

OF HOPE IN HOPELESSNESS

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Connie Habash tells her audience that “the season of autumn is bittersweet”. In some ways, it is: the crispiness of frozen grass feels like tiny, wet needles when pressed on. And a stunning light show is flaunted whenever the sun grazes over the thin blades. The beauty of it almost takes away any of autumn’s sharpness. But the only flavor that reaches me continues to be the tartness she brings.

Summer has left the pond desiccated. She is dry; lifeless. And as the wildlife croon in despair over the lack of water, she is hopeless. But despite the shortage of rain that comes with the pumpkin spice season, the shrubbery remains green and luscious. Perhaps they feel hopeful? Hopeful to flourish for a few weeks longer? It is not ideal to hold such high faiths; sooner or later autumn will make her grand appearance and rip the remaining leaves off their branches.

I find the hedging outside my house to be unforgiving; they’re overgrown and appalling. They do not mix well with the new season. I brush over the tangled stems with my fingertips, making a mental note to trim the bushes before autumn sheds her tears. Near them stand the dogwood and apple trees. They were the only two to suggest the change of equinox; the leaves were ill. A twinge of yellow, red, and/or orange captured the green leaf starting as a small speck. But then the foreign color takes hold of it entirely. Later, they will become brown as the nutrients dry up. Senescence is what this process can be called.

To say that I am hopeless would be an understatement.

I can taste the coolness of the winter breeze. With the sky being exposed, the sun shines down upon my anxious frame. I had thought that the cold would freeze my nerves, but it is my first day at university. There is nothing that can stop my jittering.

But this is not my first college experience; my final years of

high school consisted of college courses. I had already been subjected to the paced quarters, midterms, and final exam weeks. Still, community college is much different than this institution. Nonetheless, it is thanks to my time at Pierce College as to why I will be graduating with my bachelor's from the University of Washington Tacoma come Spring 2019.

Much like the high school system, the average college student spends four years of their life studying. However, this is not always the case. Danielle Douglas-Gabriel found that “[t]here’s increasingly a new norm for students: spending six years getting a degree. Even the government now measures whether students graduate on time if they do it within six years, rather than four”. And her findings apply to me. I will be completing my degree after five and a half years. But the reasoning is why I connect to the idea of forlorn: I had changed my major from that of biology to writing studies.

The darkness was suffocating. Yet it brought some comfort; a sort of relief. Maybe I am lost in the void, free from the cruelty I have received as a result of my actions. But unfortunately, this is not so. Instead, I sit cowering outside my rental house inside this black 2016 Honda Civic.

Anxiety wraps her malicious hands around my throat. She causes my heart to dance an almost indescribable routine: a kick with a shuddering drop into a tub full of ice. My thoughts run rampant: *Was this the right thing to do? Will I be kicked out? Will she attack me?*

Beside me came words of encouragement: “It’s going to be okay, Emily,” Jasmin cooed. “I’ll be right around the corner, remember? We came up with the text codes if something were to happen, remember?”

I remembered. We had planned for this night months prior. It was the reason why I held onto hope. Hope that I will be released from the confines placed upon me by the one who gave me life. I let out a shaky breath, nearly missing my phone light up with a Snapchat notification from Abri. With trembling hands, I read it: “You got this Emily you are a strong independent woman that don’t need no man!”.

This is a message I often scroll to; it’s been two years since the incident.

I am born into a family of nurse aids and primary teachers. There were no means of high income making, but each member managed. As a child, I questioned why the women don’t just marry well-off men to take care of the family. But society has told me our

cleft chins and wide-bodies aren't the ideal image. I grew wary of marriage, for who will love the revolting body I wear? The only hope I felt for my status came from my parents: my mother had once been a thin beauty. But as time does, she has withered down some and never lost the baby weight. Yet my father, who appears the same as he did when she first met him, still cherishes her dearly.

I am instructed to be a worthy child, a pretty daughter, a brilliant doctor. These were conditions I have long accepted since the age of eight. I let my mind wander, imaging the blood cycle through the tubes as I save a life. Or swabbing the inside of a patient's mouth for bacteria.

"I'll give you a discount on plastic surgery!"

It was a joke I often told my mother. And maybe that's why she would constantly hang over my shoulder like a child does to their parent. But harsh words have led me to believe that she had wanted to use me as bragging rights.

"It's not uncommon," Jennifer spoke. "To change your career pathway drastically like that."

I turned away to reach for some tissues. "I—I know. My high school teachers sa-ay the same thi-ing to us." I silently cursed myself for crying. I didn't want to cry. Crying shows weakness. I am weak. But I cry in any kind of situation. Why do I always cry?

"Your life is your own, Emily. You can do whatever you set your mind to." She smiled gently.

I wiped my tears, letting her cliché words pass through me. This is not helpful. She doesn't understand my hopelessness. Still, we had decided together that I should change my major. Jennifer was with me as I spoke to the Arts and Humanities advisor. But my nerves were still soaring. I don't remember the last time I felt at peace. I should be okay, though. People frequently change their majors. So why do I feel like I made a mistake?

Raised by a working mother, and an absent father figure, she grew up before her time. Their family were average-poor, but she found that living in poverty is a more suitable life than here. Therefore, she moved in with her friend from Washington to California at fifteen. She worked as a forgetful waitress. But because of her beauty and young age, she was often forgiven.

Because of this, maybe that's why she tends to be hard on me. I am not the beautiful young woman she had been. Nor am I a worker. She tells me I should be doing better than I am. After all, I

live here rent free and am given warm food and a car. Is this why I am not allowed to be stressed?

I am like Nadine from *The Edge of Seventeen*. Not by looks, nor education level. But we are similar when it comes to parental relationships. Since that night, I often compare myself to her. I had recently turned eighteen, the age Nadine herself was soon to become. Like myself, Nadine has a shaky relationship with her own mother. A mother who struggles to listen to her daughter, to be precise. And even though the mother asks the daughter to come to her, she retaliates and manipulates Nadine whenever she does.

I had similar responses when I approached my mother. I as Nadine would stand on the verge of tears, listening to how I should not feel a certain way because my life is not something to be upset about. I never say it is, for it is not. I live in a beautiful home with a room of my own. I am given clothes and accessories, I have my friends and more. And although I know I have it great, I find myself alone.

My anxiety feeds off my loneliness, creating nightmarish scenarios that I brainwash myself to believe. She is in every corner of the room, ready to strike at any given time. I confide in Jasmin, who acts as Erwin from the film. She allows my emotions flow.

I want nothing more than something more.

“I worked and went to school while pregnant with you and raising a four-year old!” She screeched. “What do you mean you’re stressed?!”

Regret is a repentance I do not feel about my new major. Like the autumn leaves, dreams change. In fact, “just 6 percent of adults end up in the careers they wanted when they were kid” (Dahl). And I am part of the 94% of people who let their childhood fantasies sleep among the sheep. Had I realized the medical pathway was not an ideal career candidate sooner, maybe my mother would have been lenient towards my choices.

Still, there were obvious cues; I would get minimum marks during elementary science. But as it had been “kid science”, I suppose it didn’t concern my mother much. After all, my science test scores were outstanding in junior high. But this had been environmental science, not biology. And as I began the high school biology course, my grades began to falter. This was the start of my hopelessness.

NON-FICTION

My dark clouds have oppressed me into obedience; I cannot reject her. Therefore, I welcomed her with open arms as she greeted me in the parking lot at Pierce. Together we stayed in my Veloster, dreading the exam for Anatomy and Physiology I. But I knew that I was to receive a failing grade by the end of it; staying up till 4am to study in the last week will not change this outcome.

My hopeless is persuasive; I was close to turning my car on to go back home. What was the point of trying when I knew I was going to fail? But my actions were halted as my phone vibrated. With weary hands, I opened the lock screen and to read the email I was sent:

Hello Emily,

My name is Jennifer [REDACTED] and I am the Faculty Counselor [REDACTED] at [REDACTED]. I was reaching out because one of your instructors noticed that your grades were slipping in class and they were concerned. I wanted to offer you a safe and confidential space to come and talk should you have something going on that is affecting you. It is important that you feel supported when you come to [REDACTED] but often times students don't realize that there is a free and confidential mental health counseling option. Whether or not you come to see me is completely up to you. I do not report back anything to your instructors. If you do want to make an appointment, don't hesitate to call, email or come in to Student Success to schedule a time to see me.

Thank you,

Jennifer [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

I hate crying.

I enjoyed the cellular portion of tenth grade biology; humans and plants are built up by interesting components. Yet second semester brought my first storm. She started off as an early morning fog. By noon, she grew into a thick haze.

My drive is lost. But I never gave up; I took every reassessment, sought extra aid, studies days in advance. However. my grades never rose above the clouds.

I give up.

“I’m going to gouge your eyeball out with a fork!”

I stood my ground, letting my tears fall freely all the while avoiding her gaze. It took a lot for me to not start visibly shaking. Hopelessness was there with me, reminding me of the mental nightmares she created. We knew it was going to be like this.

“What is this blather, Emily? You’ve always wanted to be a doctor! And now you want to be a what? A loser?!”

I hovered over the delete option. Never in my life had I thought I’d receive an email like this. I was used to the saying that claimed no one helps you when you’re grown. Maybe I got this because I’m only seventeen. Still, I don’t think I should respond. There is no hope for a loser.

“Jasmin, I’m scared.” I admitted.

Jasmin paused her piano playing and gave a long look. “Are you sure you’re ready?”

“We’re moving soon. It’s now or never, honestly.”

“Okay but, your mom is crazy. What if she, I don’t know, attacks you or something?”

It would not be the first time my mother has felt the need to be violent; she has some sort of temperament issue. But her physical attacks were not as often as her verbal ones.

“Why don’t we come up with a text code or something?”

I grab a handful of fallen leaves, feeling their dry stems and brittle skeleton. These ones have become hopeless as they face decomposition. Their lives are over. Yet mine isn’t; I am still alive despite my hellish trial.

I sit here as a writing studies major with plans to be a writing teacher. But lately, I have felt another surge of hopeless wonder. Had I made this change blindly? Did I let my desperation take ahold of me?

I feel almost as I did when I lived through my days as a biology major. This time, I just want to put my laptop away, throw my textbooks in a box, find a simple job, and just take a moment to breathe without having to worry about the future of my education.

But Connie is right: “Fall season reminds us that we all have out-modeled parts of ourselves that we need to let go of”. I need to retain my composer before I fall victim to hopelessness’ embrace once again.

NON-FICTION

“The old ways, however, don’t need to be tossed into the trash”
(Habash).

My memory fails me often. Stress has a tendency to do that. Still, I cannot forget all that I have went through to be where I stand now: lost but hopeful.

“On the contrary, like the leaves that drop from the trees, they can serve as the foundation for new growth and fuel for renewal”
(Habash).

Perhaps my next trial is to forgive what has been done. It may be the only way for me to truly move forward. The only way for me to become truly hopeful again.

I grip the leaves, letting them crinkle to dust under the pressure of my fist.