

"You have no right to talk about my past!" I sprung up with anger, not noticing how that was possible when I was depleted of energy. "What..." Scanning my body for any wounds, my eyes shot to the man in front of me who was grinning with mirth, like he was proud of his work. "What did you do to me?"

He lifted his left hand and, using his two fingers, gestured for me to come over. He wasn't using any black magic, but my body followed, as if I was helpless against him. "Don't you know? I'm Heorot's number one philanthropist, Dansleif," he answered. At the mention of Heorot, my feet rooted to the ground and my breathing hitched. Noticing my reaction, Dansleif threw his head back as he laughed his stomach out. "Please calm down sweetheart, I'm a philanthropist, not a murderer like you." For some reason, what he said dropped an anvil on my heart. I didn't want to end up like this.

"When the soldiers of Heorot attempted to obliterate the whole lineage of Mr. Cain, they didn't consider that some of them..." Dansleif glanced at me. "...may have turned a new leaf and led a life full of good deeds." He walked up to me and sat me down on a log. Kneeling before me, he continued, "Your father was indeed a great man. He taught me many things. He's the reason I became a philanthropist."

Dansleif knows my father? Who exactly is this man?

"When I found out about what they did, I tried to look for his only daughter. Imagine my reaction, when I found an 8-year-old little girl, performing a demonic ritual, just to avenge her adoptive father." My hair stood on end. He knows everything. There's nothing to hide from Dansleif. He's been watching me from the very beginning. "I understand that the Heorot simply wanted security for their people, but I also understand the injustice you experienced." Unlike my earlier fight with that Beo...Beo-man, Dansleif attacked me not physically but emotionally. It was a different kind of pain that I had no idea how to handle. "Grendel." He held my hand and locked eyes with me. "Don't you think you've turned into the people you hate? Generalizing others, and killing off the innocent."

I fought back my tears, not letting this man see me at my weakest. His words struck me hard in the chest. It made my heart beat faster, along with my breathing. Years of living with hatred flowing in my veins, this is my first time, in a long time, receiving kindness from another person. "What's done cannot be undone. Your words won't be able to help anyone."

Dansleif stood up and stuck his hand in a large clothes bag. His eyes looked around the heavens, as if the item he was looking for was there. The end of his lips tugged up and his hand stopped searching. For the whole time, I was devising strategies to escape him in case of any sign of harm, but to my surprise, he knelt back down in front of me, with two of his hands offering a present wrapped in large leaves. He stayed in that position without uttering a word, I felt pressured to receive it. Upon unwrapping it, I almost dropped the present when I found out what it was. "Don't worry," Dansleif reassured. "This hand's been cut off by a suicide victim." How could he say that in such a calm tone? "If you eat this, you'll gain enough energy to turn back into that hideous monster. But, if you choose not to eat this, feel free to stay with me here. No one will judge you for your past

mistakes here.” He gave me a pat on the head before walking away.

“Where are you going?” I couldn’t hide the helplessness in my voice.
“To find food. In case I’ll get another mouth to feed.” With that, he turned and wandered off in the woods.

I never felt so alone for so long. I have been living alone, but the feeling of loneliness only dawned on me now. What did he mean by I can stay with him here? Is he really hoping that I give up on my revenge and forget all that hatred? Don’t you think you’ve turned into the people you hate? Generalizing others, and killing off the innocent.

His words won’t leave my head. I could hear a young girl begging for me to stop. I could hear the barbaric soldiers cheering as they killed off my father until his corpse was cut into a thousand pieces.

I don’t want to be like them.

I don’t want to be like them.

I don’t want to be like them!

With my eyes shut close, I remembered Dansleif’s words, “No one will judge you of your past mistakes here.” I looked down at the cut-off hand and finally burst into tears.

What have I become?

Losing to a mere weakling, and now succumbing to the words of a stranger, who apparently knows my father. Father! If you can hear me, please give me a sign. What should I do...?

I stayed grounded, unmoving, almost lifeless, staring into space, while waiting for a message from the heavens, but nothing came.

“Don’t die on me now Grendel.”

My eyes lit up. It was Dansleif. “I also made a promise before.”

He laid down the different plants and animals he gathered as ingredients before coming up to me and patting my head once more. “I promised your father to take care of you until my last breath. He would be so proud to know his daughter grew up to be strong, but disappointed if you have lost yourself in hatred.”

Like a glass, my dark outlook in life shattered. For the first time in a long time, I could see the world with color. Father, is this the sign? Through Dansleif, he has told me this. It’s difficult to explain the feeling of enlightenment I received from my encounter with Dansleif, but my heart knew very well, that he has saved me from the cycle of hatred.

Thank you, Father. Thank you for giving me another chance to live my life differently.

Camp

MAEVE SALLA

Twice a year, I take a weekend for myself and literally get to be a kid again. For a weekend in August and again in October, I go to Girl Scout camp, not as a troop leader or parent or volunteer, but as a camper.

It's a Friday morning in October. I wake up, pick up my phone and check the weather. Good. No changes. We're looking at a cold weekend, but there is no rain in the forecast. Excellent camp weather. I glance over at my bag, packed and ready, already overstuffed because I am a chronic over-packer. I'd rather have it and not need it than need it and not have it. I grab a wool hat I had already packed and unpacked and stuff it into a side pocket of my bag. I think I already have a hat in my bag, but I'll bring another one, just in case. I get ready for the first part of my day, work and classes, and a paper to finish before I can disconnect for the weekend.

I carry my bulging turquoise overnight bag downstairs and set it next to my sleeping bag, already waiting behind the couch near the front door. A post-it note is precariously sticking to the sleeping bag stuff sack. Listed on it are the words "water bottle, day bag, charger, and cord," the last few things I need to remember to bring. I turn around and lift my hiking bag from the hook on the wall, pausing for a moment to consider the hiking poles hanging in their bag underneath it. I shake my head no and carry the small pink backpack into the kitchen.

I have already decided against bringing the hydration bladder in favor of a regular water bottle. The bladder is convenient but refilling it at the water jug in the dining hall would be awkward. The bottle is a better option.

I check the pockets of my hiking bag. Flashlight, first aid kit, whistle, small notebook, pen. Two old granola bars, crumbly and smooshy inside their wrappers. Those get fished out and tossed in the trash. I can't remember how long ago those were from. There is a cooling towel crammed into a side pocket. I won't need that this weekend. I open the basement door and chuck it down to the bottom of the stairs so I can wash it before I return it to the bag for a hike on a warmer day. I make a mental note to grab a bandana or small towel to replace it. One should always have a towel, after all. I take my water bottle from the cabinet and put it into the bag. I unplug the charger cord from the wall, wrap the cord around my grey portable charger, and add it as well. I zip the bag, hesitate, and look around the room. I've forgotten something. Something important. I notice the clock—oops, I'm running late for class! I drop the hiking bag next to my overnight bag on my way out of the house.

Later in the day, I've finished classes and work and remembered to toss my daily medications into my bag. I am contemplating running upstairs to grab an extra pair of socks when a car horn beeps outside. Heather is here, and it's time to go. Four pairs of socks are plenty for a two-night camping trip anyway. I hug and kiss my husband and kids goodbye, heave the strap of my overnight bag onto my shoulder, my hiking bag on the other, and pick up my sleeping bag. Something is definitely missing. Ah! I ask my daughter to get my pillow and bring it out to me. Heather opens her trunk, we put everything in, one more round of hugs and kisses, and we're on the road to camp.

When we arrive at camp, Heather stops and parks at the campsite unit we registered for. While Heather meets our friend Marie-Luise at the cabin door, I grab my stuff and head across the field to the tents on the other side. No one else is there yet, so I claim my cot by dropping all my stuff onto it. I take out my strand of battery-operated fairy lights and hang them around the tent entrance. I meet Heather back at her car, and we head further into camp to park and sign in at the activity center. As we sign in, we discover that somebody had changed our reservation to a different unit than we had requested. After some debating back and forth and checking with organizers, they agree to let us stay where we were since we had already started to set up and it was already dark.

The woman at the registration desk asks me if I plan to move into the cabin. I cheerfully say, "Nope, I'm fine in the tent." She points out that I would be the only person on the site. I repeat that I would be fine, preferred to stay in the tent, and it was all okay. She shrugs as if to say, 'better you than me,' and we went to the dining hall for dinner.

After dinner, crafts, and catching up with camp friends, it is bedtime. The walk to the tents seem a bit longer than it had earlier. I set up my tent, shifting a mattress off one of the other cots on top of the one I had chosen, quickly change into my fleece pajamas, jot down a quick journal entry, and crawl into my flannel-lined sleeping bag. I pull up the weather app on my phone, crawl out again, grab my wool hat, and put it on.

It is dropping to 32° tonight. Then I go out across the field to use the bathroom and brush my teeth, discovering in the process that there isn't any hot water running at the tent site. Shaking my hands dry, I run back to my tent and my cozy sleeping bag.

I crawl into the sleeping bag, zip it all the way up, and shift, looking for a comfortable position on top of two one-inch-thick mattresses layered atop a wooden board. I text my family, turn off my phone, and snuggle in deeper.

Suddenly, I feel very alone and isolated way out there in my tent. I consider picking up all my stuff and knocking on Heather and Marie-Luise's cabin door. The cabins have hot running water. And electricity. Lights. Solid walls. I hear a sound nearby and freeze, staying very still in my flannel cocoon. A fox shrieks. A night bird calls. A more distant

fox answers the first. An owl screeches. I consider leaving everything else, picking up my sleeping bag and pillow, and knocking on Heather and Marie-Luise's cabin door. I am hyper-alert to every sound, deeply questioning my life's choices that had led me to this point, alone in the dark, cold night with the branches rustling and animals calling. And the axe murderer who is (probably) just outside my tent door. I wish my sister was in the tent with me as she had been in August.

An hour passes, then another. Every rustle of a branch or call of an animal sounds menacing. Then, a new sound. A few raindrops plink on the top of the tent. A few more spatters, then a soft, steady, un-forecasted rain begins in earnest, masking all the other, less familiar night sounds.

Finally, I sleep, deeply.

The next sound I hear is my phone alarm; AJR singing, "I get up, I get down, and I'm jumpin' around / and the rumpus and ruckus are comfortable now..."

I reach out of my sleeping bag and turn it off. Sitting up, I yawn and stretch, grab my hat from my pillow, and pull it back onto my head. I can deal with the tangles in my hair later. Right now, it is freezing cold, the sun is coming up, an axe-wielding maniac hasn't murdered me, and I'm at camp.

It's a beautiful day, and I feel fantastic.

Nowhere To Run, Nowhere To Hide

GRACE FEENEY

“I’m drowning,” I whispered. My chest started to cramp, and the crowd’s roaring cheers sounded muffled. Was I underwater? Looking at my feet, the high school’s blue track took on the appearance of the sea. I tried to spot my dad in the stands, barely catching my balance. The pinprick of tears started to form in my eyes, but I blinked them away. Breathe.

My chest pain became excruciating. Placing one foot in front of the other, I chanted my mantra: 1-2-1-2-3. Coach Matt’s words echoed: “Be a machine, Grace, don’t stop, you can’t stop.” I no longer felt like a machine. My engine of a heart was overheating and breathing took a conscious effort.

Then I blacked out.

In retrospect, I can see how I got to the breaking point of my running life. It had started earlier with the League Championships. I was expected to place first overall in the mile, and my body wouldn’t let me forget it. I turned my music up loud to block out the frantic shouts of fans and runners. I checked my phone one last time and saw a chain of desperate messages from my mom. The first was a picture of my uneaten breakfast thrown in the trash: a sliced apple and steel-cut oatmeal. That message was quickly followed by another. “This is the fourth day in a row, Grace. You didn’t even eat dinner last night.”

The third message was even more damning: “Stop ignoring me.”

I rolled my eyes and turned off my phone. I couldn’t deal with her messages on race day. Food was the only thing I feared more than losing. The burning in my stomach turned into a full-fledged fire.

As that race started, I counted each time my spikes hit the rubber track: 1-2-1-2-3. It was a mind-numbing practice I used to cope with the pain of races. I learned to detach myself from reality during competition—a dynamic I would years later come to recognize as dissociation.

The only girl in front of me set the pace. She was tall like a volleyball player. Her blonde hair and purple uniform aggressively swayed from the hot and unrelenting wind. I closed the gap between us in three strides, positioning myself behind her. Our strides worked in unison. All I had to do was wait her out.

As we rounded the final corner of our first lap, the crowd roared. My heart pulsed loudly in my chest. I glanced over to the bleachers to spot my dad, just as I would the day I blacked out. He mouthed “push,” so I did.

With shoulders aching and spikes melting, I shifted myself into the second lane, craning my head to get a read of the tall girl's facial expression. It was time. Like ripping off a band-aid, I sprinted ahead ten feet. I didn't dare look back.

When I rounded the third corner of the track, something changed. My legs, which were previously burning from lactic acid, became numb. My body felt uncharacteristically heavy. "Ignore it, it's just adrenaline," I told myself. It wasn't.

Years later, I clearly see it was the signs of my body starting to fail me.

After the blackout on the racetrack, I woke up to blinding fluorescent lights and the metronome of a heart monitor. Wiggling my fingers, I stretched them outward before bawling my hands into fists around the bed sheets. My head pounded like a hammer on nails. I closed my eyes again, listening to the sounds of the hospital room.

People were whisper-shouting. One of the voices was clearly my mom's. "This has gone on long enough, Robert," she said. "Grace needs serious care. When she wakes up again, we need to talk to her."

"I'm not saying you're wrong," he said. "But if we bring that up here, she's just going to flip out."

My brows furrowed in confusion. I don't remember waking up. One minute I was running and the next I was swaddled in hospital sheets. The beeps echoing throughout the room chimed more frequently.

"Hi," I croaked, attempting to divert the conversation. My dad forced a smile. As a kid, I became an expert at reading his expressive eyes. In the hospital room, they were crystalline blue. They only turned that shade when he cried.

"Hi," my mom said. "We need to talk."

Unlike my father, my mother is impossible to read. Her face remains a stoic mask in every situation. Her brown eyes and chiseled jaw never flicker or flex with consternation. They remain steady. However, what she lacks in emotional expression she makes up for in directness. I swallowed the lump in my throat and asked, "About what?"

"This," my mother replied, her hands pointing around the hospital room, placing emphasis on the heart monitor. "You've ignored my texts, my questions, my concerns. Did you really think we wouldn't notice that you've been starving yourself?"

"I'm fine," I snapped, crossing my arms over my body. "You're just overreacting."

My father shook his head. "Overreacting," he whispered. "I didn't want to talk about this here, Grace, but don't you realize where you are?" His voice grew louder, quivering in a way I had never heard before. "Your body finally gave out on you. The doctor said that your blood pressure and blood sugar are dangerously low, and you've developed a heart arrhythmia. Grace...you are not fine."

Tears formed in my eyes, and I no longer had the energy to stop them.

My mom looked directly at me: “Grace, you can’t run anymore. We need to get you some help.”

For my whole life up to that point, I had dealt with emotions, pain, and conflict by running away from them, patching up the wounds with band-aids. Like in elementary school when I was mercilessly teased for my weight. Rather than telling anyone, I opted to not eat lunch at all. I “fixed” the problem. My mom knew about my tendency to flee, and now she had caught me in the act. “You can’t run anymore,” was more like her saying, “I won’t let you hide your pain any longer.”

I could taste the salt from the tears slipping into my mouth. “You don’t have the right,” I cried. The warmth of anger filled every inch of my body. “This is my life. How dare you try to control me!”

My dad crossed his arms, holding his jaw with his hand. He looked at me with those sad blue eyes. “Grace, you’re fifteen, protecting your life is our responsibility and our right.” Uncrossing my arms, I looked back at him. My mouth opened and closed, trying to form words that I knew would be futile. I stayed silent. Looking at my mom, I saw a gentle crease in her brows. She avoided looking directly at me.

Seeing their grieved faces, a ball of sadness and guilt grew in my abdomen. In the moment, I realized my suffering was more than a personal choice. It was a death sentence. I was their baby and only daughter, and they helplessly watched me decay for years.

With each chime of the heart monitor, I could feel my heart sinking and tearing—the closest thing I’d ever felt to heartbreak. For the first time in a long time, my parents’ love outweighed my desire to be in pain. I looked back at my dad with the exhaustion of a girl who’d been running for far too long, and with a slight bow of my head, I nodded okay.

Not even a week after that day, I was sent to a residential treatment facility for several months. Three months of tubes, bloodwork, medication, and therapy. Three months of anger, crying, crippling guilt, and pain. I learned how to be stationary for the first time in my life—and finally allow myself to feel.

After recovering, I found myself on the same blue track where I collapsed. It was now fall, the amber and crimson leaves scattered across the infield. A cool breeze flung them onto the rubber track and bleachers. I breathed it all in.

It smelled like autumn, fresh air and decaying leaves. I wore old blue skinny jeans and a gray sweatshirt, both of which hadn’t fit me in years. In my hands, I grasped the laces of my racing spikes, rubbing their grooved edges between my fingers. My phone pinged, and I slipped it out of my back pocket to read a message from mom: “Good luck, Grace. You got this!”

I smiled and texted back “thanks.” I walked across the track to the Athletic Office located under the bleachers of my high school. Out of habit, my brain counted the paces. When the track turned to concrete, I found myself outside the closed office door.

My stomach burned with nerves. The sensation was like déjà vu. It was enough to turn my face pale with terror. I knocked on the door anyway.

Papers rustled on the other side of the wall and the echo of footsteps grew closer. The doorknob turned, and there stood a surprised Coach Matt. With wide eyes and a beaming smile, he greeted me with a bear hug. I felt relieved.

We fell into easy conversation. He asked me about my summer, and I asked him about coaching. It was like I never left. But I looked down at the worn tile floor to gather my courage.

“Coach Matt, it’s been wonderful to catch up, but I did come in for a specific reason.”

Breathe in, breathe out.

“I wanted to give you these,” I said, dangling my spikes in front of him. His eyebrows furrowed in confusion. Coach Matt had bought me these shoes as a reward for my undefeated season. The only race I didn’t win was my last one. “I don’t want to race anymore, so I won’t need these. I would love it if you gave them to someone else on the team.”

“Won’t you miss it?” he asked.

“Yes,” I stated honestly. “Running has been a cornerstone of my identity for my whole life. So much so that I don’t know who I am without it.” I paused for a moment. “That’s why I can’t do it anymore.”

I smiled back. “I don’t know! But that’s kind of the beauty of it I suppose.”

He laughed, shaking his head in amusement before taking the spikes from my still outstretched hands. “See you around, Grace,” he muttered shyly.

“Yeah, see you around, Coach Matt.”

Walking out of the Athletic Office for the last time, I took my phone out and called my mother. I cried for hours that day. My mom came from work early to comfort me, and I let her. I was in mourning. I mourned the loss of a sport I had excelled in. I mourned the community I had lost by turning in my spikes. But more than anything, I mourned the girl I was just four months ago. She died the day I fell on the track. Turning in my spikes was merely just placing a tombstone on the grave.

I simply allowed myself to feel all of it. Old Grace would have thrown herself into work, school, or exercise—anything to distract from the grief. She never would have asked for help or even admitted that she needed it. But I wasn’t that machine of a girl anymore. And I stopped running this time.

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