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“Relief and its Stages”

“I feel like I just finished reading the last chapter of the book about your life.” says Allison. It has been two and a half weeks since my mother died.

And it’s true. Everything that could be resolved is. I am in my childhood home, curled up on the couch where I have spent many evenings reading after class. The spot where I sat waiting for that text from my dad. Distracting myself, shopping for dresses online with my housemate, Rebecca.

Now Allison is sitting next to me in the same spot. She absently pets my sister’s huge black cat. I rest my head on her shoulder and start to laugh.

My relief comes in four stages.

The Hospital

At fourteen, I made the decision to stop trying to get along with my mother. It wasn’t a difficult decision at the time. It was more of an epiphany than anything else. Our family took a trip to New York for a vacation. We went to art museums and musicals. We went to FAO Schwarz, the biggest toy store I’d ever seen. There, my mother yelled at me for twenty minutes in front of some sixty strangers. There, I decided to give up on my relationship with her.

Seven and a half years later, it is nothing. It’s not anything in particular. It’s just walking into the Cleveland Clinic, where I have been so many times before. It’s just stopping at the cafeteria for a coffee and a scone because we’ve just picked my sister up from the airport and there’s simply been no time to eat. It’s just walking down the hallway and around the corner and getting on one of the three elevators in the bank and taking it up to the fourth floor, calling in from the lobby phone and being let in to the intensive care unit. It’s just getting ready to take my mother off of life support. The little curtained room in the ICU smelled like hospitals always do. It was

poorly lit, and there wasn't enough space around the bed to navigate the room. My father, sister and I squeezed to the right of the bed. Grandma stood to the left. Leaning, domineering as ever, over my mother, whose arms and legs were periodically spasming. Apparently not with pain. Her wrists were secured to the bed rails, however. We asked for chairs. We got one extra. Two people would have to be on their feet.

Grandma was excited. Mom's eyes were open. Her blue eyes, flashing a strange silver in the light (a side effect of her cataract surgery several years ago), drifted lazily over to me. The four of us stood quietly. Uncomfortable. In a rare moment of empathy my grandmother excused herself from the room. The three of us then. We tried to engage her for a few moments. I told her about my new job options. Rachel talked about her school and the projects she was working on. Dad made a weak joke about the (lack of) quality of the music being played on the overhead, some strange country remix.

Then the doctor walked in. A younger woman with a thick Uruguay accent. I don't remember her name. She tries to break down what's going on. She begins to explain. We'll be taking out the breathing and the feeding tube today. After that it could be--But my father doesn't want to talk about this here, not here. She'll hear what's going on. He is not comfortable with this.

The young doctor feels that the patient should know. What she doesn't understand, I tell her, is that Mom "might understand just enough. Just enough to be terrified." Not enough to know that maybe this is the lesser of two evils.

So we walk a few feet away from the little curtained room. The doctor knows who Rachel and I must be. Dad is incapable of not bragging for a day let alone the past month and a half he's been commuting each day to the Clinic. Grandma joins us to stand clustered in the narrow hallway.

She has something funny to tell us. "She's from, how do you say it? Yer-ah-gey"

“Uruguay?” asks my sister, humiliated, her eight years of Spanish language education coming into play.

“When I first heard her say it, I thought she said “far away”! “Far away”!” she exclaims again, laughing loudly. She slaps me heartily on the back.

My Dad ungracefully steers the conversation back to the point. What’s happening today.

“We’ll be taking her off of the breathing tube in a little while. At that point we don’t expect her to be able to breathe for long on her own. There is a valve in her throat that won’t close all the way. She keeps in breathing in mucus and so she’s drowning in it. That’s why there’s the pneumonia.”

“How long do you think she’ll...be okay for?” Rachel asks.

“Well there’s not really any way to tell. My guess is she’ll be gone before nightfall.”

And there it is. Communication has never been my father’s strongpoint, but somehow it always takes us by surprise anyway. What he had told me, some four days ago or so, was that the tube would come out after Rachel and I had had a chance to talk to her. There was a slim chance she would simply survive without the ventilator, but she would at least take a few days, maybe a week. But now, it seemed, that time was cut short to just a few hours.

“Will she be able to talk to us after the tube is out?”

“It’s unlikely.”

That was that. Rachel went in to talk to Mom while she was still semi-cognizant. Grandma went to the bathroom and Dad and I stood making small talk with the doctor.

In the little room Rachel said goodbye.

“It’s okay.” She repeated, trying to hold on to Mom’s jerking hands. Mom shook her head and tears fell from her eyes. At least she knew.

It was my turn next. I didn't have anything to say. I didn't want to lie, even now, when I knew it might be my last chance to.

So, I said, "I'm sorry our relationship was so shitty."

She looks at me and I can't tell if she understands what I'm saying at all.

And then I stand there, blinking at her for a few moments.

"I'm sorry." I say again. And I try to get my arms around her for a hug, but in the elevated bed with the restraints and the wires and the tubes it's virtually impossible. I kiss her on the forehead and I leave the room.

They take the tubes out. She lasts until One AM the next morning. In the several hours that pass, Juanita, my mother's best friend of many years comes, cries by the bedside. She shows me the only picture I have ever seen of my mother as an adult looking truly happy. That's the most upsetting thing. In the year of fighting and the further years of indifference between the two of us, this is what hurts me. My mother could never just enjoy me, my company, my intellect. Could never forgive my childhood transgressions for what they were: the actions of a child. And now there was no chance she ever would. I hadn't expected her to, but the reality of it was suddenly too clear. My mother had never given me the chance to be myself, and had never allowed me the privilege of being more than a daughter---a person, a friend, and, in these last moments, someone who could miss her desperately, miss the happy smile without feelings of anger tangled up.

Some four hours into the waiting my father sighs.

"This is taking longer."

"Longer than what?" I ask.

"When your brother died I held him in my arms. I could feel it when he stopped breathing."

I don't say anything. I don't know what to say.

"You...never told us that." Rachel voices.

Dad doesn't reply.

Six hours later she is gone. It's Thanksgiving.

The In-between Days

Thanksgiving and the day after are maybe the easiest. It's the time we have just to ourselves. The only part of the week that is for us, instead of us comforting others about our loss. We don't really talk about it. We make rolls and mashed cauliflower and latkes, because it's Hanukkah, too, and we head over to a friend's house where we have Thanksgiving dinner.

When we have Thanksgiving with our cousins in Chicago, there's always the grace before the meal and then we go around the table and say what we are Thankful for. Family is obligatory on the list. What I am thankful for today is that I don't have to give thanks at dinner with our friend Maria and her mother.

When we get home a huge box sits on the front stoop and when we open it it's full of turkey and pie and mashed potatoes and matzoh ball soup. There's a note. It's from our cousins in Oberlin. It was their youngest daughter's bat mitzvah that my mother had fallen at. We bring it inside and put it in the back room which isn't heated. We watch TV and light the Menorah for the third day of Hanukkah.

The next day I have an appointment with my ophthalmologist. In August of 2012 I went blind in my left eye due to a retinal detachment. To this day we don't know what caused it. I had surgery on both eyes immediately to repair the detachment and to keep the right retina from detaching. The surgery went well but after several months of recovery we realized that there was still liquid behind the damaged retina and that I would need to undergo further treatment not simply to continue to restore my vision but to keep me from going entirely blind in my left eye.

We tried a little bit of everything. Diuretics to dehydrate the liquid. Steroids to bring down inflammation. We tried a lot of waiting. But at the end of a full year the liquid was still there and the danger still worked. We agreed that over Winter Break of that year I would have surgery to manually remove the liquid. there was no guarantee it wouldn't come back. Furthermore, there was the guarantee that at some point after the surgery I would develop cataracts as a result of the needle going through the lens of my eye. I was condemned to surgeries and painful, blind recoveries for some ten years.

The appoint today is a pre-surgical check up. See how the eye is doing. Make sure there are no further complications. Schedule the surgery. Dad and I wake up at eight, grab some coffee and cereal before getting in the car. We drive downtown to where the Clinic's campus is.

"It's going to be weird not doing this drive every day." My Dad comments as we trundle down the curved hill that leads to the crazy intersection at MLK boulevard and Carnegie Ave that, to me, has always marked the beginning of downtown Cleveland.

We arrive and go inside. At this point, I am so used to the routine I do it on automatic. My doctor, a kind Indian man with a poofy head of hair, has come in on the holiday weekend just to see a few of his younger patients who are home for the break. I plump down on one of the beige couches that fill the brightly lit atrium. The place is virtually empty at nine in the morning. Three or four kids around my age sit with their mothers. The building, itself, is beautiful. I wondered about that for a long time in my monthly trips back to the clinic. It seemed ironic that this place is lit so brightly with natural light for a room full of people wearing eye patches and feeling their way around the pillars that hold up the high ceiling.

After half an hour--shorter than the normal wait time--I'm called into one of the little rooms. The technician, someone I've met before for once, is a kind, thin lady with short, greying hair and soft hands. She asks me about my medical history, what I'm here today for. She tells me

to lean back and puts four drops of medication in my eyes. One for each to numb them and then one for each to dilate and color them yellow with iodine for the pressure test. It stings even though it's supposed to be numb, as per usual. She hands me a tissue and I dab the excess liquid from my eyes and try to open them again. She remembers me so she remembers that I'm truly awful at the pressure test. I am incapable of not flinching as the glowing purple device enters the space between my eyelashes. She goes and gets the pediatric pressure device without a pause. That's virtually painless and she's good at her job and it's over in a snap.

She then tells me I need to go downstairs since I need an OCT. It's a kind of camera that takes pictures of your retina. Do you I know where the elevator is? I do. I even know the back way of getting into the tests area. And my Dad and I walk over the elevator and take it one floor down, hand my chart to the lady who sits at the desk down there. Today her highlights are pink. She smiles and tells us to sit. Then there's the photos. I stick my head on the chin rest and it's simple after that. We head back upstairs with the results.

There's another half hour wait and the Dr. Srivastava joins us in the exam room. He shakes my hand and then my father's. He asks us how we're doing. Neither of us mention Mom. He clicks around in the results that have been uploaded to the system already and then there's this pause.

"You're...better". He sounds stunned.

"Better?"

"About ninety percent better."

I don't know what to say. I can feel my throat constricting and my Dad asks for me "So she doesn't need the surgery."

"No! She shouldn't. Honestly I was pretty convinced that was where we were heading. I kept on asking myself if it was really okay to be putting this patient through so much. But now I'm really glad we waited."

He's so happy. He shakes my hand again. And then he is gone. My Dad and I grab our coats and we walk out the door. I cling to his arm as we walk to the car because my eyes are still sensitive to the light. My throat is too tight to say anything.

We hop in and start driving back.

"That's gotta be a relief." says Dad. And it is. But for some reason that's when I start crying. I turn my head into the window so he won't see.

"I'm so glad it's over."

"Me too, honey."

"Mom would have been really happy."

"Yeah."

When we get home we have to clean the house. My mother had been sick for a long time, and had needed near constant attention for the last four years. In that time we'd all been too exhausted to keep the house looking like... a house. When I'd left for school last August the house had been a disaster zone. There was a clear pathway from my mother's easy-chair to the bathroom and stairs, but the rest of the first floor was difficult to navigate due to clutter and the various accoutrements we'd added for her safety, most irksome of all being the safety-seats attached to the toilets in all but one bathroom.

Dad has made a lot of progress in the month she'd spent in the hospital. The living room was mostly clear, only clutter in the corners and on the coffee table. The safety seats are gone but I still find myself climbing the stairs to my bathroom everyday. We wake up that Friday and clean the rest of the living room. Books are put in boxes and shucked down to the basement. Papers are gone through and some thrown out. The bulletin board, which had been completely covered with items, some many years old, is completely clear, only the pertinent items replaced.

Allison comes over and we eat another Thanksgiving dinner comprised of the deli tray our cousins had sent and the leftovers from Maria's house. We get back to cleaning and I chat with Allison about anything but what is happening. I am glad to have her back. She starts cleaning too even though the three of us tell her not to. She and I clear off the shelf in the dining room. It's covered with knickknacks and spare change and photos from God-knows-when. There is a wedding photo of my parents, a portrait of each of them separated by the deep pink lettering on the three-decade old invitation. The triptych is broken apart at the hinges and I try to prop the pieces together as best I can with the remaining knickknacks: a shofar, a book of old photos, a chessboard. Allison and I collect the loose change and sit on the floor by the coffee table and sort the coins into bags. This is just the kind of activity that Allison oddly loves. Sorting change, untangling knots, matching colors.

It's late by the time we give up. The house is far cleaner than I can ever remember it being. Allison and I take up our customary seats at the end of one of the two couches, me lounging half on top of her. Rachel makes hot cocoa and we sip at it and relax and chat. My dad pokes at his email on his tablet. It's around eleven o'clock when my Aunt Reenie finally arrives at the house, the bright lights of her rental car catching on the far wall so I don't need to look out the window to see she's here.

She comes inside and there's the obligatory hugs and she opens one of the many bottles of diet Pepsi Dad had bought for Mom just before her fall. She smokes a cigarette and scares the cats. She teases my Dad. We introduce her to Allison. And that goes...funny.

"This is Allison. She's my bestie."

At this point I'm lying basically on top of her, reluctant to leave my warm spot on the couch and Allison says, "Wifeys." It's her way of referring to our relationship. Such good friends we might as well be married.

It rolls off her tongue and immediately my Aunt's face freezes. Carefully set into a non-expression.

"Wives?" she asks.

And before I can answer, my reaction somewhere between amusement and exasperation, Allison continues, "We're married." She's never been one to pick up on the subtleties of conversation.

"You're married."

"Like. Not married. Not actually married. But, like, we're pretty married." I reply and I figure now would be a good time to use the "my mother just died" excuse to explain my sudden lack of ability to articulate.

My father sighs. "Maureen. It's illegal in Ohio."

And that doesn't really explain anything either so I find my vocabulary again, and, accompanied by my sister's quiet and fervent laughter, I explain that, no, Allison and I are not engaged nor are we dating we are just very, very close friends. Not that it would be a bad thing to date a girl, thank you very much.

Reenie visibly relaxes and I quickly change the subject to the photos we'd found while cleaning. They're mostly photos from my father and Reenie's youth, picture of them with their parents when they were still together.

She looks at me lounging across Allison's lap and says, "Gee, Ivy, you look more relaxed than you have in years." Then she tries to talk my Dad into dating again and not one of us feels up to saying "don't you think it's a little too soon?"

The next evening, the four of us, Reenie, Dad, Rachel and I, leave to meet my aunt Dale and Uncle Clint (who is my father's brother.) at the funeral home. When we get there they haven't yet arrived. Dad wants to go in right away.

"I just don't particularly want to be stuck waiting here afterwards." I protest. Afterwards. After seeing the body.

So we putter around the empty lobby-way. There's a LCD screen displaying the list of services for the next few days. There's mom's name and a few others. There's the name of my father's friend's 103-year-old mother.

"I wish I could have gone, but it's right after your mother's" he says. She had been the opposite of mom in a lot of ways. 103 and vivacious. They had been fond of each other. I think maybe it's good they have each other to go to the grave with. Ethel at 103 and my mother nearly 50 years younger at 58. She would have turned 59 the next week.

Finally my grandmother arrived. Then it's the five of us waiting for Clint and Dale. I settle on one of the ornate couches with Dad and Rachel and Grandma takes one of the Jewish calendars from its display, tucks it into her bag. Reenie wanders around the room inspecting the art.

They finally arrive. They were late because they ran into some of our many cousins at the hotel. We stand up and look to the chaplain.

"So where are we going?" dad asks.

"Oh it's right through here. he replies and points to the double doors which take up much of the room. It seems odd that we don't have to walk through some long hallway that there is no sad organ music playing that we simply pull open the doors which swish softly on the plush, green carpet and there is the casket.

To me, it doesn't feel like anything in particular. I round the edge of the coffin and look down. There she is. How much weight she had lost since I'd last properly seen her in August is more

obvious now. Rachel and Juanita had not been around so I had chosen the outfit for Dad. It's the red shirt and sheer black jacket she'd always liked to wear once we could force her to put it on. Her nails are painted a tasteful shade of red, darker than the shirt. She wears the wig that looked best on her, grey and white speckled. The most disconcerting effect is her mouth. It's closed for the first time in years. The Miotonia had quickly taken her ability to shut it completely from her. Today it is closed, though, and the line of it is wrong, somehow. I realize that her jaw must have been broken to shut it. It had be forced open more widely for a month by the ventilator. Her makeup is more tasteful than it ever was in life. I wonder if that is somehow a betrayal. Maybe her eye-shadow should have been the bright, and frankly garish blue that it was in my memory.

I am stuck in this place of idle observation. I can hear my father's breath, loud as it usually is, and then he sharply inhales and says, "I can't. Excuse me." and he's out of the room before I can turn my head to look at him, just a flash of his windbreaker as the door closes behind him.

I immediately want to go after him to see if he is alright, but I know my father. For all that he was the more supportive, more open to emotions parent, he does not like to be seen out of his own control.

My aunt, however, does not imitate my self-restraint. As soon at the door has swished to a close she is following him despite my and my sister's cries telling her to just leave him alone.

"He's not going to want to talk to you right now." I say, but her head barely turns towards me before she, too, is out the door. Less than thirty-seconds later, however, she is back in, looking both depressed and cowed.

"He didn't want to talk to anyone." She says quietly, clearly embarrassed.

"I am so surprised" I don't say, at least aloud.

I don't want to look at Mom anymore so I wander around the small chapel. My uncle Clint and Dale are sitting in the second row back, her hand on his arm, and are talking quietly to each other.

I sit in the first row. Rachel sits down to me. She whispers about her annoyance with Aunt Reenie. Our shoulders brush each other in solidarity. I stand up in a few moments, restless, and continue to pace back and forth in front of the open coffin, catching glimpses of my mother's hands, which look so much like mine, and the fluffy top of her wig.

I worry about my father. Not much time has elapsed but I want to know he is okay. And I am done being in this room with these people who were not there. Who have such strange and strangely idealized images of death and grief and daughterhood in their minds. I want, as selfish as I know it is, for my father to be strong enough to defend me from them, even now.

My uncle keeps on making for the door until I finally explain to him that, as he should personally probably understand, my father is a man of the '50s and therefore does not appreciate consolation when upset, at least not immediately. Then he waits four minutes before proclaiming, with some finality, that he is going to go talk to him. He makes for the door and I say, "Fine. At least let me go. I'll go."

And I walk out the door.

My father is sitting on that ornate couch from earlier and is poking at his phone. When he notices me he straightens up and says, "Hi honey." I take that as an invitation to join him, and I sit with my shoulder pressing into his, as close to a comforting hug as I can come without giving one. I look at the phone just as he locks its screen. He's been playing words with friends. Typical.

Slowly the others trickle out of the chapel. We collect ourselves and leave for dinner just in the next strip mall over. The place is small and owned by a family. The waitress knows the entire menu by heart including the fifteen or so specials, which she rattles off, pausing only for air.

We order and sit sipping water and hard root beer. The restaurant is typical of this area of town. Half Asian, half Jewish. Matzoh ball soup is among the appetizers we order. We talk about school. How's my job search going. How's my sister's grad school going.

The conversation turns to what my father should do now that he is single (let's not say widower, let's not say it), and has far much less to do. Without my mother around there's no driving to doctor's appointments every day, there's no staying in and watching bad TV to sate her, there's no watching her laboriously taking her pills, watching for her to miss one. Without my mother there's a whole hell of a lot more free time.

The suggestions come in waves. Take a yoga class. Maybe dance. Travel. Write more. Take a course in writing. Maybe visit Reenie. Maybe visit Reenie for a few weeks, months.

Oh and that reminds her,

"Ivy, have you given any thought to our trip?"

For several months Reenie had been calling me, offering to take me on a trip abroad after my graduation in the spring. It was a generous offer, and straightforwardly so. But I didn't want to go. Reenie's judgmental habits and her tastes in entertainment, art and culture were all often adverse to mine. Where I enjoy musicals and nights in Reenie enjoys nightlife and designer clothes.

As per usual, I try to back out of the subject. "I don't know. I've been kind of busy lately so I haven't really been thinking about it."

"It's getting pretty close to when we should be ordering tickets."

And it's been a long day and for all of us and Reenie has been telling me that I should be grieving, should be crying, should miss my mother.

"To be honest, I don't think I'm really going to be up for it anytime soon."

"Summer's pretty far away." She contradicts her earlier statement.

"I'm pretty sure about this. I mean I'm just really tired."

And Clint and Dale decide this would be a good time to jump in.

"You'll regret it if you miss out now. You don't have too many opportunities like this in your life time."

"Look, I'm tired." I try to explain. "I understand that it's a good opportunity. But I also know I'm exhausted."

The conversation continues and continues. My father and sister each try to intervene. Try to get my uncle and aunts to drop the subject.

"You'll feel better after a while. I know things must be bad right now with your mother."

And I don't know if this is when I snap or if it's before or if it's after. I don't even know who said what. What I do know is that suddenly I am angrier than I have been since high school, since I was living under my mother's thumb. And I am humiliated and I am angry because now, in this nice restaurant with the quirky waitress and the Jewish-Asian food I am crying and it's not because I am grieving for my mother.

"I am tired." I say tearfully. "For the last, I don't know, six or seven years I have been dealing with my parents having illness after illness. I have gone blind. I have taken care of myself."

"Maybe we should talk about this another time." Dale says.

I ignore her. I am too caught up in myself and, though I know it, I cannot stop.

"I think that after all of that, I probably know what's best for me. I'm not happy! But for the first time in a fucking decade I don't feel crushed by my mother being here."

"Well that's a longer conversation." Clint shifts uncomfortably. I would be lying if I said I didn't take so satisfaction in that.

And I want to rage at them. I want to point out the physical and emotional abuse I went through as a kid and the way in which my mother's disease perpetuated the problem, made us live with it for longer. I want to point out how they mindlessly believed her and enabled her. I want to scream at them to look at me. To see that I have become who I am not because of my mother but in spite of her.

But, no, now is not the time. Tomorrow is the funeral.

I go to the bathroom and wash my face. I come back out and make painful small talk for another forty minutes before Clint and Reenie start arguing over who's going to pay the check. Then I gratefully escape. In the car ride home I let it all out of me like a poison. We get home and lay out our clothes for the funeral. We go to sleep.

And Here's Before

For years before my mother's death life was stunted. In some ways, though, the curse was a blessing for me. My mother was emotionally abusive towards myself and my sister and even my father. She was physically abusive towards me primarily because I was incapable of letting her have her way, even when I was wrong. I have always been stubborn.

In the later years of her disease she, on several occasions said to me "I hope that one day you are sick and old like me and your daughter is as mean to me as you are to me." In the earlier years she said to me, "I am surprised you have any friends at all." And, in the earliest, "No one will ever love you like I do." That one while pushing me to the floor, sitting on my back and forcing me to stare at the chart on the wall: How many days has Ivy been good? Not today. Not many days, apparently.

For me her love quickly became a form of ownership over me. It became something I equally feared and craved. Something I am still ashamed that I wished had been there. Wish had been there.

In some ways her descent into dementia was a relief because suddenly she could no longer perpetually hide her crueller self from others. Gradually people started to finally believe me when I pointed out my mother's manipulations. Friends and then my sister and then my father. The veneer stripped away. In the spring of my sophomore year of college I was listening to a song by the

Mountain Goats working by myself one night. It was entitled “Hast Thou Considered the Tetrapod” and it recounted an experience the author had had with his abusive stepfather.

But I do wake you up, and when I do
you blaze down the hall and you scream.
I'm in my room with the headphones on
deep in the dream chamber.
and then I'm awake and I'm guarding my face,
hoping you don't break my stereo.

It was that moment, though I had first said it aloud nearly a year prior, I felt that fact that I had been abused. That my person that was thought to be my protector had instead felt the need to compete with me, to foster an intense and mutually destructive jealousy towards me. I wasn't sad, exactly. I felt shame and I felt an intense frustration and helplessness not against her attacks but against those feelings. They were and are inescapable. And I felt an extreme and irrepressible anger towards those who not only who had stood by and let this happen to me but towards those who had been unable or unwilling to recognize it, to reconcile the friendly mother who always seemed interested with others' lives and accomplishments, who laughed easily and wore quirky shirts and sang badly to “West Side Story” with the mother who wielded love both like a sword to cut me and shield to excuse those attacks. The mother that sat on my back and gave me backhanded compliments.

Her death affected us all in different ways. My father felt grief. He felt relief. Regret over how he'd treated her in her last months and years. Regret over not stopping the abuse. I felt grief too. Grief both for the mother I had thought I had when I was young and didn't yet harbor any resentment. And grief for the closure I'd never been given, which had been taken away already by the insidious disease that revealed her faults for the world to see. But, for me, the most devastating aspect of her death was that the mask was replaced post mortem, the veneer replaced and solidified with the rosy lens of a funeral speech.

The Funeral

Grief is supposed to happen in a specific way. It is supposed to hit you in the chest and force the air from your lungs. You are meant to choke on it.

Funerals, in Jewish tradition, are about the living. We go to the funeral, and it's hard because it is too much about us. The family of the dead sits in a room to the right of the chapel, where the non-familial mourners can see them at all times. We sit in a place of honor and a place of scrutiny.

I feel at once as though, for the sake of those watching, I need to cry and I need not to cry. The tables at the ends of our little room have butterscotch candies and pamphlets about headstones and copies of the mourners' kaddish with Hebrew on one side and transliteration on the back. There's no translation. It's the thought that counts, I suppose. Looking out into the chapel is like looking at a stagnant TV screen. The same benches from yesterday. The same deep brown paneling on the walls. The same green carpet. And the same pine casket with the Star of David embossed on the top, but both sides of the lid are closed now.

My father, sister and I sit in the front row. On my right my grandmother sits and repeatedly claps her bony hand over my forearm, squeezing it. Reenie, Clint and Dale, and Barb, my mother's brother's wife sit in the second row. Juanita sits in the back by herself no matter how we try to convince her that she's welcome up front. And, in lowered voices that she is more important than Clint and Dale and Reenie. She doesn't want to come. It is difficult to sit in the place of honor and scrutiny. I understand. I would sit in the back if I could, maybe.

I am grateful when the first guests arrive and I can stop sitting with my grandmother squeezing my arm, holding me down. I don't know who these people are, but they are from some branch of my father's family, two of the seemingly millions of Krislovs populating North-Eastern Ohio. I put on my "it's nice to see you smile". Maybe my face should be more somber but I don't

know what that face would look like. When they ask if I remember them I say, "Oh, of course! it's good to see you!" and they clap their hands on my shoulders and apologize for my loss. They sigh, the job done. When they'd last seen me I was this tall.

Soon the stream of family of friends is nearly constant, and I begin to recognize people. No one from my mother's family comes. Everyone is a Krislov relative or a friend of my father's. A few of my grandmother's friends turn up late and introduce themselves to me as though we will be great friends. The only friend of my mother's is Juanita, who is still sitting sequestered in the back of the room. Her funeral, like the life I'd been witness too, was comprised of, maybe stolen from, the lives of others.

For now, I am glad to be busy. I am tired of talking about what comes next. Most of my high school friends have returned to college already, since this is the Monday after Thanksgiving, but a few that are in town attend. Allison arrives with her mother who hugs me. My friend Jordana, who I have not seen in a long time comes and I am so excited to see her that I forget myself for a moment and grin and wrap her in a huge hug. We chat for while before I'm interrupted by a friend of my grandmother's who gives her condolences and hugs me despite having never met me. It continues like that for a while until the chapel is nearly full of people who hardly knew my mother or who are here for me, for my father, for my sister, my grandmother. There is a moment where I realize that the entire room has shared a moment of telepathy and we all sit and Canter Sagar takes the podium next to my mother's head.

Canter Sagar is one of the most important people in the Jewish community of Cleveland. She is tall and thin almost to emaciation. My entire childhood she would lead services for the High Holy Days, singing in a clear and startling operatic voice the Sh'ma and the Ve'ahavta, two of the most fundamental prayers to Judaism which I can still recite today despite now being older and agnostic.

This week I have learned another thing about the woman who seemed ethereal throughout my youth: She officiated my brother's funeral. And officiating the funeral of a child whose body was so small he could not fill out the tiny coffin never left her. When my father called and asked for her to officiate she did not hesitate despite being in Chicago at the time. She flew in the morning of. Her hair is grayer than I remember. She seems shorter too. She is still bigger than life for me.

And her speech is lovely. And it's awful because none of it is lies, exactly, but it's not the truth either. She begins:

"My dear Alex, dear Rachel, Ivy, Bernice. Dear family, friends. On Wednesday evening, as Robin Krislov's life was ebbing, Jews all around the world gathered around Chanukkiot, Chanukkah menorahs, to light the first Chanukkah candle, the first of what will become eight lights shining brightly against the darkness, certainly of this time of year, but which speak to us, far more importantly, of the light of faith lit against the darkness of hopelessness. The light of courage lit against the darkness of fear. The light of the few inspired by a single idea to rise up against the more powerful many. The light of freedom when confronted by the darkness of tyranny.

"Robin Krislov would have understood the rebellious impulse of that small band of Maccabees against the mighty power of the Syrian-Greek regime of ancient Israel. She would have respected their adherence to what they believed, even when confronted by overwhelming odds. She would have understood their single-minded focus, perseverance, self-reliance. "

She continues, talking about my mother's childhood, her relationship with her late brother who also died of miotonia almost a year and a half ago. She talks about my parent's first meeting in the basement of the local JCC. When my mother's reaction to being asked out was "why?" and all of the lights in the building went out at once. Canter Sagar thinks this is ironic, "There is something wonderfully poetic about the fact that a relationship that was destined to bring light into both of their lives began in the dark." I think that it makes perfect sense. Listening to this speech is like seeing jam spread on burnt toast.

There's the story of how my mother taught in the Cleveland Public schools for twenty years, the unions making it impossible for her to be fired despite her track record of flipping of students and skipping work at least two days a week. She was transferred from school to school, administrators trying to foist her off. She had Rachel and I grade her students' assignments and write her lesson plans even though Rachel was the oldest at thirteen. Sagar's account sounds a little different though,

"It was not easy. She taught inner-city students, who could be exceedingly challenging. There was not enough money to support the arts programs, so there was never enough supplies. The administration could be difficult, and she taught at ten different schools in the course of nineteen years. At one point, the situation was so bad that her experience prompted Alex to write a horror short story entitled, "The Class from Hell."

"She was doing what she had always wanted to do and she did not flinch from the responsibility, but when she had to retire due to her increasing disability, she was not sorry to leave it behind."

In the sections about Rachel and I, our respective skills and talents are attributed to my mother's love and her artistic talent (of which there was, indeed, some, but not enough to explain my sister's delicately constructed sculptures and fine-lined prints). Of my father's role as primary caregiver the Canter has this to say:" In their independent, unconventional way, much of the day to day parenting fell to Alex, as the parent who actually worked at home, and had the flex time to attend to his daughters' needs and schedules."

And then there is the part I want to scream through. The part I want to yell through to keep these outsiders from hearing the lies, "Robin loved her children. Loved to hug them tight, to braid their hair when her schedule allowed, to follow their exploits and accomplishments." And maybe it's true. But pride that is a matter of ownership isn't the kind of love I ever wanted.

In the end though, it's the true parts that hurt the most because they are twisted into the lies and made indistinguishable.

Both Alex and Robin faced major health problems when Rachel and Ivy were teenagers, and we will never know when the illness actually started to deprive Robin of the

fullness of her being. She struggled with so much for so long. Strong-minded and strong-willed as she was, we can only marvel at how long she continued to function with some sense of coherence. She continued to enjoy her game shows on TV, she enjoyed listening to audiobooks until she was no longer able to concentrate long enough, and she enjoyed eating.

We think at this time of so many family members who are in mourning for Robin. We cannot begin to imagine Bernice's sense of loss at having lost first her husband and now both of her children to this rare and dreadful disease. No parent should ever have to stand at the grave of a child, as we know too well, let alone have to repeat this most unnatural experience.

Most of all, we are in awe of Rachel, Ivy and Alex, who have travelled this road together and will continue to be each other's primary supporters and boosters, sources of comfort, strength and encouragement. None of us can begin to understand or appreciate the highs and lows, the victory and despair, the challenges and successes, the sense of love and the sense of loss you have all experienced in the course of this profound journey.

And here is the part where I cannot be in this space any longer. Because one of the things that hurts the most even now that everything is over and done is my loss of my father as a father. His being too consumed by the maw of my mother's needs to take care of me even now and too consumed to take care of himself. There is anger there, for him, but mainly compassion. Terrible compassion when I see him, out of the corner of my eye, swallowing a sob as the Canter's words.

We are particularly moved by Alex, who with uncommon grace and fortitude, with nobility and tenacity, with an uncomplaining and willing spirit, as he said, he took a vow for better or for worse. He has been Robin's primary caregiver, guardian and protector, advocate and champion through all of the twists and turns of this excruciating ordeal. You have cared for your children. You have cared unstintingly for your wife beyond any reasonable expectation. And you have done so with love, with respect for her, and for who she was, with intelligence, devotion, tenderness and compassion beyond measure. He shakes with it. And this is by far the worst part. Rachel and I squeeze his arms from either side. He doesn't say anything to us. And he doesn't say anything after for months.

Sagar performs the keriyah, the tearing of the cloth symbolizing grief, by ripping black ribbons that have been pinned to our lapels. My sister, father and I surround the casket and lift. I have picked up this body before on the other times she'd fallen. A burden I picked up more for my father than my mother, though it was not in me to leave her on the floor wailing and struggling like a turtle capsized.

We shuffle towards the hearse and slide the casket in. We get in the limo, crunched for space, my shoulders pressed up against a window and my sister on either side. We come to a stop right at the open grave, get out and walk single-file around its sides which are covered in a proceeded green carpet I've seen used for mini-golf. It's a little cold. Canter Sagar says another prayer. We are invited to do my mother a last favor by helping to bury her. I am third in line and I take the little shovel and throw as much dirt as I can down onto the Jewish star the top of the coffin. I shuffled around so I am out of the way as my grandmother does her part and then Juanita does hers. When Juanita begins to cry I pick my way through the crowd and wrap my arms around her, my back to the hole and the people piling dirt on my mother. The only other person I can see crying is Megan, the daughter of a couple of my father's friends. It's her first death. The first person she had known to any notable extent to die. She doesn't know, yet, the relief is can be, in some ways.

There's an awkward moment where no one is shoveling and no one is moving. Canter Sagar indicates it's time to go back to the house for the Shiva, a Jewish wake-like tradition. Juanita holds my hand all the way back to the limo.

At home the house is full of relatives and friends. So much so I can barely make it through my own living room. Platters of deli meat and cheeses cover the tables and the cats scurry upstairs in terror. We gather around in the living room appropriately to say the prayer over the living. As we wait for everyone to arrive and get situated, the Canter talks quietly to me. We talk about my school. She somehow knows about my job prospects. "You're waiting to hear back from Microsoft, right?"

"Uh, yeah. I was supposed to hear back the day Mom—uh."

“Well if you get it, that’s your mother looking out for you.”

I know she is trying to be kind. So I smile. But I want to say, “If I get this it is because of me. If I get this, it is in spite of her. Or just despite her.”

We finally say the prayers and Jaunita, Dad, Rachel, Grandma, Reenie, Clint, Dale and my Uncle Larry’s widow, Barb, sit down at the table for the se’udat havra’ah, the first meal of the living which symbolizes the need for the mourners to go on. None of us have any trouble eating, but it’s disconcerting to have thirty people watching you eat so I am glad when enough time has passed and my cousins start to take cheese and bread from the trays. I quickly lose my father and sister in the mess, but Jordana and Allison arrive and I am perfectly happy to have them to talk to. Various family members want to ask me if I am alright how my school is going, where I’m working after graduation in the spring. My cousin, Marvin, whose family had sent us our extra thanksgiving meal and who is the president of Oberlin University offers to write a letter to my professors requesting they give me less work. I appreciate the gesture but am not sure why he thinks that the president of someone else’s university will be able to have any effect on my classes. I want to tell him, “It’s not your fault. It was always going to happen.” If mom had not fallen that night at his daughter’s bat mitzvah it would have happen a month later, maybe two, maybe three, but eventually. In the end it didn’t matter if my father was embarrassed to come into the ladies restroom to help her before the fall or that I had skipped the bat mitzvah for a job interview, that my sister had been busy that day. It would always have happened. And we had been waiting for it, just as we waited that night in the hospital room for her to go with both dread and anticipation for our lives to change.

The night drags on. My bus back to Pittsburgh and the last two weeks of school leaves at nine P. M. I chat with Allison and Jordana and then, later, my sister for hours. I pack up my

backpack and my duffle of clothes. I pin the black ribbon from my lapel to the bulletin board in my room. I hug my family goodbye.

Rachel and Allison and Jordana take me to the bus station. We look odd there, standing around with the other passengers while wearing our black funeral clothes. We talk about other things, about our friends and about the books we're reading. We chat about human sexuality and gender and about relationships and how platonic ones can be so important and about how family is sometimes built, but can be born in to.

The bus arrives and as I wait the man next to me, wearing a blue University of Pittsburgh hoodie ask me if they my sisters.

"No. Well one of them is."

"Might as well be though."

I have the sudden compulsion to explain why I am wearing all black and why I look so tired and to explain why these women are better than sisters. They believe me. They drive me to the bus station in inner city Cleveland because they love me. The believe me. I just say, "Yeah." And smile at him.

We board the bus. The three of them make heart signs at me as we drive away. The night is clear and beautiful. I am relieved. f

Ivy Krislov

11/25/13

Henry's Story

On December 7th 2012, a student at Carnegie Mellon University committed a sudden and violent suicide. His name was Henry Armero and he was a friend of mine. He was sweet, thin and scarecrow-like in stature with huge, wild hair and round eyes. He gave excellent hugs. Nobody was expecting it when he left a note on his Facebook wall and stepped out of his fifth story dorm-room window.

His note read:

"My life goal was to make a story. A story that hit you right there! So,

Remember me whenever you cry in a theatre or at the last pages of a book. I'll be crying right there along with you.

Best of luck with everything,
Henry Armero"

Henry did succeed in creating a story from his life. At CMU, his story is also the story of how the culture of the school is changing, and what it was before. I hope that it is a story that bears writing down.

Carnegie Mellon University has been referred to by those inside and outside of it as "Pittsburgh's last great steel factory." The steel the institution manufactures, however, is not metal, but its student body. Of the top twenty-five schools of the nation, it has a relatively high acceptance rate at 25%. However, this is largely because the retention rate for students is so low. Within your first year at Carnegie Mellon, you are

certain to know someone who cracks under pressure. They will leave the school for a semester or for good. It is easy to fail out and easier to do badly enough that you might feel the insanely high tuition rate of \$46,670 per year is no longer worth it. Easier still is overwork yourself into a breakdown, something I've witnessed more times than I care to think about.

As a student body this has always been something we were aware of. The difficult "weeder" classes begin freshmen year and don't stop for most students even during their last semester.

Of course, many school across the country are full of hard-working, stressed-out students. What seems to make our school different is that the students have a compulsion to do more than they can reasonably do. And if they're not stressed they feel like they're doing something wrong.

CMU's culture is compared to a steel factory not simply because of the hard work, but because of what it does to its students; how it makes them think.

That is to say that it makes us okay with self-sacrifice. It makes us okay with never saying "No". It makes us scoff at weakness and lack of endurance when it comes to our fifty-mile academic sprint. It makes us think that we must not forgive ourselves when we take time for ourselves.

What took me too long to realize about the world was that sustenance comes from many places. We need food, and drink, of course. We need to see the sun and to take our vitamins and we need to exercise regularly and breathe clean air.

But we also need to sit in front of the TV. We need to chat with our friends. We need to cry. And we need at least four positive touches per day to maintain a healthy mind, and more like eight to feel truly happy.

But here at Carnegie Mellon we laugh at all of these things. We feel we can do without them. We feel, almost, that it is weak to need them. Furthermore, the stigma against therapy that exists everywhere is exacerbated here, where taking any time for yourself is looked down upon.

I met Henry only a little less than a year before his death. I was immediately drawn to him. It was early in the spring semester of my sophomore year of college, sometime in January, and the air was icy. We joined up with some mutual friends to paint the fence, a literal fence at the center of campus that students paint to advertise or brag about their events, their dorms, their causes. Students must "guard" the fence all day to have the right to paint it. They can only actually paint it between midnight and six A.M.

We were painting it in celebration of the anniversary of our favorite web comic. Silly, maybe, but a fun respite from the otherwise tedious and frigid days inside.

Henry wore a baggy sweatshirt under a worn windbreaker. He also had a beanie with the yellow ears of Winnie the Pooh for the top and red of the bear's shirt at the trim. It more sat on top of his mass of hair rather than actually serving any purpose, the edges of it were nearly half a foot away from the tips of his cold-reddened ears. A polka-dotted blanket completed the ensemble as a wrap-around cape.

We chatted about the things CMU students always chat about when they meet each other. He was part of the BXA program, I learned. Bachelors of Fine Arts and Computer Science. Both were intensely difficult programs to get into. He was smart, then.

We chatted more, and played a game of "Cards Against Humanity", which requires the player to use the cards in their hand to create the most (hilariously) offensive sentence possible. At midnight, we picked up paintbrushes and got to painting the fence, which is a good four inches thicker with layers of paint than it was when it was first constructed. Henry carefully outlined beautiful letters on the irregular surface. They looked as though they might have been stenciled on.

We finished, drank hot cocoa out of red solo cups, and headed home. We'd be sure to Facebook friend each other in the morning. Goodbye.

Our masterpiece stood uninterrupted for four days, and then was painted over. But it's still there, somewhere, under some hundred layers of paint.

The truth is that, according to a survey of 200,000 students in my class from "The American Freshman: National Norms Fall 2010," only 52% of us believe we are "above average" in terms mental health, down 12% from ten years ago. This number is likely even lower at a school like Carnegie Mellon.

Many college students now perceive their mental health as below average, while we perceive our "drive to achieve, and academic ability" to be going up.

Everyone I know has a story about the stress they've dealt with over the course of time they've been studying at CMU. Drinking is treated very differently here than

it is at other schools. Where our neighbors at Pittsburgh University down the street statistically drink in moderation on most days of the week, my classmates drink in excess on Fridays and Saturdays, and wake up hungover on Sundays to work all day. They drink to unravel the tension. They drink to socialize, because a lot of us are introverts here and sometimes socializing can be as much of a burden as doing your 3D Calculus problem set.

In her article published in CMU's student newspaper, "The Tartan", Katie Chironis wrote, "In the wake of a student's recent death, I'd like to take a moment to express something that's been dawning on me slowly for years now. It's that tiny voice in the back of my head that says, upon hearing stories like those above, that it's not fair. It's not fair to see good people throw everything on the altar of Carnegie Mellon and get no acknowledgement that yes, this is hard, and yes, it's difficult to cope."

I had no idea Henry was coping with so much. The summer after we met, Henry and I were each alone and bored in cities far away from each other. He worked in the Bay Area of California while I sat at home in Cleveland, most of my friends distributed across the country and often having only my cat for company in the evenings.

At night we would chat on the Facebook messenger for hours. Usually begun on his end with a, blooping noise from my speakers and "ivy!!!! C:" all in lowercase blinking at the bottom of my screen. He told me about his job. We swapped work-music playlists. I can't listen to Beruit without thinking about him, but it no longer upsets me like it used to. He showed me the self-portrait he was working on in photoshop—painted in soft browns and oranges and creams.

And he told me that he was lonely. Alone in a new city. His coworkers were older, and had their own lives. He came home and cooked for himself. He tried to make it exciting by trying new recipes, weird combinations and he started a blog about it.

He only made it through three posts before letting it fall to the wayside, but they were all written with more than a little humor.

"HEY YOU GUYS HELLO IT'S ME I'm back. And I cooked some stuff and I'm going to tell you about it and if we're lucky maybe you'll find it kind of amusing and then we can all go home and laugh and sip lemonade and read magazines and pet kittens and all that good stuff."

The summer waned into late July and then August. I asked him if he was excited to come back to school. He...was.

He didn't want to tell me what he had fought with his freshmen-year friends over. He didn't want to invade their privacy that way. But he was convinced he was the guilty party. And maybe he was. But that should never have meant guilt to the level and length he was experiencing.

Henry Armero

I was super rude to a bunch of people at the end of the year because i was super tired and grumpy and mad :0

and today i was like aw geez i need to start thinking about apologizing and stuff! so i was like Friend, i really need to apologize proper to XYZ

and friend was like HERE IS SOME PRETTY SERIOUS ADVICE AND SOME TALKS AND STUFF AND NOW YOU FEEL LIKE FRIEND IS GRUMPY AT YOU TOO, GOOD WORK HENRY

Ivy Krislov

oh noes

Henry Armero

or something. I don't know! and then big curly sadfaces :0 and i don't know i probably don't have anything to be sad about

Ivy Krislov

i mean, it's not invalid

Henry Armero

but like. i am only managing to get through the summer because i'm expecting
the fall to be super
but what if it won't be super? @ n @
Ivy Krislov
in general i think, if a person is big enough to admit their transgressions, they
should be forgiven
i dunno man
i guess this might not be the best advice
but i had a little bit of a falling out with some of my friends from freshmen year
and we're all still really close, but it's not like
the super happy want to be together every moment thing that freshmen year
can be?
i still love them to death, but, in some ways
i guess we form really strong friendships really quickly
and forget that it's okay to not think each other are all perfect?
i think it's probably good you said something, rather than letting it lay there
Henry Armero
:O!
well! i was thinking i probably couldn't apologize.
because i'm still mad. i thought i'd be able to sleep all summer and be happy
again in the fall, but i'm just as grumpy as when i left
Ivy Krislov
i would think if you're still grumpy then you probably had a valid reason?
Henry Armero
like, i'm cool with not being best buddies etc etc, i get that :O
Ivy Krislov
but it'd be good to settle it
and stop feeling mad?
Henry Armero
m. i can't explain. @
but. hm. i wish i could go home
being in california is like being at home except everyone is worse

I talked to him almost every day. I tried to convince him that, as kind as he was
from what i'd seen, as kind as he was to me and as earnest and passionate an artist as
he was, he should try to accept that any grudge his "friends" had against him did not
bear thinking about. Even if he couldn't forgive himself, that didn't mean he should
torture himself over something he could not change.

In late August, however, I stopped. I sustained an injury to my eye that kept me from seeing for a week and from reading for another. I dictated a message to him. I was sorry I couldn't talk. I was looking forward to seeing him at the beginning of the school year (haha "see").

He wrote back his concern and then it was radio silence. We didn't speak again until we met by happenstance on our way to class one morning. He gave me a big hug, but then had to run or he'd be late. We talked a little more on chat, and saw each other in person in passing. But our lives were once again consumed by the tasks of our school-lives.

Near the end of the semester I saw him, again, on the way to class. He gave me another hug. I lingered at the bottom of the hill where we stood, reluctant to go to my two-hour lecture. I said we should try and have a movie night soon. We could order pizza. He agreed, hugged me again, lifting me a little off of the ground, and then he was gone. He looked tired. But we all were. I walked to class.

The night he left his final message I tried to call him. I left a voice message. I woke up the next morning to a text from a mutual friend. The message had meant what we'd feared. There would be a ceremony if I wanted to attend. Call me if you want to talk.

I cried. I thought about whether his parents would see the slew of messages and call from Henry's friends on his phone. At least, perhaps, they would know that he had been loved here. Then I got back to work. It was Finals at CMU, after all.

Immediately afterwards, everyone wanted to talk about stress at Carnegie Mellon. I overheard people I knew to have never met him discussing his motivations

around campus. The suddenness of his death and the looming, overwhelming workload that many of us have to deal with everyday abruptly could not be ignored any longer.

I had mixed feelings. I knew Henry too well to think his final decision had been made purely as a result of school-related stress. It made me angry that people were using his death as a way of discussing their own problems. It made me angry that no one wanted to know him, but to use him.

Everyone wanted to blame his death on "CMU Stress Culture", which I felt simplified the issue to the point of insulting Henry's intelligence and personal struggles.

But later I realized that, in some way, it had been CMU stress that had brought him to that point. Not his school work in particular, maybe, but, as another student, Nicole Ickes put it, "[T]he culture of the school is 'failure means you're worthless and will never ever succeed', that 'anything less than perfect is failure,' that any instance of a mistake no matter how insignificant is read as failure. That this is complemented by the idea that you have complete control over everyone and all events, which means that there is nothing 'unforeseen' and thus that anything going wrong means you allowed it or didn't do a good enough job and thus you're a failure. Asking for help is admitting any of the above and invites people to shame you for it."

What she was talking about wasn't specifically schoolwork. It was the crushing responsibility we have to our friends—the crushing responsibility Henry experienced when he was unable to feel he could make things better, could make himself better for his friends.

There is a fine line between responsible and self-flagellating. There is a fine line between learning from your mistakes and missteps and never forgetting them, and punishing yourself perpetually for something you can no longer control. CMU encourages the latter. The students encourage each other and our professors and administration give little attention to other factors in our lives. The mentality is one of if you can't stand the heat step out of the fire.

Henry's depression and subsequent suicide was likely caused by a large number of things, and I will never know all of the reasons. However, I know that having to deal with everything is what's hard. It's the schoolwork, but it's also family and it's also extracurriculars and it's also the obligations we feel to be skinny, athletic, pretty, handsome, and intelligent. It's the obligations we feel, as students, to be the smartest person in the room at all times, to be able to cope with everything. And that everything can very much include the friends who are supposed to help us through the rough times. At CMU, as a result of our "toxic" culture of stress, sometimes our friends send us the opposite message. The result is that many of us struggle forward, doing everything, while using nothing.

Conservation of energy, itself, dictates that that lifestyle is not sustainable.

As Nicole put it, "Realizing it's bullshit and toxic, getting rid of the 'friends' who perpetuate it goes a long way towards reducing that stress." Is the first step towards maintaining good mental health in a place like CMU. "Then go about getting healthier habits, such as simply not doing things that don't matter, making self care a necessity just as much as work is, and treating getting help with work the same way you'd use a

screwdriver--tools instead of crutches."

I think that we forget that the little joys are what keep us the healthiest.

The times I saw Henry happy were always small moments, but they were in no way negligible. There was the time he bought the entire "Star Wars" series on VHS despite his distinct lack of a VHS player. He told me we would watch them together, when he got one. There was the time he bought a pack of brightly colored dinosaur stickers and bestowed them upon those he deemed "worthy". There was the time we were painting the ceiling of a set and there were no paint-rollers left. He took a long poll and used painter's tape to attach a plain paintbrush to it. He painted the whole ceiling with patience and amusement and at the speed of a snail.

Being around him always made for a good story.

Ivy Krislov

10/26/13

Hubris

I don't hate religion, though I do not follow it myself. Similarly, I believe that religion can be a force for good in the world.

However, I also think that it can be a great source of apathy—lifting the weight of many burdens off of troubled shoulders, and equally lifting responsibility off of shoulders meant to bear some load.

"You don't have to be angry at them," says Conrad, sitting on the couch adjacent to the chair I'm sprawled across, legs dangling over the side.

"I know I don't have to be. I mean, I'm not obliged to be I just am."

I am scrolling through the newest comments on my father's latest Facebook post.

It has not been a good week. The weekend previous had been almost entertaining in its difficulty. I'd flown from Pittsburgh to San Jose, an eleven hour trip in all, done a six and a half hour interview for an after-college job and then flown back the eleven hours finally to return and be greeted with more homework than when I'd left.

I'd finished putting the finishing touches on my HTML assignment, and was taking a quick break to check my Facebook only to read the following on my Dad's Facebook page:

"Robin fell again. Waiting at hospital. Aargh."

It was past midnight.

I grabbed at my phone. IT was nearly dead from my trip. I looked to my friends who were squished up on the tiny couch of my friend's dorm-room.

"Does anyone have an iPhone charger?"

I waited for a reply, fully knowing that there were three people in the room who owned iPhones. However, the conversation carried on without even acknowledging my question.

"Guys I really need to charge my phone."

Again, no response.

"Okay, guys, pause, I need to charge my phone because I need to call my Dad because he's at the hospital with my mom who just fell — again."

"Uh, yeah, you can grab the one in my room. It's by my kettle, next to the fridge." Finally Evan replies. I go into his room, which is attached to the little lounge, and bring the charger back in, plugging it into the wall. I make the call. Finally, my Dad picks up, tiredness and even annoyance in his voice.

"Hi."

"Hi, Dad."

"Oh hi, honey."

"What's up?"

"Well, I'm in the hospital. Your mother's in the operating room right now."

"Wait, so, what happened?"

The weekend had been a big one for me, and bigger for my little cousin, Evie, who had just turned thirteen. The Krislov family is Jewish, and so Evie had just completed her Bat Mitzvah—a coming of age ceremony where the presenter reads from the Torah in front of the congregation for the first time. My parents had traveled from Cleveland forty-five minutes to Oberlin, where they'd watched the ceremony and then attended the reception—where my mother had gone into the ladies' room and fallen on the beige marble floor. The blood thinners she'd been taking since having a bout with lung embolisms six years ago meant that when her head hit the floor she immediately started to bleed and bleed and bleed. And bleed into her brain.

"I'm worried." Confessed my Dad. I was too nervous to ask what he was afraid of: Death or vegetation.

Instead I asked about our relatives. The entire family had been in town for the event. This was the first time my Dad's brother or twin sister would actually have been around for this kind of disaster, the likes of which had been happening to my immediate family for years and quite regularly.

"Well Reenie and Clint wanted to stay in town, but I told them to go home because they would have just driven me crazy. Reenie called me as soon as she got home anyway. I mean it's not like anything's changed."

"Yeah. You guys are at the Clinic?"

"Metro Health, apparently. They airlifted us from Oberlin. It's in Cleveland but I've never been here before."

"How did she fall?"

"I guess she just slipped again."

A stray cousin in the bathroom went running when my mom hit the floor. She retrieved my father, who stopped people from crowding around. He told them to call 911. He told them to see if there was a doctor in the reception. In a family of affluent Jews there had to be at least one neurologist. Someone went running. She came back, trailing about three doctors behind. One was an immunologist, and he couldn't remember what the second one was, but the third was a neurologist.

My Dad told the other two to get out; this was the ladies' room, after all.

The third doctor did the regular tests: Were her pupils blown? Could she squeeze these two fingers? What was the date? The current president? Her name? She didn't do well on the tests.

"So how was your trip?" My Dad asks.

I pause. The tone of voice clearly tells me. "Let's just talk about something else. Entertain me. I'm worried and I've been in this waiting room for three hours and God Damn if I'm not a little bored too."

So I tell him how, on the hour and a half bus ride home from the airport a boy from China asked for my number. I obliged, nervous, but unwilling to make the next hour and half of the ride the most awkward of my life. My actions, I would learn, were misled, however, as not ten minutes later the boy texted me. He, fully sincere, asked me to visit Niagara Falls some four hours from here. I made homework my excuse, and spent the rest of the ride home staring uncomfortably at my shoes.

Sure enough my father was entertained, but then,

"Sorry, honey, I'll call you tomorrow they're asking for me now."

I say goodbye quickly and "I love you" and then there's the click and my Dad's rushing off to the ICU. I sigh. It has not been a good weekend.

I sit on the desk chair that's been abandoned in the lounge and look at my friends. "Mom fell and cracked her head open. She's bleeding into her brain."

The reaction, of course, is surprised. The quintessential response, though, comes from Evan. "Ivy, your life."

I grin. "At least I'll have something to write about this week."

"You don't have to be angry at them," says Conrad two days later as he sits on the couch adjacent to the chair I'm sprawled across.

"I know I don't have to be. I mean I'm not obliged to be I just am."

I am scrolling through the latest comments on my father's latest Facebook post, which reads, "Robin ate an orange! Robin ate an orange! I am totally revved because my wife ate an orange. How weird is that?"

The post doesn't annoy me, and maybe the comments shouldn't either, as Conrad suggests. But they reliably read some variation of, "I am praying now for you and Robin! I am sorry that the two of you are going through this. God bless and big hugs!" or, worst of all, "It's called love, Alex!!!!".

The later in particular annoys me because "love" has been absent from my parent's marriage for a long time and it's more a sense of duty that causes my father to look after her when things like this happen. But the prayers annoy me for a whole other reason.

"Why does it annoy you?"

"Because there's this---there's this sense that the praying people have some sort of control over the issue. Some control that you don't"

"It's the same as saying, 'I'm keeping you in my thoughts'."

"But it's not, because there's this implication that, like, they have some control over God."

Conrad is a deeply religious person. "I don't think they think they have control—"

"Okay not control, sorry, but influence, maybe. I mean otherwise what is the point of prayers beyond self-betterment by meditation? That's not bettering me. It's not really helping anyone but them."

"Well they don't know how to help."

"Well then maybe they should ask? I mean I realize they're not trying to annoy me, but you can't expect everyone to take comfort from the same things you might. My immediate family is not very religious. Prayers, to us, just mean that you're too lazy to do something actually productive."

"That's not fair, they don't consider it laziness."

"I know that, I don't think it makes them bad people, but religion has made them to apathetic to ask what we might really need. Not God. God doesn't teach us to just pray for people. But religion—like priests and stuff, just teach people to pray and not think about what might actually help. This is what you're taught to do. Saying 'I'll pray for you' might be nice for religious people because it means

something for them. It signifies some possible effect It doesn't mean anything to me." And I know I'm generalizing but that has been my experience. And I know many people whose experiences with organized religion have been similar to mine. Rebecca, to name one.

There's a pause. I've clearly made him uncomfortable. So I say, "It's sort of the spiritual equivalent of telling a computer expert to turn it on an off again. It's like, don't you think I've tried that? It didn't work. You doing it will not help more than my doing it will, and it's kind of insulting of you to imply that it would."

"Ivy."

"Yeah?"

"Have you tried turning your mom off and on again?"

Two days later and my mother is out of the ICU and is placed in a rehabilitation close to our house in suburban Cleveland. My father wakes up in the mornings, gets coffee at Starbucks with his friends, and then heads over to the center where he sits with my mother. He posts to Facebook, "Robin ate an orange! Robin ate an orange! I am totally revved because my wife ate an orange. How weird is that?" and his friends assure him that it's really not that odd of a thing to be excited about, given the situation. They're still praying for her.

He attempts to help her re-learn how to hold a spoon. He follows her to physical therapy where the doctors hold her up while she takes slow, unsteady steps. He drives home. He reads his book. He goes to sleep.

Two days after that it's Saturday, and my mother suddenly stops breathing. My father posts, "Back at the hospital. Robin is "code blue." Frankly, scared half to death." The doctors rush her back to the ICU. They resuscitate her. She has a collapsed lung, pneumonia, is septic and has a bleed in her brain. They work on her through the night.

I call my father and he responds that he doesn't know if she'll make it. They'll know one way or another in the next forty-eight to seventy-six hours. I offer to catch a bus home. I live two and a half hours away and I can grab a MegaBus in the morning. Dad says no. "If you come now, she won't recognize you. You'll feel silly if you come and she doesn't die; you won't be able to get your work done." I hang up and call my sister to tell her what's going on.

She's upset, but she hasn't heard the latest. I tell her dad sent her some information on Facebook and listens as her "Ohs" steadily decline as the weight of it sinks in. I reply. "Yep." With a sort of giddiness that is a result of dark amusement. What's happening isn't funny, of course. No matter how much Rachel and I dislike our mother, we're not bitter enough people to wish her death, or to wish guilt over her death on ourselves and especially our father.

We chat for about twenty minutes. She'll offer to come home too, so at least Dad will know she's offering. He won't let her, though. We discuss the fact that it's mom's disability payments from her old job that pay for our health insurance. I say that I am glad I've just picked up my birth control for the month. "Oh crap I should do that."

"Oh man, better pick up that shit before mom dies or it's coming out o pocket." This triggers a wave of hysterical laughter. I am looking at myself in the mirror. I look the same as I always do, maybe a little more tired. I am fine. "Jew humor" I joke as our laughter dies down.

She chuckles and then snuffles a bit. "Yeah."

I tell her I love her and I hang up. I sit on my bed and put my head in my hands but I don't cry. After a while I walk back into my living room. Where the empathetic look on Rebecca's face is the first thing that really makes me want to cry.

"My life". I shrug. I sit down and pour myself more tea from the never ending supply we've set up for ourselves: a box of assorted teas and a full electric kettle plugged into the wall. I sip at my tea—pumpkin chai from the box a friend bought for me last Christmas—and I set to work on my Human Factors problem set.

Rebecca and I have a midnight snack and then we go to our separate rooms and crawl into bed. I put on an audiobook. I turn it off at one to get some sleep. I need to wake up early to work on a project on campus. I can't sleep so I turn it on again. I turn it off at two. And then again at three. I tell myself I can't listen to more. I'll be exhausted. So I lay there and stare at the shadows of leaves projected on the far wall from my window. I think about what would happen if my mother were to die right now. Which she might. What would happen. No health insurance, it's true, but it's also true that my dad could come visit me. We could take the trip to London we'd been talking about for seven years but hadn't been able to because of my mother's health. I could go home and talk about my work and my interests without being criticized for my intelligence, my passion, or my opinions.

The alternative doesn't seem better. If my mother did survive, chances were she would be completely incapacitated. We would either be forced to never leave her alone in the house—meaning no one-on-one time with my father: something that has already been lacking for a while—or we would need to put her in a nursing home. If we put her in a nursing home we would have to pay for six years until she was sixty-five and Medicare would pay for her housing. We don't have that money. My father's income would be consumed, and then his life's collection of rare books and eventually the house would go too.

I know that it's selfish, but I am exhausted.

Eventually, I fall asleep. I have anxiety dreams of failing a project.

Seven days later and my mother is still alive. There is now only a "low chance of death" according to my father. I admit to him that her dying is not my only concern. He knows what I mean without me telling him. Sitting in that hospital room, watching as, when my mother opens her eyes for the first time in a week only to display complete confusion, there is little else to think about.

"I feel like I've been running a marathon—since like before Senior year started." I tell him. I don't need to explain it to him. My family has had health problems since I was eleven.

It's been nearly twelve years since health was not a concern somewhere at the back of my mind. But the summer before senior year of high school had been the first time I'd been forced to settle into the routine I am now in. Mom had fallen badly on the day of her and my father's anniversary. She'd spent the entire summer

lying on the couch screaming at the top of her lungs. She had never dealt with pain well, moaning long and loud at the stub of a toe, and now that reaction was tripled.

My life became a series of duties. Take care of mom. Be patient with your mother. Do your work. Clean up after your mother. And each year since then there had been some hardship: My mother's cancer coming back, my father's brain tumor, another fall down the steps, my own brush with blindness and now this. And the marathon likely has miles left to it.

He asks me about my work. I'm in a group for a project for my Web Design class and the group is in shambles because of my inability to concentrate and the tragedies befalling another group mate. I tell him about her. She's just broken up with her boyfriend and her grandfather just passed away. On top of that, when she'd returned from saying goodbye to him she'd discovered the electricity was out at her place because her boyfriend had not paid the bills for long before moving out. I'd offered to let her crash at my place but her parents were coming to make sure she was okay the next day so she needs to clean but thanks.

"Oh my God." Says my dad.

"Yeah." I laugh in reply.

"Well it's good her parents are coming in."

"Yeah. I wish you could visit me."

He changes the subject. My eyes burn as the conversation continues. I am too exhausted.

I understand why, in situations like these, people turn to religion. The sheer exhaustion makes you seek meaning. As humans, we crave reason. We have to

wonder what the point of prolonged suffering is. And the only logical conclusion for many people, like for Conrad, is that it has to be in God's plan.

"Suffering" says Conrad, "is a God's way of helping you to improve. To become more perfect."

"You mean, like, more empathetic?" I ask.

He nods his affirmation.

I think I cannot possibly learn more about empathy than I already know. If anything, the sheer length of time I've been exposed to the constant uncertainty of health has convinced me that people can deal with pretty much anything. And they should. And they have to. You have to keep running the marathon. Even when it feels like your lungs are burning for air and your muscle will give out with another stride.

"Then why do some people suffer more than others?"

"Because they have more potential to improve than others."

I am not sure if I should be flattered or offended. Rebecca asks for me.

"Wait so people who suffer more just need to be improved more?" She puts it much more diplomatically than I might. Her feet rest on Conrad's knees.

"No!" Conrad backtracks. "They have the ability to improve to a greater extent."

"Well then doesn't it make it unfair that--say—you haven't suffered as much as I have? Because then you can't improve as much."

"I don't know." He admits. "I don't think it's as simple as that, and, of course, I don't know."

"And also, under that ideology, people who'd been more improved still wouldn't be able to go to the top level of Mormon heaven, because for that you have to have faith, right?"

He falters for a second and I continue. "I mean, like, starving people in Africa, most of them don't believe in the Mormon version of God. How does that make them bad people? How does never being provided with evidence that the Mormon God is the right one make it our fault that we don't believe. Why do we get punished for that?"

"It's not punishment."

"You're right, I'm sorry. I just mean there is this value of faith for faith's sake that seems unfair—seems unlike a fair God. If God is all good then why would he be so petty as to be mad that you didn't believe in him in life. 'oh man. You meanie you didn't believe in me.'" We all laugh, but eventually Conrad does come up with a reply.

"Because there are some things you can't do without faith." You don't need faith to be a good person, as we'd discussed before.

"Like what?" I ask, a little harshly.

"Like know that it's good to give tithings to the church." Tithings are the donations all Mormons are obliged to give to remain members.

I bite my tongue. And then release it. I share a look with Rebecca. But Conrad sees my expression.

"What?"

"I just---I understand that you don't believe this, and I would guess even church leaders don't believe it either. But if someone were to ask me for that, and said that God asked for it, I would think it's a rip-off. I mean I know it isn't to you. But that's what it sounds like."

"I guess I get that."

"So can you come up with a different example of why faith is a valuable trait, aside from personal reassurance?" asks Rebecca.

There is much dithering on Conrad's end. Eventually he says, "There is something. I just can't articulate it to you."

And, though it may be unfair, I think that this is because there is no point. If there is a God, an all-seeing, all good God, I cannot imagine Him or Her to be that petty.

Religion is a tool, and is maybe a tool of God. It's a tool used to control people.

Throughout history that's been both good and bad. Despite crusades and hate crimes, much religion, including Judeo-Christian religion, dictates empathy and charity.

But the bad, universally, has been an issue of implementation and not of God, Him or Herself. I do not believe in God. I do not believe that if there was a God, He would spite me for not believing in him, having been provided no proof, and having instead been provided perpetual uncertainty about the state of my family and my future.

And I cannot believe that God would praise the idea of knowing him and what he wants. If God wanted us to know, we would know. That applies to religion. But it also applies to my family.

Maybe my mother will die tomorrow. Maybe in two years. Likely it will not be longer than that. Maybe I will go blind again. Maybe my father will die of cancer before then. I do not know. And it is terrifying. But if there is one thing that I know it is that I cannot rely on God, on religion or on prayer. I cannot presume to think that I know what's going to happen, or that anyone can control it. That is a waste of time and of hope.

I just have to take it as it comes. Run the marathon and don't slow down because I'll need the momentum, if nothing else.

Ivy Krislov

10/14/13

Conrad and Rebecca

"There Conrad sat, propped up on the sun-bleached beach chair, reclining slightly, and butt-naked save for a computer on his lap, tube-socks and gamer-glasses." I narrate bombastically.

"OH GOSH. Why did I say that?" responds Conrad, covering his face with his hands. Rebecca, his girlfriend, snickers from the chair behind him.

It's a Monday night and we should be working, but we've taken a twenty-minute break to eat from the never-ending drawer of candy under Conrad's desk and play "Would You Rather?". The question of the moment? "Would you rather live as an Amish in Amish country or live in a Nudist Colony?"

"Okay. We're stopping now." Says Conrad, sitting down at his desk which is decked with three computer monitors and an ergonomic keyboard. And--yes--he dons the gamer-glasses, the yellow plastic shading his eyes.

I've known Conrad and Rebecca for the past three and a half years, and would have considered us to be friends for most of that time. Conrad I met during orientation week at our college. Sitting at a table with a handful of other freshmen, I was listening as we went around the table, telling jokes.

"What's the difference between a Cadillac and a pile of dead babies?" asks my dorm-next-door-neighbor. she paused a moment and then answered her own question, "I don't have a Cadillac in my garage."

She was met with a series of cackles just as the stranger walked up to the group, long limbs swinging to a stop.

"Are you telling dead baby jokes?" He inquired, tilting his slightly over-sized head to the right.

"It depends, are you offended?" I replied and he took a seat at the table. We continued to tell bad jokes until I stuck out my hand. "I'm Ivy, by the way." He shook it.

"Conrad".

It turned out Conrad was a student in Computer Science from California, or Utah depending on what day you asked him and where he was feeling most homesick for. We lived in the same dorm, he in the basement and myself on the first floor.

Conrad is like a disproportionate scarecrow. It seems as though, if he were to tilt his head too much to one side or another that it might continue to roll and roll, off his shoulders and to the ground and out the door, all the while yelling about how he needs to finish his game of Dragon Commander or some similarly titled videogame.

We saw each other a good amount that year. But mostly Conrad spent his free time in his darkened basement room playing Starcraft and Call of Duty.

It wasn't until two weeks later that I met Rebecca. I'd met her twin brother, Matt, during orientation, and one day he texted me to inform me that I was coming to his dorm to watch "Dr. Horrible" and meet his twin sister. I obliged.

The sound on the projection was pretty awful, but it didn't really matter because everyone there knew every lyric by heart. I met up with Matt at the front doors and he led me over to where a petite girl sat with her legs pulled up into a ratty armchair. She fit there quite easily, and she looked like the female version of Matt.

"Hi Rebecca!" said Matt, waving his hand at her a little over-excitedly. "This is Ivy and you guys should be best friends."

Rebecca and I proceeded to make small talk. "What's your major?"

"Comp Bio."

"You a big Joss Whedon fan too?"

"Yeah."

Well, nerd-small-talk.

Rebecca is a short girl with a smile that is huge and reveals the edges of her gums. She cuts her hair short because waking up early to style it is way too much effort, especially when you're the only Computational Biology major at Carnegie Mellon. She is extremely petite, and the bed she bought for our house is queen sized. She is extremely happy to be dwarfed by it. She loves sea creatures that most people find a little gross, in particular squids and cuttlefish. And she is both proud and overtly aware of all forms of pretention.

And we were best friends, but not until more than a year later.

The spring of my sophomore year was in no way easy. I was slammed with the most difficult workload of my academic career, and the people who I'd come to call my closest friends at college had begun to avoid me for reasons I couldn't hope to understand. Then, the day before my birthday, I received a call from my father. He wanted to wish me a happy birthday since he knew I'd be busy the next day. That was nice. What wasn't nice was how the phone call ended.

"Your mother does have breast cancer again. They're gonna do a mastectomy and then put her on this drug that confuses people so it's gonna make her alzheimers a lot worse."

My father's never had a great sense of timing.

But it was a Saturday night and I had plans. First to a play with my quickly fading friends and then to another friend's apartment to party. I did my best not to think about my family situation. The last thing my family needed was for my mother to become more confused and more dependent on my father.

At my friend's apartment the others began drinking, play a Pok mon based drinking game. I was never a heavy drinker and knew that drinking would probably make me more depressed.

So I sipped a rum and coke that was about ninety-nine percent coke and then, as midnight rolled around, joined my friends and drank half a shot to celebrate. There was no way I was drunk, but as my friends sang the strange birthday song we'd made our tradition, I felt like crying. I smiled through the three verses and then quietly excused myself to the hallway.

I sat on the floor a safe distance away from the door, leaning against the speckled wall. Then I cried. It was not pretty crying and soon my face was red and puffy and snot dripped from my nose. Being a soggy mess did not make me feel better, and I did my best to look decent when a few strangers walked through the hallway on their way home.

I heard the door to my friend's apartment click open and hurriedly wiped my face on my sleeve. Then Rebecca came over and sat on the floor next to me, her shoulder just touching mine.

"You okay?"

"Yeah it was just really loud in there." It was a lie and I knew she knew it.

"Matt barfed all over Rachel's shoes."

"Oh jeez."

The front door to the building opened and Conrad's head appeared at the bottom of the steps. He arrived at the landing where we were sitting and looked at us silently for a moment. I grinned tearfully and waved with false enthusiasm at him.

"Apparently Matt barfed on Rachel's shoes." I said, brightly.

"It was pink because he was eating red velvet cake." added Rebecca, helpfully.

Conrad put an exasperated hand to his forehead and then took a seat on my other side. A moment later he wrapped an arm around my shoulder and Rebecca leaned her head against my other side.

I took a deep breath. "I'm just so tired." And started crying again in earnest. I felt Conrad's arm squeeze tighter around me and Rebecca put a hand on my arm. Eventually I got a hold of myself.

"So what's up?" asked Rebecca and then it all came spilling out. My family troubles and feeling abandoned by the people who were supposed to be my friends.

"I'm sorry. They're just dumb." She replied, after a moment.

"And hey at least you're not dealing with your problems by vomiting bubblegum on Maddy's floor." Added Conrad. I snorted, amused, and immediately regretted it. To put it delicately my sinuses were still very full. I clutched my hands to my face laughing at my own misfortune and saying. "Oh, God. Tissues. Can you get me like eighteen tissues? I need like at least eighteen."

Conrad got up chorusing Rebecca's drawn out "ewwww". And went to get some.

In the following months, things got somewhat better. Things weren't perfect, but at least I had reliable friends again. It was difficult to accept, as it always is, to accept that my life was changing, but in the end it seemed to be for the better.

Near the end of the semester, I was determined I would see "The Avengers" in theaters. Our friend group had a facebook page we used to share things with each other and to invite each other of events. I posted the invite, and there was no response. Though I knew it shouldn't affect me, it felt like rejection all over again. I resigned myself to the idea that no one really want to go with me. It was nearly finals, anyway, I reasoned. I should be studying anyway.

The I ran into Rebecca outside our dorm. "Oh hi! You wanted to go to the Avengers Friday, right?"

I was relieved. Though it was melodramatic, I knew, I'd been feeling like no one really liked me or wanted to spend time with me. Rebecca and I walked the rest of the way to the dorm and met up with Conrad, and the three of us made plans. We'd catch a 61A bus on Friday and head down to the waterfront. We'd buy our tickets and get dinner, then head back to the theater for the nine o'clock showing. A last hurrah before finals and then the summer.

And we did catch the 61A and we got there with time to spare--except that all of the tickets were sold out. The cashier offered us tickets for the midnight showing, but we wouldn't be able to get back to campus afterwards since the busses stopped running, so we had to say thanks, but no thanks.

We complained a lot, and loudly, but only to each other and already en route across the outdoor mall and to PF Chang's to eat the most expensive dinner we'd

had all semester. Afterwards we split a plate of fried bananas and coconut ice cream. The most decadent thing we could afford. We let Conrad eat more than his fair share because the look on his face when he ate it was hilariously enraptured.

Then we paid our bill and headed out, wandering around aimlessly. Going home this early would mean we'd be obliged to force ourselves to work, and that just wasn't happening tonight. Instead we went into the Barnes and Noble and wandered around.

We stopped at a stand that had brightly colored puppets and Rebecca and I grabbed two hedgehogs.

"Mine's Mr. Hedgehog."

"What a creative name."

"All of my stuffed animals are named Mr. blah blah blah." She explained. "Mr. Rabbit, Mr. Octopus"

"Don't you have like eight octopus plushies?"

"Yes."

Conrad made a fuss about choosing a puppet. There were no hedgehogs left.

"So take the derpy seal" suggested Rebecca, and she pulled from the stand the stupidest looking seal I had ever seen, though I would admit the comparisons were few. It's mouth was curved at an angle that you might have believed it would start guffawing and waving its flippers any second. Its eyes were askew and of slightly different shades of blue.

"I don't want that thing!" exclaimed Conrad, pushing back towards Rebecca. In response she hugged it to her, patting its lumpy head consolingly.

"You're hurting its feelings!" I glared at him, added my own patting consolation.

"Fine!" grumbled Conrad, and snatched the monstrosity away, slipping it awkwardly onto his hand. The thing looked even more ridiculous animated. Rebecca and I donned our respective hedgehogs, "Mr. Hedgehog" and "Christopher" and the three of us headed over to the children's section of the store. We pointed out to each other the books we'd read as children and eventually settled down in the reading area with "If You Give a Mouse a Cookie." With a little help from me, Christopher read the story aloud in his squeaky, jubilant voice.

We were most of the way through the book when a clerk announced the store would soon be closed.

After some anguished deliberation, Rebecca and I bought Christopher and Mr. Hedgehog. Derpy-Seal, however, was left with the other puppets, since he was ten dollars more than the cuter hedgehogs. We waved him goodbye wistfully, and headed back to the bus stop. There were no benches so we climbed the nearby trees and sat in them until the bus came and then came down, Conrad more unfolding from it than dropping, and boarded.

Finally we were back on campus, but it was early and we were still reluctant to go to bed and wake up the next day to be engulfed by our work. Instead we all just laid on my bed and chatted until late. The lights were off and it was quiet. It was the most relaxing time I could remember for years.

I shared the room with a common friend of ours, Katy, but, like many of my other relationships that I had forged since the beginning of college, my relationship with her had become strained for reasons I could not understand at the time. Later, in the heat of an argument with her, she revealed to me that she had been in love with

me.

But while I was laying on my bed with Conrad and Rebecca, I had no clue what was going on inside my friend's head. And so, when the door clicked open and the lights came on, my reaction was only a sleepy "Hi Katy", as Rebecca and Conrad covered their eyes, loudly protesting the sudden brightness.

Instead of responding "Oh! Hi!" as I had expected, Katy yelped, "Oh my God. Sorry! I'll just—I'll just leave." My heart sank. After an evening of no one questioning my motives or desires, I was thrown back into what my life had become in recent months; trial after trial of explanation and clarification.

Katy left the room quickly as I rolled off of the bed. I was too stunned to say anything but "What?" to Rebecca and Conrad who were now sitting up. Rebecca shrugged.

"Ugh. I'll be right back."

I went down the hallway and found Katy in one of the lounges nearby. She looked immensely uncomfortable.

"Hi. You can come back? We were just chilling."

"I figured that out when I was halfway down the hallway."

"I take it you're a little tipsy"

"More than a little", she sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose.

"Well why don't you drink some water and go to bed. If Rebecca and Conrad feel like hanging out we can move to the lounge."

We walked back to our door, which Conrad was carefully shutting so that the bolt was stuck out to keep it from locking us out. I was disappointed they were leaving.

"We can go to the lounge if you want." I suggested.

Katy called, "Goodnight", and walked right past them and into the room. Our heads all turned as the door clunked to a mostly-shut position behind her.

"*What?*" mouthed Rebecca gesturing after her.

I shrugged exaggeratedly.

Conrad finally answered my question. "Nah we should go to bed anyhow. "

"But we've got to work when we why up" moaned Rebecca.

I sighed and watched them go. Then I went into my room and unbolted the door. I didn't speak to Katy again except to say "goodnight" as I crawled into bed.

What was different about my friendship with Rebecca and Conrad was what I would call clean empathy. I loved Katy as a friend, and I still do, but, at the time, she was unable to see me as me—someone who was not defined by her actions and desires. She loved the me that she perceived through the lens of herself, while Conrad and Rebecca loved me without any assumptions. They never thought that they might know someone so well that they needn't ask how they are or what they want or what they were thinking.

It isn't that she was a bad person, but sometimes people are so caught up in themselves that they need time to figure out what they do want before they can even try to tackle another person.

Rebecca and Conrad were different in that respect. They didn't feel like my problems were problems for them. They didn't feel pressure to fix me. They just liked me and wanted me to be happy. And that was exactly what I needed.